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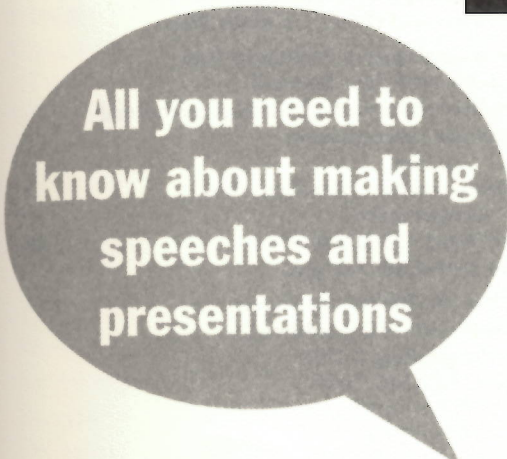
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# Lend Me Your Ears



All you need to  
know about making  
speeches and  
presentations

**Professor Max Atkinson**

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*For Joey*

# Physical Facts and Fiction

## Body Language, Movement and Tension

A number of topics that are often grouped together under headings like 'body language' and 'non-verbal communication' have already been discussed in earlier chapters: the role of eye contact in holding the attention of audiences (see Chapter 1), and the importance of intonation, stress and pausing (see Chapter 2). But there are various other claims about non-verbal communication that are heard so often that it is important to consider just how seriously they should be taken.

### I. FICTION?

#### 1. Comfort, cold or confrontation

Looking out on the audience in a crowded lecture theatre, I often notice that some people are sitting with their arms folded. If I believed all the modern myths about body language I would start worrying about what I'd said or done to prompt such a mass

display of defensiveness. This is because it is widely claimed in the folklore of management training that people with their arms folded are on the defensive.

Luckily, I have two good reasons for not becoming too paranoid when I see people with folded arms sitting in an audience. One is that I have, on many occasions, taken the trouble to *ask* them if they are on the defensive. Usually, they say that they are feeling comfortable. Occasionally, they complain about the lack of armrests on the chairs, or about the inadequacies of the heating system. But never once has anyone said that they are feeling defensive. A second reason for not worrying about it is that there are invariably several people sitting with their arms folded. This is exactly what one would expect from observing how people behave in groups. It is a manifestation of what researchers have dubbed 'postural echo', which refers to our tendency to copy or reflect, albeit subconsciously, similar postures to those around us. The fact that there are a number of people with folded arms is therefore more likely to mean that they are responding to each other than mounting a collective display of defensiveness against me.

If, on the other hand, we fold our arms when confronted with an awkward question or some other kind of threat, it may well then be a sign of going on the defensive. This gives us a fourth possible meaning to add to comfort, missing armrests and feeling cold. So, just like words in a language, elements of body language can have different meanings in different contexts. The trouble is that many trainers seem all too ready to accept and propagate a more rigid doctrine, in which things like folded arms are assigned a single, unambiguous and unvarying meaning in all situations. Indeed, so widely entrenched has this particular view become that

I now advise people not to fold their arms when speaking, whether in a presentation, job interview or anywhere else where they are keen to make a good impression. This is not because I believe that folded arms are a sign of defensiveness, but because I know that there's a high probability that there will be someone in the audience who believes that it is.

## 2. Non-verbal sense and nonsense

The overstated claims about the meaning of folded arms are part of a much more general trend that has gathered pace over the past two or three decades. This is the rise of various modern myths about the overwhelming importance of body language and other non-verbal factors in human communication. It is a view that has been fuelled by a mass of books aimed at distilling the findings from research by social psychologists and others for the benefit of a mass readership. Some have become best sellers, and much of their appeal no doubt lies in the fact that, although people are vaguely aware of body language, there is an air of mystery about what it is, how it works and what it conveys. Such books therefore hold out the hope that, if only we knew how to crack the code, our social lives would be transformed for the better.

