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Find Your Voice

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A couple of recent Wall Street Journal articles cited research that indicates CEOs of public companies who were taller and had deeper voices made on average \$187,000 more per year. You can't do much about your height (although Mae West, at under five feet tall was known to wear five-inch platform shoes), but you can train your voice.

It is not just what you say, but how you sound that can have a substantial impact on how you are perceived as a professional. Steve Jobs, Tim Cook, Barack Obama, etc. have vocal qualities that portray them as dynamic, charming, convincing, captivating speakers, whether you agree with what they say or not.

We've all heard speakers who have great, interesting things to say, but simply don't inspire confidence in their listeners, or worse, are so difficult to listen to that you start to tune out their voice despite your interest. Think of the last time you heard a speech that truly held your attention. What was it about the speaker's voice and delivery that made you pay attention?

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles have some theories as to what makes a charismatic speaker.

According to the researchers, the following qualities inspired trust and respect in listeners: a deeper voice, abrupt increasing and decreasing vocal pitch, a varied tonal range, and lower pitch on words that end in vowels. Many great leaders in business and politics use similar vocal techniques in delivering speeches that trained actors would use when delivering a monologue on stage.

Without going to acting school, how can aspiring executives be sure their voices are helping them be taken seriously as candidates? Here are a few tips:

- Breathe deeply. A shallow breath creates a shallow sound, which is weak, short and doesn't inspire confidence in a listener. A deeper breath will give strength and power to your voice, and as a bonus, you probably won't have to repeat yourself in meetings!

- Vary your vocal pitch. Don't sound like Ben Stein. Let your sound travel higher and lower as you speak. An easy way to do this is to sound excited or passionate. Even better, actually BE excited or passionate about the subject at hand. Enthusiasm is contagious, and your enthusiastic sounding voice will make your audience more enthusiastic about you.
- Speak in full sentences when appropriate. A quick, affirmative "yes," is fine, but when trying to convey an actual idea, speak the full sentence without stopping your voice. We've all heard that person. Who talks like this. And it gets grating. Very quickly. And you start to tune it out. Because it's annoying to try to follow.
- Speak with your full voice. A voice that contains only high tones, like Julia Child, will be memorable but will not inspire confidence and respect. A voice that is forced too low will sound like something is being faked and will inspire mistrust. A voice that is forced low, raspy and creaky like someone just waking up or falling asleep (known as "vocal fry") will make the speaker appear less competent and even less educated.
- Lower your pitch at the end of a statement. In many languages, one can turn a statement into a question simply by raising pitch at the end. When one does this in speech and does not intend a question, the question is still implied, and the speaker sounds unsure of him/herself. Lowering one's voice at the end of a statement and then taking the time to take a breath afterwards shows confidence in what is being said.

Putting some conscious effort into all of these techniques will help you sound confident, respectable and inspiring in your next meeting, speech or interview.

The Employment Picture Improves

Recovery in employment has long been recognized as trailing real economic recovery following a recession. The 2007-2008 great recession is no exception. In fact, employment recovery has been significantly slower this time around. This is probably due to companies being more conservative in their cash management and hiring processes, the greater supply of workers, the ease of recruiting at the junior level through job boards, and a shift in the economy toward lower-paid service industries.

Despite all these headwinds, we are seeing tangible signs of an employment recovery. The unemployment rate is now at 5.8%, near historical averages, and is projected to decline to 5.3% +/- in 2015. As importantly, real wages are up 0.4% this year, ahead of inflation for the first time since 2008.

There is, however, a cloud to this silver lining. U6, the combined measure of unemployment, involuntary part-time workers who can't find full-time work and discouraged workers is at 12%, a historically high number.

A survey of public company CEOs published by the Wall Street Journal indicates their top priority for 2015 is finding a trained and experienced workforce, a workforce for the 21st century. So far, corporate training budgets have not reflected this urgency. Instead, companies are pushing partnerships with

educational institutions and the government, particularly around STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics).

While we are waiting for government, education (both notoriously slow to change) and the private sector to work together, you should take charge of your own development and employability. One strategy is to build bridges into growing sectors and expand your network in those areas. These include healthcare, professional services, construction, technology, clean tech, education (particularly non-traditional), software and ISMAC (Internet-of-Things, Social, Mobile, Analytics and Cloud).

At the same time, no matter how young or old you are or what skills you have developed, the workforce is changing and you will need to spend at least some time on personal professional development. Let me suggest a New Year's Resolution. Identify one or two marketable skills, set a plan, and start learning. Your career will thank you later.

