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“Stage fright is something natural! Breathing and power-posing help!”

3 weeks ago • Von Anke Dembowski



Constanze von Rheinbaben lives in Duesseldorf, Germany, and she has been running her company Rich Impact Speaking™ since July 2013, offering executive speech and facilitation training. In this interview, Fondsfrau Anke Dembowski asks the communication expert for

tips on how to use our voice and our posture and how best to deal with stage fright.

Ms. von Rheinbaben, with your company “Rich Impact Speaking” you are practicing speaking and voice. Women have a higher voicepitch than men. What do you practice with women specifically?

Studies have proven that a deeper voice pitch creates the perception of more self-confidence and relaxation. Recently I had a client who had a very high, rather squeaky voice. We can hardly change the basic pitch – whether high or low. However: Through humming and specific vocal exercises we can lower the voice minimally, but not much! So we worked all the more on the relaxedness of the voice.

So is one just in a weaker situation, as a woman with a high pitch?

No! Margret Thatcher also had a high voice, and she was a very powerful woman. Everything else about her, her statements, her body tension, the serenity and relaxation made her. Women should for example work on their choice of words. We often downsize. We women want to have “a bit” of something, or we do something “just” instead of leaving the sentence as it is: we want something and we do something!

Many women are afraid of public appearances, but the further you go up in your career, the more you have to step in front of an audience and say something. What do you advise women for public appearances?

You should take up space. Just as women like to make things smaller with their words, we often make ourselves physically small. I have very personal experiences: We are second-generation migrant children from Lebanon to Mexico. My mother was born in 1927 and had already studied chemistry in Mexico, which shows that she is quite progressive and emancipated. She always taught us daughters to use our brains, so she let us study a lot. But despite her modern attitude, she admonished us girls to keep our legs together nicely when we walk, so you could hear your knees rubbing against each other.

And, is it bad if you keep your legs close to each other?

See: Boys walk wider and take up more space while women cross their legs. We make ourselves small and narrow, tilt our heads, and often we put our hands in the lap, causing the chest to fall in and make us even thinner. This way, the voice cannot arise, so that it becomes narrow in volume and in vibration; it is not being projected. Words are then often not articulated correctly, but are more of a stroke than well-filled vowels. Also, many women talk so fast that not only do they not take up any space, they also do not occupy “space-time”. All these things mean that we show little presence overall. It is correct to keep the chest straight and high, otherwise the diaphragm cannot relax and the vocal apparatus cannot unfold. Then we should speak slowly and clearly, while taking our time and our space.

In our preliminary talk you mentioned power-posing. What’s it all about?

There is a study by Amy Cuddy, a social psychologist at Harvard Business School which suggests we should occupy space and show presence, in order to appear confident. It starts with the breath and goes through the language which should be clear and full. Then we should take up time thus showing physical, space and time presence.

How can I be physically present?

As a woman, there is no need to sit there wide-legged in order to be physically present. But we should use our posture to express straightforwardness and sincerity: I am here! I want to be seen! I want to act in this room! This way we can be different from men – not better and not worse, just different. This also strengthens the diversity!

Back to power-posing, that sounds a bit like “Chagga”!

I started practicing that in 1998. For the usual victory positions, you take your arms up. This facilitates deep breathing, which incidentally also leads to the strengthening of the immune system. You also have similar positions in yoga... I am also a yoga teacher which is where I learnt it. Amy Cuddy's study shows that two other things happen in these open, big positions: the level of testosterone increases, and at the same time the cortisol level drops. Among other things, the hormone testosterone provides purposefulness, and cortisol is a stress hormone. That is, just by taking a power position, we are relaxed, alert, and purposeful.

And how does it work?

Stand with your legs apart and place your hands on your hips, or up V-shaped. Breathe slowly and deeply. You would not do this during your presentation or talk, but before. Incidentally, I do that before every performance. When you do this, you are more confident and radiant, and you are even more relaxed. I can only say: take these five minutes before your performance and do these exercises consciously! That also gives us this empowerment feeling: I did something for myself! That alone gives a lot of confidence. And again and again: breathe relaxed – that helps!

And how can we train our voices?

The easiest way to train the clarity of our voice is through the resonance space in which we create our voice. Ideally, we have a dome in our mouth, which is formed by the palate. That's like the acoustics in a dome. If we make better use of our dome in the mouth, the voice can vibrate better from there. This can be done by making the vocal apparatus stable from the diaphragm, as if it were a metallic tube. This metal tube has exactly the strength we give it.

So is voice pure technique?

Not only, the human psyche also plays a role. The moment I take a deep breath, I also dive into the psyche. I allow the psyche to show through, but I do not pick it up directly. Working on the technical side also has an impact on the psyche. As a trainer, I keep an eye on this. I cannot and I do not want to work psychotherapeutically so we always come back to the

voice. If I notice that one of my clients might have a deeper problem, I refer them to a speech therapist.

Stage fright is also a topic that you treat in your trainings. What do you suggest to our readers, how should they deal with stage fright, e.g. before speaking in front of a greater audience?

Stage fright is completely normal... about 80% of people have it! Most people are nervous when they step in front of an audience. Even professionals get an adrenaline rush on stage. There are a few very simple breathing technique tricks: Breathing through the left nostril causes body and mind to calm down. To do this, cover your right nostril with your thumb and breathe. You can do this shortly before your performance, maybe two or three minutes before, in the toilet stall. Another trick is calm breathing. Make sure that you exhale twice as long as you breathe in, so count to four when exhaling and to two when inhaling. Long exhalation is relaxing and calms you down. The mere fact that you are dealing with breath counting causes us to become calm as your mind stops to wander.

And then?

Actually, it's only about the first moment. Once you're on stage, and it's flowing, then everything is fine. I encourage my clients to engage in a dialogue with their listeners, through eye contact, and by feeling what kind of energy is in the room. But you can do that only when you have overcome the first fears.

Thank you for these good suggestions!



Photo by Maximilian Probst: Constanze v. Rheinbaben at "Tag der ZEIT"

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