PART ONE OF THREE ARTICLES

The George Washington University Speech and Hearing Center in Washington DC has treated clients with voice problems since the 1970’s. One of the most common vocal issues that arose with clients was difficulty *projecting* their voices in a variety of situations.

Common complaints included:

"No one can hear me!"
"My voice wears out too quickly."
"My throat feels so tight and strained."

While most of us do not have voice disorders per se, it is not uncommon to have similar difficulties when we have to do a presentation at work, coach little league, or even call to a neighbor across the street. Therefore while we all have the tools to project our voices effectively, it helps to understand how to use them!

The purpose of this discussion is to introduce each of the tools necessary for easy and effective vocal projection, what each of their roles are and most of all how to use them!

**Vocal Projection vs. Yelling**

Projecting the voice is not just ‘yelling’. It is the ability to beam the voice to its intended target. It is a natural balance of breath support, oral resonance, and other components that work together to produce an effortless and efficient voice.

*Yelling* without projection, on the other hand, is forcing mainly the throat muscles to do all the work. Since those muscles were not designed to function independent from the rest of the body, vocal fatigue, strain and discomfort can result. Therefore what we are going to work on here is *balancing* the voice allowing it to *project naturally*.

**Vocal Projection Is Natural**

It is important to understand that it is more natural for a voice to project easily than not. So this is not something that you have to work hard at physically. In fact if you try to push
the voice and force it, it will not be able to do its job. In fact, if you think about most children’s voices, they carry easily without strain or effort. Most parents can confirm that even an infant’s cry can project effortlessly throughout a multi room home unencumbered and free to mother or father’s ear.

Although it is usually after years of life stress and perpetuation of poor vocal hygiene and habits that restricts the natural freedom of the vocal mechanism to project, general health can also be a factor. Health issues may be multifaceted and can negatively impact if they affect one or more of the components of vocal projection.

First of all, anyone can improve vocal projection. It is most important to understand that the voice functions best when the whole body is engaged, not just the vocal folds. So when you think voice, think total body.

If the posture is misaligned, the breath is shallow, or the resonance is low in the throat, there will be a negative impact on vocal projection. With that in mind let’s talk about how the body is used to support projection of the voice.
“The Ten Components”

We are going to introduce the 10 components of vocal projection that when balanced together, create effortless sound that can be easily heard, is comfortable to produce, and pleasant to listen to.

1. **Aligned Posture:**

   Proper postural alignment is the foundation of the balanced voice. This allows freedom in the throat and breathing muscles and tubes. It is essential that they stay relaxed, open and unrestricted in order to function optimally.

   ![Posture Diagram](http://www.neckpainreliefkit.com/neckposture)

To align your own posture, use a mirror and reposition yourself so that you:

1. Stand or sit *(with heel on the floor)* tall and ease your spine into alignment so that it feels like one segment is above another, yet stay aware of a natural curve.
2. Allow yourself to position your ears directly above your shoulders (not in front of the shoulders) and your shoulders directly over your hips.
3. Keep your head level (your chin is not up or down) in a *relaxed and active way*. If you try a gentle nodding motion, it is easier to find.
4. Release your shoulders keeping them soft, back and down.
   It helps to unclench your fists and let your fingers fall open.

You should not have the experience of fixedness or rigidness to the body whatsoever! It is fluid in that every breath, every turn of the head, and even each thought and emotion can impact it. This is natural and healthy.

If you are used to misalignments such as “slouching”, this new pattern is going to feel unnatural, and it should! It should feel different and even a bit awkward at first, as you practice this in both the sitting and standing position.

2. **A Relaxed Body**

   Once a body is in alignment, it is easier to maintain a relaxed body. This is more natural when we are healthy, happy and relaxed within ourselves.
Life stress can and does impact this however. To counterbalance this effect, general relaxation of the body is necessary for the voice to function freely because the body is the environment that the voice box functions out of. If the environment (your body) is tense then the voice will be too. A tense voice is a dysfunctional one.