The trouble is that the process of popularisation almost inevitably results in research findings being diluted and simplified to such an extent that, by the time they reach a wider audience, they are presented as being far more definite and unambiguous than the original researchers ever intended. What started out as preliminary observations or hypotheses become hard facts, and few of the original author's words of caution about the methodological limitations of a particular experiment ever find their way

into the popularised versions. One of the most spectacular examples of this is the claim that the words we use are by far the least important part of the communication process.

### 3. Is 93 per cent of communication non-verbal?

Type 'non-verbal communication', or something similar, into almost any search engine, and up will come a reference to a widely repeated claim about the relative importance of verbal and non-verbal factors in communication. The following version (from [www.selectassesstrain.com/hint6.asp](http://www.selectassesstrain.com/hint6.asp)) is typical:

Studies show that during interpersonal communication:

- 7% of the message is verbally communicated
- while 93% is non-verbally transmitted.

Of the 93% non-verbal communication:

- 38% is through vocal tones
- 55% is through facial expressions.

Like almost all the other citations of these statistics, whether on websites or in books and courses on presentation skills, mention of 'studies' is not accompanied by any reference to what the original research actually consisted of, let alone who did it or when it was done. Nor, on the several occasions when I have asked lecturers or trainers who have presented it unquestioningly as 'fact', has any of them ever been able to cite the source, or to provide any further details about the original study.

None of this would matter were it not for the fact that the claim flies so flagrantly in the face of our common-sense experience. If true, for example, it would mean that anyone who is unable

If only 7 per cent is communicated by the words we use, there would be no need for anyone ever to learn foreign languages, as we would already be able to understand 93 per cent of any particular one of them without any formal instruction at all.

to see a speaker's facial expressions, whether because they are blind, in the dark, listening to a radio or talking to someone on the telephone, would only be able to understand 45 per cent of what was said to them. It would have made more sense for Shakespeare to have had Mark Antony say, 'Lend me your eyes', and for the same correction to be made to the title of this book. Most absurd of all is the fact that, if only 7 per cent is verbally communicated, there would be no need for anyone ever to learn foreign languages, as we would already be able to understand 93 per cent of any particular one of them without any formal instruction at all.

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of claims like this is that they help to spread and consolidate the myth that non-verbal behaviour is so overwhelmingly dominant that the words we use to convey our messages are of little or no importance. This is not only grossly misleading, but also increases the normal anxieties of speech-making with a catalogue of extra things to worry about, like stance, gesture, movement and even what colour clothes to wear.

In some cases, there is a huge gulf between the originators of the research and their disciples, both in the amount of confidence shown in such 'facts', and in the extent to which they hold them to be generally applicable. This is certainly true of the 93 per cent claim, which first reached a wider public with the publication of

the book *Silent messages: Implicit communication of emotions and attitudes* by Dr Albert Mehrabian, a social psychologist at the University of California, in 1981. But, as he pointed out to me in an e-mail, the research on which it was based dates from more than a decade before that, and was actually concerned with feelings and attitudes:

This work of mine has received considerable attention in the literature. It was reported originally by Mehrabian & Weiner (1967) and Mehrabian & Ferris (1967). *Silent Messages* contains a detailed discussion of my findings on inconsistent and consistent messages of feelings and attitudes.

Total Liking = 7% Verbal Liking + 38% Vocal Liking + 55% Facial Liking.

(Albert Mehrabian, personal communication, e-mail, 16 October 2002.)

A key point to note here is that Dr Mehrabian's original percentages refer to different types of 'liking', and *not* to communication in all its forms. And, as one of the originators of these numbers, he writes with far more caution about their general applicability than is ever shown by the popularisers of his work:

Please note that this and other equations regarding differential importance of verbal and non-verbal messages were derived from experiments dealing with communications of feelings and attitudes (i.e. like-dislike). Unless a communicator is talking about their feelings or attitudes, these equations are not applicable. (Albert Mehrabian, personal communication, e-mail, 16 October 2002.)

