

# Comfort and Impact

How do leaders move others to action? The vast majority of our ability to have impact doesn't come from the words we say. In fact, most of our ability to have influence comes from habits of which most of us are completely unaware. The bottom line is that we respond to comfortable, committed, accessible people more favorably than to people who seem nervous, bored, or held-back. Everything about us — how we look, sound, move — gives others a reason to listen to us...or not to. This may not sound like a revelation until you consider how self-conscious many of us become when we stand in front of a group to talk. If we are going to move others to action, two things have to happen:



**1. We need to find a way to feel more comfortable and in control**

**2. We need to make choices that help us to have real impact and influence**

**Obviously, these concepts are closely related. In fact, they are two sides of the same coin. Let's look at each of them one at a time.**

## **Comfort**

Jerry Seinfeld once said that since "public speaking" is America's number one fear, if invited to a funeral, most Americans would rather be in the coffin than standing at the pulpit delivering the eulogy. I hope it's not that bad for you, but my experience is that even if it's not paralyzing fear, your internal reaction to the prospect of a challenging communication situation probably makes you think, "There has to be an easier way." Well, there's no magic formula, but there are some powerful choices you can make every time you talk that will help you feel more comfortable and in control.

## **Fight or Flight, or Why Your Body Says, "Get Me Out of Here!"**

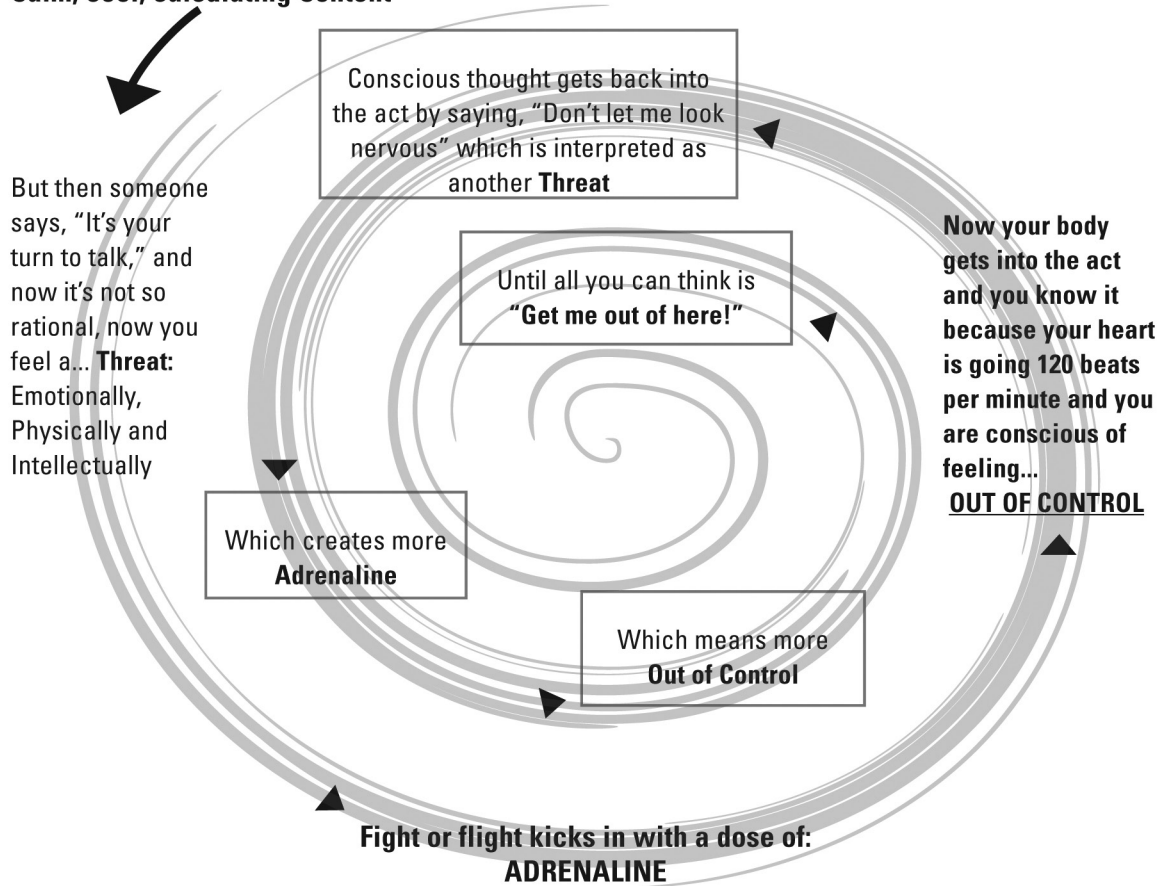
Take a few minutes to remember how you have responded, both physically and emotionally, to a situation in which you were under extreme pressure. Ever been in a fight? Ever been in a championship game? Ever led a meeting that would lock in your bonus, get your company the funding it needed, or bring in millions of dollars? How did your body respond?

