

The Voice and Communication Pentagon™ **Alexander Massey – www.authenticvoice.co.uk**

Our voice is our identity. It is both our deepest, inner self, and a means through which we engage with the world and from which others form an impression of us. The ancient Greeks said that “as men’s life is, so is their talk” – our voices seem to echo precisely everything that we are. This is presumably what prompted Socrates to say, “Speak, that I may see you,” and prompted the title of Boone’s book, ‘Is your voice telling on you?’.

Our voice is also an expression of our power. Through our voice, we can claim our place in the world. The energy and sound of our voices can have both positive and negative intention and impact, as can our words. The voice and the person are indivisible. As Stengel and Strauch say, “work on the voice, whether conscious or subconscious, is always also work on the self”. Andrews writes: “No problem exists in a discrete form. Any problem that affects the ability to communicate creates social and emotional difficulties. Similarly, social and emotional problems can themselves create or exacerbate communication disorders.”

Effective development of voice and communication skills therefore needs to take account of both the physical dimension of voice (how the body produces the sound most efficiently and healthily), and the personal dimension (the inner landscape of the person, and their social and relationship context).

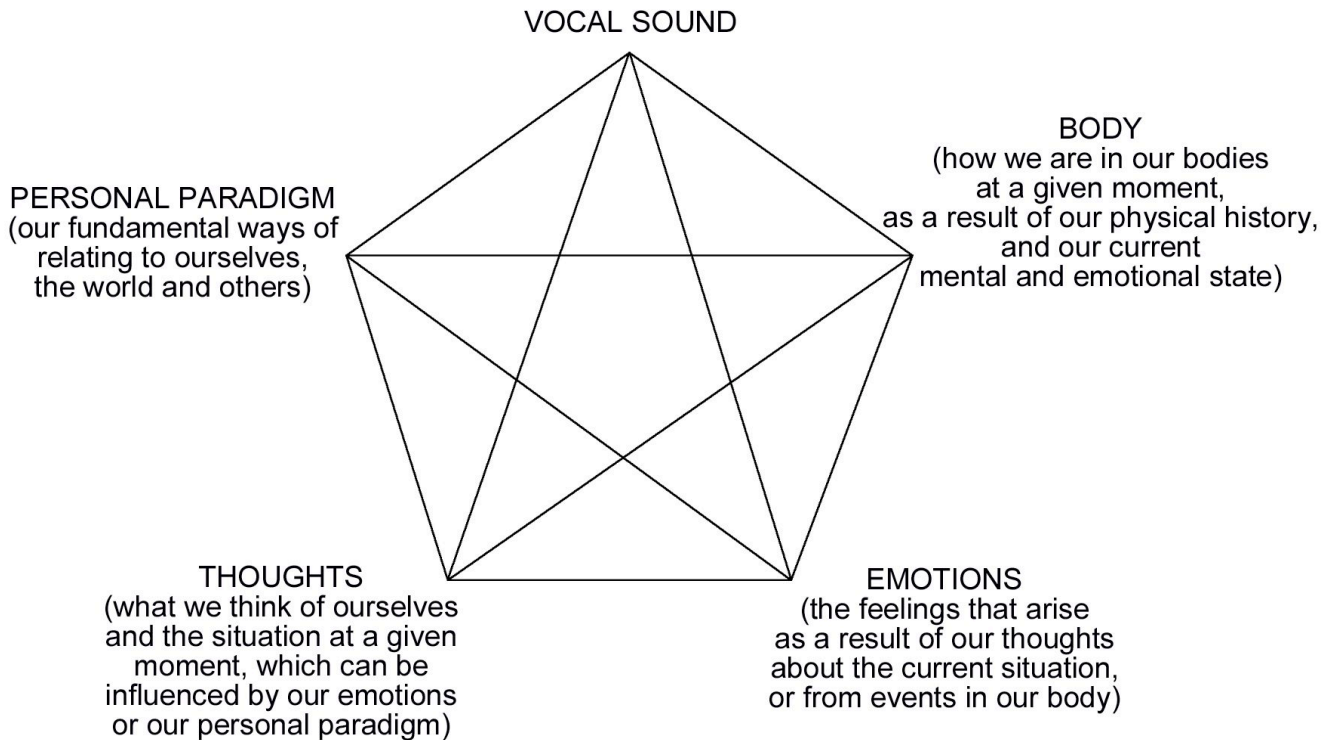
It can be useful to think of voice and communication with a five-part model that can be represented by a pentagon.