Unlike Dr Mehrabian, those who recycle these percentages with such confidence have few qualms about generalising way beyond anything he ever intended. Their cavalier disregard for the details of his research is also a matter of some concern to him, as he indicated in the reply to an e-mail in which I asked him what he thought about his findings being so widely used to mislead people about the relative importance of verbal and non-verbal communication:

I am obviously uncomfortable about misquotes of my work. From the very beginning, I have tried to give people the correct limitations of my findings. Unfortunately, the field of self-styled 'corporate image consultants' or 'leadership consultants' has numerous practitioners with very little psychological expertise. (Albert Mehrabian, personal communication, e-mail, 31 October 2002.)

If this biggest of all claims about the dominance of the non-verbal over the verbal has been so exaggerated and distorted in its translation from the original to the training rooms of the world, the question arises as to the reliability of other 'facts' that make up the received wisdom about body language and non-verbal communication.

#### **4. Does it matter what you wear?**

A few years ago, a delegate on one of my courses reported that, after failing to get promoted, he was told that one of the main reasons for being passed over was that he had worn a green suit at the interview. Unfortunately for him, there were members of the

panel who had been informed by an image consultant to be wary of men who wear green suits to business meetings.

Albert Mehrabian may be uncomfortable about self-styled image consultants with very little psychological expertise, but the situation may be even worse than he thinks: some image consultants are quite willing to make definitive-sounding claims without being constrained at all by facts or research. The seriousness of the situation first came to my notice when I was invited to speak on a conference panel with an image consultant, whose company specialises in advising people what they should wear, and what colours suit them best. At a briefing meeting some weeks beforehand, it seemed a wise precaution to check on whether the clothes I was wearing would contradict any of the advice she was planning to present to the audience. My suit was apparently fine, but my tie was 'the tie of a man going nowhere'. Fearing that there might be some hidden reasons for concern about my career prospects, I asked what kind of tie I should be wearing. The answer was that it ought to be bright red with prominent patterns on it. By now, I was beginning to wonder if there were whole new reservoirs of scientific data that I ought to know about, so I inquired about the knowledge base on which such claims were made. After a few moments' hesitation, she answered, 'It's loosely based on the Bauhaus movement in German art in the 1920s.'

When it came to the conference, I followed her professional advice by wearing a bright red tie with yellow arrows running up and down each side of it. On seeing it, the image consultant greeted me with the words, 'That's the tie of a man going somewhere – but that belt you're wearing should be buried.' Ties, it turned out, were at the heart of her presentation, the gist of which

was that patterns smaller than a five pence piece were 'yesterday's ties and should be binned'. However, if the pattern was bigger than a 50 pence piece, it was apparently 'over the top' and should also not be worn. The key to success was therefore to wear a tie with a pattern somewhere in between the size of the two coins. What fascinated me most about all this was that, at the end of the session, members of the audience (all of whom were highly qualified professionals) formed long queues to buy her publications on the subject. Some even started to make enquiries about bringing her into their various companies to advise colleagues.

In effect, what consultants like this have done is to identify and tap into a market that seems to be based mainly on fear and anxiety. There are a lot of men who are so uninterested in fashion and so uncertain about what style of clothes to wear that they are prepared to pay for professional advice and reassurance. It's a market that has probably also been stimulated by an increase in the number of professional women, who unlike men, have no obvious uniform to wear at work.

### **5. Appropriate attire**

This is not to say that how we dress doesn't matter at all. For example, after losing a legal dispute with Virgin Atlantic, Lord King, former chairman of British Airways, is reputed to have said that he would have taken Virgin boss Richard Branson more seriously if he had worn a suit and tie rather than his customary sweater and open-necked shirt. Many years ago, while I was being video-taped doing a lecture on a course for new university lecturers, the studio lights were so hot that I took my jacket off. At the feedback session, it became a matter for discussion: the tutor

stopped the tape with the words, 'Here's a speaker who really means business.' Though nothing could have been further from the truth, the realisation that some people might see it that way has made jacket removal a routine prelude to almost every lecture I have ever given since then.

The point here is not that clothes don't matter at all, but that we should not be drawn into thinking that there is some scientifically based recipe that is guaranteed to enable us to convey a favourable impression to every member of every audience, regardless of the particular circumstances of the occasion. In my experience, most people get away with it through a combination of common sense and trial and error. There will obviously be times when advice and reassurance will be needed, in which case family and colleagues are likely to be just as helpful as professional image consultants, and certainly a great deal cheaper.

