

## Work & Careers

# Pitch perfect: how to speak with authority

Women can change the way they sound for more impact, but authenticity is crucial



Narita Bahra, a senior barrister, sees her 'down to earth' voice as a strength © Charlie Bibby/FT

Rivkah Brown 8 HOURS AGO

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It's Sunday night and I'm deep in a YouTube hole, watching a video already viewed by 1,479,225 others, that replays a radio interview in which the interviewee snaps in anger, swinging to the top of her vocal range. Realising the mask has slipped, she checks herself and starts again, this time slower, deeper. But it's too late. A text overlay pinpoints her switch from "real" to "fake voice" and diagnoses it "sociopathic behaviour".

The speaker is Elizabeth Holmes, founder of collapsed blood-testing company Theranos, who has [been charged](#) with perpetrating a multimillion-dollar fraud. Like Theranos's claim that it could revolutionise blood testing, few had previously questioned the authenticity of Ms Holmes's very deep voice.

The human voice is an index of identity, encoding everything from age to gender, education to nationality. To manipulate the voice is to fundamentally alter the self.

Yet the way we speak is not only a trademark, but a tool. "We adjust and adapt our voice all the time," says UK-based voice coach Kate Lee. Each of us consciously and unconsciously modulates our pace, pitch, volume and tone to control the impression we give to others. "Everybody does it. And if they don't, they might lack awareness," she says.

In this light, Ms Holmes's behaviour appears the very opposite of sociopathic. Research has shown our preference for lower-pitched leaders, a preference so strong as to [swing elections](#).

Margaret Thatcher famously took voice coaching during her term as prime minister. “Soon the hectoring tones of the housewife gave way to softer notes,” wrote her biographer Charles Moore, “and a smoothness that seldom cracked except under extreme provocation.”

Pitch lowering is not exclusive to politicians and chief executives. Kate Henney teaches at an inner London secondary school and says that “strong voice” — a technique devised by Doug Lemov in his book [\*Teach Like a Champion\*](#) — was integral to her teacher training programme.

“We were told that nobody respects a shrill teacher. If you wanted students to listen, the most powerful thing was to speak deeper, not louder,” she says.

Why, then, did Ms Holmes strike the wrong note? I put the question to Casey Klofstad, associate professor of political science at the University of Miami, who has studied how voice pitch affects perceptions of [leadership capacity](#).

Prof Klofstad says that when it comes to using the voice in a professional setting, women are “trapped”. On the one hand, “lower is better for obtaining positions of leadership”. But the human ear likes “averageness, prototypy ‘normal sounding’ voices,” he says.

We do not like people deviating from their natural voice, particularly in a way that is “sex atypical” (meaning higher for men, lower for women). We like depth, in other words, but not when it is faked, and especially not when it is faked by women.

Research like Prof Klofstad’s has informed a new approach to voice coaching. Whereas Thatcher’s coach might have been tasked with getting her to sound a certain way, most coaches are now focused on helping people sound like themselves.

Pitch lowering is never Ms Lee’s intention when working with a client, though it is often one effect. “When you’re nervous, your throat muscles tense and your pitch rises,” she explains. “I give people the confidence to find their natural voice, which is usually a couple of notes lower.”

While authenticity is now considered essential to projecting authority, high-pitched, working-class accents like Narita Bahra’s are a rarity among senior members of the legal profession.

She is a criminal defence barrister and was made a Queen’s Counsel (senior barrister) this year. “What makes me an effective advocate is that I’m always conscious that I have an audience,” she says.

It is an audience she believes many of her colleagues alienate. “I don’t think the ‘Rumpole of the Bailey’ [a patrician fictional barrister] style works any more: jurors can’t relate to it. I want to come across as down to earth, and how I speak is crucial.”

MediaCom UK chairwoman Karen Blackett, who comes from “a Barbadian family in Reading”, knows that “how I talk is very different to the industry norm”. Like Ms Bahra, Ms Blackett sees

this as a strength. She says her voice is what makes her seem “accessible” and “real” to the people she works with, rather than “untouchable” and “inauthentic”.

Research like Prof Klofstad’s backs up this approach. Although we may be biased towards lower voices, affecting one does not do the speaker any favours. “It is not a big leap from ‘you don’t sound genuine’ to ‘I don’t trust you’,” says Prof Klofstad. “Diverging from your normal voice can easily be perceived as odd and untrustworthy.”

What is perhaps more important is that the diversification of business leadership has shifted our idea of what a leader’s voice should sound like.

Nowhere are women’s voices more scrutinised than they are in audio, particularly in the fast-expanding podcast world. Podcast veteran Helen Zaltzman, host of [The Allusionist](#), a show about language, recalls some of the feedback from listeners on her female guests’ voices, including: “Who are these Kardashians?” Beaten only by: “If she spoke any higher, only dogs could hear.”

The latter comment refers to [vocal fry](#), a creaky voice quality often criticised in young North American women, and which Prof Klofstad’s research suggests could even disadvantage them at work. Sarah Greer, who has [also researched](#) the phenomenon, says that vocal fry is a form of voice lowering, and used by men and women to project masculinity and “coolness”. While it has the intended effect for men, it backfires on women.

Ms Zaltzman says she “quite likes the sound of vocal fry: it’s as if someone has just woken up.” Nevertheless, she recognises that some women are in an impossible position. Their voices invite criticism simply by being female. “Pretty much every female podcaster gets s\*\*t all the time,” she says.

She is confident, though, that the women’s voices that podcasting helps to amplify will eventually silence the critics and trolls.

“I don’t think they realise that in 30 years’ time, that’s how power will sound,” she says. “And I’m here for it!”

## How to get the most out of your voice

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**Open wide:** A lot of problems with the voice come from constricting your throat or closing your jaw. Stack two fingers, place them between your teeth and count to ten. Remove your fingers and count to ten again. With your mouth more open, your voice should sound more energised.

**Relax:** Yawning can release upper body tension and so allow the larynx to find its neutral position and a comfortable pitch for your voice.

**Project:** Speak louder than you think you need. Pitch your voice to the person furthest from you in the room.

**Check your endings:** Nerves can make your voice lose volume or variety as you speak. Try to finish sentences with as much vocal energy as you started with, and to end assertively.

**Pace yourself:** You'll sound more in control and be less likely to mumble, swallow words or run out of breath.

**Pause:** Think of pauses as verbal punctuation. One beat is a comma; two, a full stop; three, a paragraph break.

**Get to the point:** Cut filler words (like, sort of).

**Simplify:** Think fewer syllables per word, and fewer words per sentence.

**Breathe:** Remember, breath is fuel for the voice.

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