Fearless Forecasts

2015 will be a year filled with change, challenges and opportunities. That's not a forecast, that's a fact. Here, however, are a few forecasts.

A survey of over 50 economists predicts that US growth will be around 2.9% in 2015, inflation-adjusted. For 2014, the same group predicted 2.8% growth with actual growth probably around 2.2%. That many economists can't be that far off two years in a row, can they?

In 2015 we will see the confluence of Moore's Law (doubling of information processing capability every 18 months) and the parable of the chessboard. As the story goes, the inventor of chess asked a Chinese emperor for a grain of rice in year one for the first square of the chessboard. In year two, he would receive two grains, in year three four grains, and so on through 64 squares. The emperor eventually went bankrupt. We are now approaching the second half of the information chessboard and can expect virtually unimaginable increases in information processing capacity and information.

One technology area where we can expect a significant volume increase is in electronic payments, with mobile payments becoming more common, available for both Apple and Android phones. At the same time, new more secure credit cards will come into general use.

Whether we like it or not, 2015 will seem like an election year.

Predictions are that oil prices will rebound a bit to around \$70/barrel, still historically low, and by the way, a great opportunity to buy barrels. This lower-cost oil should boost consumer spending. It will certainly convince the airline industry to lower prices, provide more legroom, and loosen their frequent flyer programs (don't count on this one).

In fact, the price for travel is expected to increase. Other expected increases are chocolate, coffee, bourbon and some other necessities. On the plus side, cloud storage, cranberries and smartphones are expected to become less costly.

Another prediction—the Dodd-Frank provision which requires companies to calculate and publish the ratio of median employee salary to CEO salary will contribute to increased pressure for a minimum wage increase.

We can also expect some global warming fireworks. On the one hand, a global consensus is building at the Lima, Peru energy conference and should continue with US and Chinese support in Paris. At the same time, Senator Inhofe of Oklahoma who claims that human impact on climate change is a hoax, will soon be the Chairman of the Environment and Public Works committee of the Senate. We have come to expect some amazing machinations from Washington and 2015 will be no exception.

I could go on about other changes, but I really have to go out and stock up on bourbon.

Selected Success Stories

Victor Temple actually took a job offer from Alaska (I have a fortune cookie on my desk which says you will soon take a job offer from Alaska) as CFO of the Blackrock Group in Fairbanks.

David Duffy has changed industries from higher education to real estate as Vice President and Finance Director for JLL (NYSE: JLL) a professional service and investment management firm, formerly named Jones Lang LaSalle.

Doug Nathman has joined Maverick Trading as an analyst/trader which focuses on equities, equity options and index options.

James Cornell has started an investment advisory firm which helps wealthy families and affluent individuals improve the performance of their investments. The company is named Fiduciary Wealth Partners and is located in Boston.

Neil Campbell is now President and CEO at Pittsburgh-based Helomics Corporation, a comprehensive personalized healthcare company, bringing the next generation of diagnostics to the oncology field.

David Douglass is Communications Manager at Constellation in Baltimore, where he advises and counsels executive leaders with respect to communications issues, strategies and tactics.

Jeff Feldmesser is now an Independent Senior Communications Manager in the Washington, DC area, providing writing, editing and publications layout support to nonprofit and for-profit organizations.

John Long is COO and CFO of Mid-Atlantic Broadband in the Washington, DC area.

Ty Prettyman is Senior Aviation Engineer at SAIC in the Washington, DC area, supporting the FAA on the NextGen program.

John Reinemann is a Consultant at NCI, Inc. in Reston, VA. NCI is a leading provider of enterprise solutions and services to U.S. defense, intelligence, healthcare, and civilian government agencies.

Bob Singleton is now with Booz Allen Hamilton in the Washington, DC area.

Michael Shrader is Chief Operations Officer at CustomerSpeak/Vision Financial, where he is responsible for the operations and performance of both the customer relationship management company (CustomerSpeak) and the accounts receivables management company (Vision Financial Corp).

Scott Tilley is Project Manager at Web World Technologies, Inc., where he is currently managing software development for a WTI DoD client.

Larry Wolter is Director, Product Marketing at Metalogix Software, where he is responsible for SharePoint performance management and database replication solutions which enable SharePoint administrators to discover, analyze, and respond to active database issues before they become critical.

Thought for the Day

When Cicero spoke, people marveled.
When Caesar spoke, people marched. (Cato)

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