### **6. Are lecterns and tables barriers to communication?**

The claim that folded arms are 'defensive' is partly based on the idea that putting your forearms in front of your chest places a barrier between you and your audience. As such, it's part of a more general theory to the effect that anything that can be construed as a barrier between speaker and audience is a bad thing.

I spent five of my teenage years at a school where daily attendance at a church service was compulsory. A lectern stood between the person reading the lesson and the congregation, but it never once occurred to me during all those years that it was a barrier, or that it was somehow reducing the effectiveness of the reader's impact. As far as I know, I was not alone, as I never heard

anyone else worrying about it either. Nor do I remember any of us ever complaining about our teachers' desks being barriers that made it more difficult for them to communicate with us.

Many years later, more and more of those who read lessons in church have taken to standing next to the lectern in full view of the congregation. They then struggle to read the tiny print in the Bible they have brought with them. Often, this is made even more difficult by the fact that they are so nervous that they can't hold it without it shaking in their hands. A similar trend is evident in more secular settings, where more and more presenters are reluctant to stand behind tables and lecterns, preferring to move to one side or in front of them. Like readers in church, some of them also have trouble holding their notes in trembling hands, while those who leave them behind on the table have to keep turning awkwardly around to see what comes next, sometimes even losing their place altogether.

Whether or not audiences regard the lectern as a barrier, church architects have known for hundreds of years that it's an extremely efficient device for making it as easy as possible to read from a text. It positions a Bible with large easy-to-read print at a height and an angle that suits most adults. Readers can glance up at the congregation and down to the text without even having to move their heads, and without fear of losing their place. By comparison, tables are not such efficient resting places for notes or scripts, as they require speakers to glance up and down through an arc of nearly 90 degrees. But they are nonetheless extremely useful places for resting briefcases, computers, projectors and other paraphernalia associated with making a presentation.

All this raises the question of whether anyone would ever be in the least bit concerned about lecterns and tables if, like my



generation of school children, they had never heard anyone describe them as 'barriers'. The way delegates on courses raise the topic suggests that it's not a particularly burning issue for them either. They are much more likely to ask generalised questions based on what they've heard – are they really barriers, is it a serious problem? – than to complain that they personally experience lecterns as terrible obstacles to effective rapport between speaker and audience.

This suggests that lecterns and tables are much less of a problem for audiences than is suggested by much of the received wisdom on the subject. The most sensible approach is therefore not to avoid them altogether, but to balance their undoubted practical advantages against the possible risk of giving the audience a negative impression. For example, when speaking without notes, or from notes on cards that are stiff enough not to flap about in trembling hands, speakers have nothing to lose by deserting the lectern or table. At other times, however, the advantage of not losing one's place while retaining eye contact with the audience will almost always outweigh any disadvantages that might arise from being seen to be standing behind the lectern or table.

If you do decide to use a lectern, it is important to be aware of an ever-present temptation that's best avoided. Sometimes known as 'white knuckle syndrome', it involves speakers gripping on to the sides of the lectern so tightly that the rigidity of their posture, and the nervousness that lies behind it, become visible for all to see. And, once you are locked into this stiff and static stance, there's almost certain to be a build-up of tension that will reduce the effectiveness of your delivery. This suggestion that immobility may have a negative impact on speakers and audiences runs

counter to another modern myth about non-verbal communication, namely that you shouldn't move about while speaking because it distracts the audience.

### **7. Does movement distract?**

I once worked with a presentation skills trainer who taught that speakers should not only stand still, but that there was a correct stance for presentation that involved placing one foot slightly in front of the other. After the lecture that included this advice, delegates regularly came to me pointing out a glaring inconsistency between what they had just heard and what they had just seen. While recommending them not to move about when they were speaking, he had spent most of the lecture wandering about the conference room. When asked if this worried or distracted them, delegates invariably said 'no'. Most went further, adding that it helped to hold their interest and came across as lively and enthusiastic. This positive reaction to movement is in fact typical of how members of audiences tend to react when commenting on each other's presentations. Movement features in their plus columns much more frequently than in their minus columns, which suggests that the best advice for the vast majority of people is that, if they feel like moving about, they should do so.