1. First of all, it is important to realize that although we use the word ‘voice’ a lot, actually, there is no such thing as a voice. There is no physical object we can point to and say, ‘there it is, that’s my voice’. More likely, when we talk about someone’s voice, we are referring to the acoustic phenomenon, the sound that our listening brains interpret as voice and, of course, language. So, the first point on the pentagon is called **VOCAL SOUND**. If we want to have any influence on our vocal sound, we cannot change it directly; we have to look to other points on the model.
2. Vocal sound is an acoustic event in the physical world, and is produced through physical means. So, the next point on the pentagon is the **BODY**. The physical process can be simplified into three components: the breath mechanism (which is governed by many muscle systems, and influenced by posture and how we move and hold ourselves); the vibrating mechanism (the vocal cords, the structures that surround them, and the muscles that act most directly on them); and the ‘sound shaping’ element (the structures and muscles that influence timbre, resonance, and articulation, the conversion of the raw sound signal into words). Our biological inheritance, our genetic make-up plays a

role in the sounds we can make, but is the least significant element. A great voice is not so much about the accident of genetic inheritance, but how we use what we have. A important part of all vocal training happens at this physical level. There are sound anatomical principles that govern the healthy and free production of vocal sound. It is useful to be able to distinguish these sound and logical methods from the mass of mis-information and incomplete understandings that abound in the voice training world! Any good voice trainer should be able to describe exactly and precise detail the physical basis of what is happening, and why something works. Effective physical technique can also enhance the delivery of what we want to say.

3. Knowing about the physical basis of producing vocal sound is not sufficient in itself to have a free, expressive or interesting voice. Our voices can still let us down however good our physical technique is; so too, we can sometimes regret the words we choose in a given moment. This is because what we do with our bodies is deeply influenced by our **EMOTIONS**. Without having to consciously plan, our vocal sound immediately reveals feeling. A person's facial expression or how they are 'in their bodies' arises from how they use their muscles – this indicates something both about their personality and their current mood. Our emotional selves, and emotional history, are mapped into our bodies. To master our voice, we must master our bodies; to master our bodies fully, we must master our emotions.
4. Emotions clearly have a physical dimension - they are always felt in the body, albeit sometimes subtly. Emotions also always have a cognitive component. With practice, we can track through our internal process, and discover that there are **THOUGHTS** that are triggering our emotional states. For example, it is not difficult to recognize which thought process will serve me better – 'Will I speak / sing well in the next few moments, or will I make a complete fool of myself?' or "Whatever happens now, whatever sounds / words I emit, whatever responses come from others, none of this has to affect my internal equilibrium." As well as affecting our emotions, our thoughts can also directly help or hinder the conscious instructions we give to our bodies in the physical technique of sound production. How we think about the situation also governs the words we choose.
5. The fifth point on the pentagon represents the 'ground' from which our thoughts arise. This is our personal **PARADIGM**, which includes our fundamental view of ourselves, our beliefs about how the world works and what our place is within it, and priorities. For example, when I have a secure sense of self, and can meet with courage, honesty *and compassion* those parts of myself that once I might not wanted to have admitted existed, then I am likely to engage with others with a much greater open-mindedness, vitality and confidence. How others behave towards me can then not unsettle my own equilibrium. I need

to have a fundamental trust in the idea that the world is not a hostile place, or that even if people are out *are* out to 'get me', I can remain psychologically and emotionally intact. My thoughts will reflect this, as will my emotional state. My body is then, relaxed, vibrant and fluent. My words are likely to be well chosen, positive, and engaging for the listener, and my vocal energy will be at its best.



We have taken a journey anti-clockwise around the pentagon, but there is a reciprocity between all the different parts of this five-part system. Physical processes, such as breathing, relaxation and postural alignment techniques, can help change our emotional and mental state. Physical movement, and deeper breathing triggers endorphins in the body, lifting our emotional state, and we find ourselves thinking more positively. Sounds can influence our inner life (as shown, for example by music therapy, and the importance of music in all our lives). There is a large body of scientific evidence that shows how sound (which is a type of vibration) can also directly affect our bodies. We can shift our paradigm either by 'changing our mind' or by a spontaneous internal 'realignment' arising from the direct impact of sound. (Have you ever experienced a complete change in outlook from simply being receptive to prolonged sound meditation, or a piece of music?).

The Voice and Communication Pentagon™ illustrates these paths of influence. All aspects are related to and influence each other. What this means is that in terms of voice and communication work:

- any feature in one part of the self has its parallel features in the other four
- an intervention in one aspect can affect, challenge and support movement in the other four areas
- voicework does not have to be confined just to 'voice' or the body, so when we feel stuck in those areas, there are other areas we can usefully explore and work with; and communication work does not have to be confined to 'thinking' and talking through issues
- for voice and communication work to be effective, we need to be attentive to which of these five aspects is the best 'entry point' for change work at any given moment
- all voice and communication work is about coming more into our true selves

The core principle underlying all the work of Authentic Voice is that changes in vocal and communication behaviour imply a systemic change in behaviour. For all behavioural change to be authentic, consistent and sustainable (so that we reach 'unconscious competence'), we must be prepared to be different. In practice, this means becoming more ourselves, believing in what - and who - we have to offer, and being willing and able to operate from ever deeper levels of integrity. When we achieve that, our confidence is at its highest, and we can learn to master vocal and other skills easily. Such systemic change work takes time and sustained commitment. Most importantly, we must be prepared to work on the 'inner game' and personal issues that inevitably arise in voice and communication work. Working on the 'mechanics' of voice production can provide the scaffolding for this work, but rarely on its own produces satisfying results. This five-part model offers an approach that creates significant and lasting change by working with the whole person - mind, body, emotions, and values.

References

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Stengel, Ingeburg and Strauch, Theo (2000) Voice and Self: a handbook of personal voice development therapy, Free Association Books, London/NY

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