As a coach and a performer, I have witnessed everything from loss of bowel control and vomiting (very rare, thank goodness!) to sweaty palms and good 'ole fashioned butterflies in the stomach. I am not trying to frighten you. I am only suggesting that whatever you feel is nothing new. These responses do not mean that you are doomed. They mean that your central nervous system is colluding with your adrenal glands to get you ready to respond to a life-or-death threat. Scientists and psychologists call it the "fight or flight" response because your body is getting ready to either fight like hell or run like crazy for the hills. Unfortunately, neither punching your client nor running from the

platform will probably help you close your next deal, so let's look at what is happening inside your body and what you can do about it.

Let's say you are giving a talk to several hundred people at an industry forum. If you're like most people, most of your time and energy goes into thinking about what you are going to say. For the most part, you are comfortably in your head because you're good at...

**Thinking:**  
Calm, cool, calculating Content



Great. Now you understand what happens inside your body when you're nervous about an important communication. So, what can you do about it?

**1. Recognize it**

Your body is going to respond to fear, so learn your own response pattern and make friends with it. "Heart rate up?" Right on time. "Sweaty palms?" Check. "Cotton mouth kicking in?" Just what I expected." You don't have to encourage them, but if you don't know your own bodily responses to fear, you will be surprised when they come up, and that will definitely make the fight or flight swirl cycle all the worse.

## **2. Connection vs. Competition**

Most of us are so concerned about winning and being perfect in business that we forget why we talk to each other in the first place. Getting your ideas to your listeners in a way that connects with their needs and moves them to a particular action is your job as a communicator. But closing the deal, winning the contract, or getting that promotion can only happen if others get the value of your offering from their point of view. You may be able to “win the deal,” but you can’t win a conversation. The people you talk to are not the enemy. They are the people you are here to help with your product, service, or investment opportunity. And, the less it feels like a zero sum game, the less the fight or flight cycle swirls inside of you.

## **3. Stop and Exhale**

Don’t worry, you do not have to repeat a mantra, but when you stop talking and exhale, you are literally telling your central nervous system that you are not under attack. You do it instinctively when you walk in your front door at the end of a long hard week and exhale with a big “ahhhhhh.” By the way, what may feel like an eternity of silence in front of a group while you breathe actually looks and sounds like control and confidence to others.

The silence you create when you breathe and exhale gives you and others time to think: for you about what you are going to say next, for them about what you’ve just said.

## **4. Put Your Adrenaline to Work**

Fight or flight isn’t there to make you feel nauseous. It’s there to help you out of challenging or threatening situations. If you don’t use it for what it’s intended, it will make you feel uncomfortable and probably look uncomfortable, too. So, how can you use it? Open up! Get your body involved! Project your voice! Let your passion come through! Remember, the more adrenaline you use, the less adrenaline there is swirling around in your body and making you feel nervous. One nice side effect of using your adrenaline this way is that you look more interesting and committed to your ideas. Hmm...less nervous and more engaging...sounds like a pretty good trade.