There is, however, a small minority of cases where speakers' movements do get a negative rating from audience members, such as when someone continually sways from side to side, or takes a few steps forwards and a few steps back, over and over again. What these negatively rated movements have in common is a relentless repetitiveness that is at best a distraction, and at worst a source of irritation to audiences. It may well be an awareness of

this that leads some trainers to recommend that no one should ever move around at all while speaking. But the trouble with adopting such a blanket solution to what is a relatively rare problem is that it is likely to deter the vast majority of people from doing something that will have a positive impact on their audiences. Movement also has positive benefits for speakers themselves, as it helps to disperse adrenalin and reduce tension.

As for how to find out if you are one of the minority whose movements are likely to distract, the best way is through a simple practical experiment. The next time you make a speech or presentation, forget about standing still and move around in any way that comes naturally to you: then check on people's reactions afterwards. This is much more reliable than watching yourself on video, as we tend to be far too critical of our own individual performances. Many are the times that I have heard people denounce the way they move when they see themselves on tape, only to be contradicted by those who had been in the audience at the time. If one accepts that the audience is always right, the safest bet is to listen to what they have to say.

### **8. Do gestures distract?**

The news from audiences about gestures is very similar to that on movement more generally. On almost every presentation skills course I have ever run, someone will say that they have been on another one where the trainer told them that gestures are distracting, and that speakers should keep their hands motionless during presentations. Meanwhile, it is just as rare for audiences to give negative ratings when they see speakers gesticulating as when they see them moving about. In fact they are much more likely to rate

the use of gestures as a definite plus, often referring to it as evidence of expressiveness, individuality and liveliness.

As with the blanket prohibition on moving about while speaking, it may be that some trainers recommend the total suppression of gestures as an insurance policy against the risk that we might belong to the small minority whose hand movements are a source of distraction or irritation to audiences. These tend to be the ones that bear no discernable connection to what the speaker is saying. For example, a video-tape that I often use in training programmes shows a speaker continuously flapping his hand up and down. Everyone who has seen the tape not only notices it, but is also highly critical of it. Other uses of the hands that attract negative ratings include continuous hair tugging, hand wringing, or fidgeting with some other object (most usually the cap of a felt-tipped pen) or part of the anatomy. Like the randomly flapping hand, what makes these distracting and irritating to audiences is that they do not relate in any obvious way to what the speaker is saying.

The opponents of gestural freedom seem to have missed a number of key points about the use of gestures. One is that, as already mentioned, only a small minority of people, perhaps as few as 10 per cent, exhibit any such problems at all. Another is that as skilled an orator as Hitler would hardly have practised his gestures in front of a mirror if they were such a waste of time. And if it really is a distraction to use gestures, there must be tens of millions of people distracting each other every second of every day. This is for the very obvious reason that gesticulating while speaking is a thoroughly natural and normal part of the way humans communicate with each other. As such, any deliberate or conscious effort to suppress gestures may well impede a speaker's

fluency, and restrict their ability to express themselves. At the same time, completely motionless hands look distinctly odd to those who are listening, whether they are in conversation or sitting in an audience.

One of the uses of gestures is as visual aids to illustrate or emphasise what we are talking about. For example, when Winston Churchill spoke of an 'iron curtain' descending across Europe, he moved his left hand downwards at the same time. When Bill Clinton said that there was nothing wrong with America that couldn't be solved by what is right with America, he stabbed the air just before the words 'wrong' and 'right'. Sometimes speakers move their left hand during one part of a contrast, following it with a similar movement of the right hand during the second part. When listing three items, it's quite normal for people to count them out on their fingers, or to make three hand movements at the same time. Even very young children have no problem in pointing at the thing they are asking for, or in holding their hands a certain distance apart to show how big something is.

