



Speaking with Authority

To Have More Impact and Influence

Why does a project manager need to speak with authority?

“We usually have all of the responsibility and none of the authority,” is the way one project manager described her position. “We’re often charged with getting something done on a tight budget with limited time and resources. We’re not always at the executive level, so we need to coax people to give us what we need, knowing that those people have their other priorities and deadlines.”

Communicating well is critical. A PMP says he’s “expected to keep communication flowing among people who don’t normally communicate, who may speak different languages (literally and figuratively), and who don’t (always) play well with others.”

And then there’s this job description from another Project Management Professional: “Keeps a flock of SMEs on task to meet a deadline.”

If you’re going to herd those SMEs, speaking with authority is a huge help. Here’s how to do that.

Choose Your Language Well

Eliminate minimizing words like *little, just and only*. They make your work or your results or *you* sound insignificant.

Check yourself for the habit of hedging. *Kind of, sorta, maybe, might...*they soften your message. Too often, they soften it into oblivion.

Over-apologizing is a make-me-seem-small strategy. If you’ve wronged someone, of course, offer a simple apology. But don’t substitute “I’m sorry” for “excuse me,” “which way to the rest room?” or “stop interrupting me.”

Ditch the business buzzwords. Don’t increase your bandwidth for a paradigm shift and a strategic initiative at the end of the day. Better to speak plain English than the jargon that makes a person sound like a human LinkedIn profile.

Say it once, say it well. Over-explaining, repeating ourselves, and giving too much detail drains the strength from our words. You’re better off using short, clear, declarative sentences.

Use the Power of the Pause

Pausing gives weight to your words. Those breaks make it easier for listeners to understand you. They also focus attention on what’s most important.

That means eliminating filler language: *um, uh, like, y’know, basically, essentially, ‘kay?* It’s more effective to leave space between thoughts.

A measured pace sounds stronger. When we rush through our talk, the torrent of words makes us sound shady (think fast-talking salesman) or nervous. Give yourself—and your audience—some breathing room.

Tone Conveys Meaning

Put a period at the end of your sentence, not a question mark. The high-rising terminal, that up-talk that turns a simple statement into a question, undercuts professional presence.

Rhythmic or lilting speech patterns diminish impact. Natural variety in our tone of voice gives weight to our words.

It Starts with Your Feet

We sound more powerful when the body is grounded, centered and open. Energy swirling around the head and neck and shoulders will produce a thin, tinny voice...or a raspy one that strains the throat.

Breathe fully and deeply, relax your body and your face, and allow your breath to carry the sound comfortably and naturally.

Practice to Have More Influence

Choose one habit that will give your voice more oomph. And practice making just that one change. You may want to record yourself; sometimes we’re so used to the sound of our own voice we don’t notice our idiosyncrasies until we hear them played back.

Listen to the people around you. Notice who has a real impact when they speak. And pay attention to the ones you typically tune out. What is it about the way they talk? What can you learn from your observations?

Step into your authority. Whether you’re a man or a woman. Regardless of your age or your title. If you speak standard Midwestern American English or if you have a regional or international accent. You can, with practice, speak with more power and presence.

***Catherine Johns** coaches executives and entrepreneurs to develop a magnetic message and deliver it with confidence and charisma. Her clients discover how to speak more powerfully so they can be more persuasive on a stage, in a conference room or on the phone.*