## **5. Physical Choices**

Most people would agree that if you want to have real impact when you talk, just feeling comfortable is not enough. A golf swing that hooks the same way every time might be comfortable, but it won’t lower your handicap. As you think about your communication effectiveness, remember that what really matters is what’s happening for the people you are talking to. Since they have no idea how you feel (unless you show them) *your* experience of *your* comfort alone will not make you more effective. On the other hand, if you consistently practice the *physical choices* that help others accept your ideas, you will become more comfortable with those choices — just like you can get comfortable with a new golf swing.

Whether you're talking one-on-one with or one-to-a-thousand, there are a handful of reasons why people really attend to some people's ideas and not to others. Your success as a communicator is determined by the reaction others have to what you say. If others aren't convinced by *how* you say what you say — regardless of the ideas you share — they won't be convinced.

What do others need to see and hear in order for your ideas to have impact?

### **Impact**

#### **Authenticity**

To be an effective business communicator, you have to be completely who you are. In a highly-competitive landscape, the most differentiating thing about your business, ideas, and product is your absolute uniqueness as a human being. Trying too hard to do it right, be perfect, entertain, or "act like a professional" will only take you away from who you are and what makes you valuable. Videotape yourself, then watch the tape and ask yourself, "Is that me?" If it's not, you are not having the impact you could be having.

#### **Strength**

Your strength has to come through, or your listeners will wonder if you really do deserve to be up there talking. Do you look and sound comfortable in your skin? Are you in a hurry, or are you OK taking up all of that space and time?

**Expressing your strength does not mean you act like the boss or that you are barking orders, but it does mean you are aware of and comfortable with your own power.**

What does someone look like who is comfortable expressing her strength? Her feet are about hip-width apart and her weight is solidly balanced on both feet. She is comfortable emphasizing ideas with her arms and hands, but when she is not using them, they rest comfortably by her sides. She takes her time and pauses when she needs to relax and think. Her voice is strong enough to be heard by everyone. The absence of tension says, "I belong up here."

#### **Commitment**

If you do not show your commitment when you talk, others will wonder if you care about your own ideas. Someone looks committed when his body and voice says, "These words are important to me." It's not the same thing as enthusiasm, which may only say "I'm really, really happy to be here!" Real commitment is convincing because it says, "These words are important to me and I believe they are important to you, too."

What does a committed human being look like? A committed person works hard with his mouth to form his words. His torso comes forward toward others — literally getting his heart ahead of his ideas. All of his movements

seem purposeful and add to the meaning of the words. Many of my business clients struggle with expressing their commitment. Initially, making these new physical choices may feel exaggerated, flamboyant, or even phony. I am not trying to turn anyone into the next Jim Carey, but when was the last time you saw someone in a business meeting and thought, “He looked too committed to his ideas?”

### **Connection**

Most people in America say giving speeches is their number one fear. No wonder: everyone’s looking at you! You are all alone and it’s probably an important situation. Ask the same people how they feel when engaging in conversation, and you’ll get a different answer. Most of us love to talk to each other. One of the most powerful choices you can make when you talk — whether it’s one-on-one or one-to-a-thousand — is to make everything you say a conversation with one person at a time. It means staying with whomever you see first until you’re expressed a complete idea. Then, look for something back from that person — a nod, a shift, a smile, a frown — and move on to the next person you see.

**When you really talk to one person at a time, just like in a conversation, you will not feel alone because you aren’t. Instead, you will really connect with them.**

When you talk to one person at a time, you look spontaneous, conversational, and natural. And, since you are probably more comfortable one-on-one, you will almost certainly look and feel more comfortable as well. You do not have to see everyone in the room for this choice to have real impact. As you first experiment with making real connections (especially if you are used to simple eye contact), be prepared. It may take more time than you expect to get something back from other people. Some won’t give you anything back at all. That’s OK. It’s not a competition. You are offering your ideas to as many people as you can see, but you cannot make them all respond.

It’s your job as a communicator to get your ideas to others in a way that they can use them. It’s not their job to come and get them from you. So, if you are doing it right, it’s hard work. That’s why you get activated (i.e., nervous) before an important talk. Your body knows it needs extra energy to do the work. Use that energy and you will feel great — and others will more likely respond to your words. That’s how you use our body and voice to get results every time you talk!