We don't have to be explicitly taught to do any of these things, and are more or less completely unaware that we are doing them. Nor do we give much thought to the fine degree of precision timing that it takes to get it right, even though words and gestures have to be closely coordinated if they are to come across as natural rather than clumsy or awkward. So the advice on gestures is to do whatever comes naturally, because the chances are that it will make a presentation more expressive and animated than would otherwise be the case. In fact, different people gesticulate in slightly different ways, which makes it one of those behavioural details that plays a part in conveying a person's individuality. As

such, using gestures is much more likely to help you to get your own personality across to an audience than adopting a stance that makes you look like a stuffed dummy whose hands have been firmly glued to its sides or behind its back.

Finally, there is a close parallel between the use of gesture and one of the points made about intonation in Chapter 2. This was the observation that the bigger the distance between speaker and audience, the more will changes in tone and emphasis tend to flatten out. In the same way, slight gestures that are perfectly visible at close quarters in a conversation become progressively more difficult for the audience to see as their distance from the speaker increases. If, as was suggested earlier, you can avoid the problem of monotone by exaggerating your normal conversational patterns of intonation, so too can you make your gestures more visible by exaggerating your normal conversational hand movements. And the bigger the audience, the more expansive and flamboyant you can afford to be.

## II. PHYSICAL FACTS

### 1. Physical tension and the problem of nerves

Feelings ranging from nervousness to sheer terror are common reactions for many people when faced with the prospect of having to make a speech or presentation. Being well prepared and well rehearsed takes speakers a long way towards defeating the problem (see Chapter 9). But this is a battle that will never be won completely, and perhaps never should be, as overconfidence almost inevitably results in a poor performance. There are even reports of some very experienced speakers taking deliberate steps

to preserve an element of tension while speaking. For example, the late Enoch Powell, a former Conservative and Ulster Unionist MP, used to refrain from visiting the toilet before making a speech, because he believed the added tension from speaking with a full bladder gave his delivery an edge that it might otherwise not have had. This is not to suggest that everyone should follow his example, but it does draw attention to the fact that, when it comes to dealing with nerves and tension, the objective should be minimisation, rather than total elimination.

## 2. Causes and consequences of nerves

Before looking at some techniques that can help to reduce the negative impact of nerves, we need to be clear about the main causes and consequences. And the first thing to be aware of is that speaking, whether in conversation or in front of an audience, is a much more stressful physical activity than most people realise. Quite apart from the obvious physical factors, such as breathing and moving the mouth and tongue to produce sounds recognisable as words, speaking is associated with a rise in blood pressure, irregular heartbeat and, in extreme cases, profuse sweating. But potentially the most debilitating factor is that the tension directly affects the very parts of the body that produce the voice, causing muscles in the chest and neck to tighten up. This not only restricts our ability to vary our tone and emphasis, but can also result in a quavering or more highly pitched the voice than usual. Underlying all this is the rush of adrenalin that comes from the primeval urge to fight or flee when we find ourselves in a difficult situation. Running away or assaulting the audience are obviously not serious options, which is why walking about and gesticulating help to

Speaking is associated with a rise in blood pressure, irregular heartbeat and, in extreme cases, profuse sweating. But potentially the most debilitating factor is that the tension directly affects the very parts of the body that produce the voice.

dissipate some of the adrenalin, and why physical exercises of the kind described later can be a useful precaution to take just before making a speech.

### Pitch

It was to counteract the problem of pitch that Margaret Thatcher underwent voice coaching with the National Theatre. As women's voices are naturally more highly pitched than those of men, any raising of the pitch is more likely to reach a point where it will be heard as 'shrill' or 'screeching'. With the election of their first female leader, Conservative Party managers were concerned that this might create a negative impression in the rough and tumble of parliamentary debate. Tapes of Thatcher speeches before and after voice coaching show that she achieved a reduction in pitch of about half the average difference between male and female voices. While this was no doubt a sensible precaution to take in the case of such a prominent public figure, experience of listening to presentations by hundreds of speakers suggests that it isn't something most people should worry about. In only a tiny minority of cases, certainly less than five per cent, have I ever found it necessary to refer anyone, male or female, to a voice coach.

