

How your voice affects confidence, job prospects, even attractiveness – and why women have been lowering theirs for 50 years

- Hong Kong-based voice coach David Pope helps people improve their vocal impact and says judgments we make of others are often based on voice
- Changing your voice through improved posture and breathing techniques can boost others' perceptions of you and instil confidence



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Published: 4:30am, 8 Aug, 2020 ▾

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David Pope has on his chatty, casual voice when we meet at a cafe in Hong Kong's Central district. But when the conversation turns serious, so does his voice – it gets deeper, slows in pace and is more controlled.

Pope is a voice coach who has spent more than three decades in the business, working on commercials, documentaries, and television and radio dramas in Britain and Hong Kong.

Today, much of his voice work focuses on improving audience engagement for corporate executives and boosting the confidence of young people wanting to make a good impression at university and job interviews.

“We’re all about improving vocal impact, power and presence,” says Pope, founder of All Voice Talent, a voice coaching and voice-over agency. “In my studio I record clients, and when they hear their voice they get an idea of their vocal variety: pitch, projection, volume, pace, intonation, strength, tone, articulation, gravitas – it’s the science of the voice, a whole arsenal of what makes a great speaker.”



Pope is the founder of All Voice Talent, a voice coaching and voice-over agency. Photo:

The way we speak is part-genetic, part-learned and 100 per cent unique, he says. “Our voice is as unique as our fingerprints.”

But the judgments we make of others are often based on voice, mostly pitch – the highness and the lowness of one’s voice. “We’ve all heard of people being described as annoying or irritating based just on their voice.”

Women generally speak in a higher pitch than men: an adult woman’s average range is from 165 to 255 Hz, while a man’s is 85 to 155 Hz. A surge of testosterone released during puberty causes the thickening and lengthening of men’s vocal cords, the reason for a deeper sound.

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Hong Kong-based radio broadcaster Annemarie Evans says she cringes when she listens to her broadcasts from 20 years ago. “I can’t bear to listen to them – my voice is so high pitched,” she says, admitting she has adjusted pitch and intonation over time. “I’ve also changed the pace and learned to slow it down.”

But Evans is not alone in her voice evolution. Studies have shown that women have been lowering their voices for the past 50 years, a shift that speaks volumes about women's changing role in society.

Pope cites a study in South Australia that examined the voices of Australian women aged 18 to 25, comparing archival recordings from 1945 with recordings from the early 1990s. The study concluded that frequency dropped dramatically over the decades.

While hormonal changes from the contraceptive pill that could potentially alter vocal cords was taken into consideration for those tested in the 1990s, researchers also speculated a deeper tone was adopted to sound more authoritative and assertive in the workplace.



Studies have shown that women have been lowering their voices for the past 50 years.
Photo: National Film and Sound Archive of Australia

“It’s really interesting how this research has been tied to gender equality,” Pope says. “Women who drop their voice too much get judged in the boardroom for sounding too aggressive.”

Studies have shown that voice characteristics such as pitch and dominance can influence perceptions of attractiveness – yes, you do sound hot or not.

Men with lower-pitched voices are seen as more attractive, physically stronger and socially dominant, while women with higher-pitched voices are perceived as more attractive. Lower-pitched female voices, on the other hand, are perceived to be socially dominant.

A 2012 study in Canada took it further and that found the pitch of a political candidate's voice plays a role in the way we vote, concluding that voters are drawn to political candidates with lower-pitched voices.

Pope says a perfect example of how voice pitch influences perception in the leadership capacity is former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, whose pitch dropped significantly during her years in power.

But how do we change how we sound? Pope says voice is related to the resonance chamber – “basically the head” – and people can change the sound of their voice by changing the shape of the tongue, lips, teeth and mouth cavity. Engaging the diaphragm is also vital.



Margaret Thatcher's pitch dropped significantly during her years in power. Photo: Getty Images

Posture plays a big role in helping to harness that power. “If you’re leaning down like this,” he says, bending forward, “you’re constricting the diaphragmatic chamber and that impacts voice.

“Picture the winner of a race throwing up their arms as they cross the finishing line. It’s about opening up the body, straight back and shoulders back, and it’s been proven to release chemicals that give you the sense of confidence.”

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25 Mar 2019



He says the power and quality of our voice also depends on the power and quality of our breath, something that we’re not very efficient at harnessing.

“The American Lung Association says people only use about 30 to 35 per cent of their total lung capacity,” says Pope, who is creating animated online voice tool kits to help with voice strategies such as calming nerves and highlighting the power of the pause. “I’m getting people to understand that by controlling their breathing, they can project their voice.”

This is beneficial to those who are doing a pitch or engaged in long video conferences, something that has become the norm for many during [Covid-19 lockdowns](#). “If they engage the diaphragm, it gives them that power.”



Pope says the power and quality of our voice also depends on the power and quality of our breath.

He explains that research has been done to understand why some TEDx speakers get a few thousand hits, while others who talk on the same subject receive millions of hits.

“They looked at verbal and non-verbal aspects of the speakers and found that the most popular speakers used vocal variety.”

Those people who used vocal variety also had a higher charisma level and, more importantly, higher credibility, he adds.

“People have to be aware of the impact their voice has on others.”