Relaxation of the body happens when we are mentally and emotionally relaxed and are free of muscular tension. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways using meditation or other mental relaxation exercises, physical exercise and stretching, yoga and a variety of other physical or meditation practices.

**One simple relaxation exercise that is very effective is DEEP BREATHING:**

1. Sit or lie down in a relaxed position.
2. S-l-o-w-l-y inhale for the count of 10 so you inhale as deeply as you can.
   a. As you do this put your attention on how it *feels* when you take the air in.
   For example:
      - Notice how the body adjusts,
      - Notice how you can feel the air going into the nose or mouth,
      - Notice how the body fills up
3. Pause at the maximum you can take in for the count of 5
   - Again, notice how it feels
4. Let it out as slowly-as-you-can for a final count of ten
   - Feel that sensation of the body as you release the breath
5. Repeat 5 to 10 times
6. Notice the results

3. **Breath Support**

Breath is the power source of the voice. It is predominantly the action of the diaphragm that brings air into the lungs (inhalation) in *preparation* for projecting. It is vital that there is enough air inhaled in a balanced way to support the message. The action of the abdomen moves air out of the lungs (exhalation) *while* you are projecting.

![Diaphragm and Abdomen](image)
Diaphragmatic breathing is an ideal breathing pattern to use for taking in just the right amount of air to ‘power the voice’.

Proper Use of the Diaphragm:
When you take a breath inward, the belly should expand (like a balloon would when you blow into it). This is the action of the diaphragm. Problems begin when there is not expansion of the diaphragm. This causes the body to compensate with the chest and shoulders and creates imbalance causing the body to compensate with the chest and shoulders.

Are you using your diaphragm optimally?

Try the following:

1. Put one hand on your belly and the other on your chest as in the illustration.
2. Speak for 30 – 60 seconds about a topic. For example: Describe your last vacation aloud.
3. While you are speaking, observe which hand moves:
   • Is your belly is moving while you are speaking vs the chest and/or shoulders? If it is, you are using your diaphragm.
   • If you notice your chest or shoulders moving instead of the diaphragm, all is not lost! See below for how to train your diaphragm

Try the following to develop diaphragmatic breath support:

A. Quiet Breathing
   a. Align your spine in a very relaxed way and let your belly completely relax...yes let it all go without trying to hold it in (it’s ok, we won’t look).
   
   b. Now watch and notice if your abdominal area is gently moving in and out as you breath silently. Let it just happen without any conscious control.

   1. If you are using your diaphragm, you will notice gentle motion naturally below your ribs.
   2. If still not using predominantly your diaphragm, try this:
      a. Lie down and let yourself just relax for a minute or so.
      b. Keep your belly loose consciously.
      c. As you lie in a relaxed position, put your hand over your abdomen. It is important that you keep your abdomen relaxed and passive. Let the air do the work.
      d. You should see natural motion develop here now. Do not work at it! Allow it to happen naturally...
e. APPLY THE SAME WHILE SITTING: Once you can do it lying down, memorize that feeling and when you think you can duplicate it while sitting...slowly swing your legs around and sit up while keeping this motion going.

f. NOW, do 10 quiet breaths using your diaphragm

g. Once you have been successful with quiet breathing, continue with Breathing While Talking, below.

B. Breathing While Talking.

Keep your belly relaxed as you do the following:

a. Try counting to 10 using diaphragmatic breathing now.
   1. Take a breath and say “one”, take another breath and say “two” and so on...confirm that your diaphragm is doing the work.

b. Now do the same and say the days of the week, and the months of the year.

c. Progress to sentences and paragraphs until it becomes more natural.

Next, we will discuss how pitch, vocal expression, articulation, rate of speech impact vocal projection and how we can improve it. Finally we will add how oral resonance, vocal quality, intention, and animation impact vocal projection and how to pull it all together to project with effectiveness and ease.