### ☞ *Fear of the audience*

As well as the physical causes of tension, various psychological factors also come into play. At the heart of these is the fact that speaking to audiences is such an extremely rare event in most people's talking lives that they are not sure how to go about it, or how best to get their messages across in such an unfamiliar medium. Half the battle is therefore to understand the nature of the problem and the available solutions to it, which is why earlier chapters have focused on how speaking in public differs from the familiar comfortable world of everyday conversation, and on how to express ourselves in ways that will appeal to audiences.

One of the most widely cited causes of nervousness is the feeling of being threatened or exposed by being looked at by so many people all at once. This is obviously a very different experience from that of interacting with a handful of other people in a conversation, and most people certainly feel safer sitting in an audience than standing in front of it. A commonly heard remedy is that you should imagine that members of the audience are sitting there wearing nothing but their underwear. Although this may work for some people, the trouble is that it implies that the relationship between speaker and audience is an essentially hostile one, and that you are therefore right to feel intimidated whenever you become the focus of so many people's attention. But such a view is contradicted by two important facts, an awareness of which can also help to reduce the nervousness that is an almost inevitable consequence of adopting this confrontational 'us and them' attitude towards audiences.

The first comes from people's responses when asked whether, when they are in an audience, they sit there feeling hostile towards

speakers, hoping to see them fall flat on their face and make a fool of themselves. The answer is invariably 'no', at which point it dawns on them that, except in very rare cases, such as public meetings about controversial issues, audiences are much more amicably inclined towards speakers than is commonly thought. A second fact is that members of an audience are not, as many people seem to assume, wired up to each other in such a way as to constitute a collective mind that somehow enables them to conspire together against the speaker. A more realistic view is to think of yourself as one individual who is communicating with a number of other single individuals. Once you start viewing your relationship with the audience as consisting of a number of one-to-one encounters that happen to be taking place at the same time, it starts to feel more like a conversation and therefore less intimidating

### **3. Techniques for tackling tension**

While movement can help to release some of the adrenalin while actually making a speech or presentation, it is also usual to experience a major build-up of tension beforehand. And, as mentioned earlier, this can affect our vocal apparatus in such a way as to cause trembling, quavering or uncertain pitch. The best way to deal with this is to tackle the main physical causes of the problem, namely tension in the neck, chest and ribcage, with a series of simple exercises aimed at freeing up and relaxing them before taking to the floor.

Most obvious, perhaps, is the fact that deep breathing and more or less any other standard relaxation exercises will help to reduce the negative effects of tension on the voice. Other simple routines are the following:

- ❑ Move the neck and head to one side as far as you can (i.e. until it starts to feel a strain to move it any further), then relax. Do the same thing in the other direction and repeat a few times.
- ❑ Move the head downwards until the chin presses against the lower neck. Relax, and then move the head backwards as far as you can. Relax again before repeating the routine a few times.
- ❑ Rotate the head in circular motions a few times.
- ❑ Tense the shoulders upwards as far as they'll go, then relax them. Repeat a few times.
- ❑ Chew gum, or tense and relax the jaw a few times.

### 🗨 *Breathing is the foundation of good delivery*

Taking deep breaths before a performance is not only good news for the calming sensation it creates. It is also essential to control the shallow breathing which inevitably accompanies the 'fight or flight' response provoked by feelings of nervousness. Shallow breathing is designed to boost athletic activity – but is the enemy of the speaker. Otherwise it would not be necessary for actors, singers and wind instrument players to learn so early on in their careers that, to make a great sound, they need to breathe deeply.

The first step towards understanding how to breathe effectively when speaking is to learn how to control the diaphragm. This is a dome-shaped sheet of muscle located at the bottom of our lungs, which works to regulate our breathing without any conscious effort. All day and all night long it works like bellows, taking air down, and then pushing it out. But it's possible to consciously interrupt the process by pulling in enough air through

our lungs to inflate the diaphragm fully. To do this, imagine there is a balloon sitting at the bottom of your lungs, and you are trying to fill it with air. Once you feel your diaphragm is inflated – you will notice your abdomen swelling outwards – release the breath slowly while speaking or humming. You will find an instant increase in the volume of sound you create, but without the hardening of sound associated with overstraining the vocal chords (which is how most people attempt to increase the sounds they make). This deep-breathing technique has three main benefits:

- 1 It has a calming effect on most people.
- 2 It allows you to speak as loudly as you need to for the audience to hear you clearly.
- 3 Pausing to take a breath enables you as a speaker to formulate the next sentence, while at the same time allowing the audience to take in your information at a steady rate (see discussion in Chapter 2).

### 🗨 *If your mouth is not fully open you will sound dull*

An easy way to discover just how much intonation is governed by how widely we open our mouths is to try reading a speech while deliberately opening your mouth more than usual. When people on courses do this, they routinely complain that it feels a crazy and embarrassing exercise to perform. But they hardly ever continue to complain once they have seen and heard themselves on video-tape. More often than not, they admit that, although it feels odd at first, opening their mouths more widely than usual goes a long way towards eliminating the problem of monotonous delivery.

Further examples of this can be seen by watching television presenters in action. They may look perfectly natural, but they do in fact tend to open their mouths more widely than most people typically do. The opposite can be seen by looking at speakers with reputations for speaking in a rather flat tone of voice. Three famous examples are the Queen, Prince Charles and former Prime Minister John Major, none of whose mouths open very widely while they are speaking. So if you feel your performance is hampered by a tendency to sound monotonous, making a conscious effort to open your mouth more widely will give an instant brightening effect, and increase the tonal variation in the sounds that come out of your mouth.

#### ☛ *Most people speak too fast*

One of the important differences between public speaking and conversation discussed in Chapter 2 is the need for more pauses and a slower pace when addressing an audience. The suggested reduction was to bring the conversational rate down from around 170–180 words per minute to 120–130 words per minute in a speech or presentation. The trouble is that, to most people, this feels uncomfortably slow, especially in a situation where they are desperate to get their talk over with as soon as possible. The problem is further complicated by the fact that it's obviously very difficult to gauge just how fast we are speaking when in full flow. It is therefore something that repays practice, and there's a useful rule that works for the vast majority of speakers: if what you are saying sounds to you to be too slow, and if the pauses sound too long, then you have probably got the pace about right.

#### ☛ *Alcohol is never the answer*

Because drinking alcohol is associated with relaxing social occasions, many people think that a drink or two will help to give them confidence before making a speech. This is one of the biggest mistakes any speaker can ever make, for the simple reason that alcohol directly affects the brain. In excess, it causes speech to become slurred and incoherent, but even a slight amount reduces our ability to keep a clear head and will have a negative impact on performance. So the rule is simple: *never drink anything alcoholic before making a speech.*

However, drinking water or a soft drink before or during a presentation is a perfectly acceptable and recommended solution to the more or less inevitable problem of a dry mouth and throat.



Various claims about the relative importance of verbal and non-verbal communication have become so widespread that it's important to know which ones are worth taking seriously.

### **1. Claims to be sceptical about**

- What we actually say plays a minor role in communication.
- 93 per cent of communication is non-verbal.
- There is some scientifically based secret of what clothes will have most impact.
- People with folded arms are always on the defensive.
- Lecterns and tables are barriers to effective communication.
- Moving about while speaking distracts the audience.
- Using gestures distracts the audience.

### **2. Claims worth taking seriously**

- Speaking is a physically stressful experience that can cause a rise in blood pressure, irregular heartbeat and, in extreme cases, profuse sweating.
- Physical tension both increases nervousness, and directly affects the parts of the body that produce the voice.
- Breathing is the foundation of good delivery.

- If your mouth is not fully open you are likely to sound dull and monotonous.
- Most people speak too fast.
- Alcohol is never the answer.
- When it comes to reducing tension and nervousness, the aim should be minimisation, rather than total elimination.