

Singing in the office

By Ian Boughton

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When everything is going wrong in the office – sing! When nobody takes any notice of you – sing! And when the admin team has made a total mess of a project, group together and sing in harmony. Try such meaningful lines as “Happily I’m breathing out and breathing in the world”, or even “I don’t know why I’m doing this....”

The man responsible for these lyrics is human resource trainer Paul Ogden of Black Coffee sound studios. He says music helps office workers to “break their personal sound barrier”. Through a song, confidence and self-esteem will soar and workgroups will come closer together.

Amazingly, according to physiologists, we are losing the art of using our voices in everyday communication. Some researchers claim that there are people who have already lost the gift of inflection, that subtlety of tone-change in the voice which indicates that we are about to tell a joke, or give a ticking-off, or even ask someone out for a wild weekend.

The reason is reliance on email instead of the spoken contact. What this means is that we are losing the art of getting our point across. The secretary doesn’t get complete attention for her/his carefully prepared appraisal, the PA doesn’t get heard across the conference table, and workgroup teams crumble through misunderstanding.

The traditional solution, which has cropped up in virtually every PA convention for the past 10 years, is “assertiveness training”. Ogden, a jazz pianist, says he found a better answer when he experimented with bringing a piano into the training room and playing semi-nonsense lyrics to scale patterns. His trainees suffered only passing disbelief and then, in spite of themselves, “bonded” faster than is usual.

“All trainers are used to being confronted with a group of candidates who arrive early in a frosty silence, very stiff and defensive, making no conversation. Now, by the time we get to the coffee break, we can’t stop them talking, it’s only accountants that resist a little longer”.

So what can singing do for employees who believe they are not being heard?

“Most people are simply not aware of the impression their speech gives of them as a person. We trained a person who complained that nobody heard her at meetings – it turned out that she had a very loud voice, which she was projecting so badly and at such a high pitch that anyone sitting close to her got a headache.”

By contrast, received wisdom says that a measured, resonant voice gives the assurance of truth and sincerity and is listened to. Politicians have been trained to speak in that way. One managing director told a business magazine that her voice was her major asset in keeping her nerve in difficult top-level situations. If she concentrated on keeping her voice level, she knew everything was under control, from her body language to the expression on her face.

The reason, says Ogden, is relaxation. Every muscle in your body, if tightened, seems to affect muscles in the throat – by contrast, controlling the voice muscles has the effect of easing tension throughout the body.

Singing even works in team-building, and is far better than the kind of event where the department is left on Dartmoor with 50p and a bar of chocolate, and told to reach Brussels by Wednesday. "A police inspector told us that those sessions do more harm than good – brain gives way to brawn, and the first thing he has to do after a team-building session is to rebuild his team."

"Through singing, people in the workplace communicate on a new level. They learn much more about each other; when the boss is talking to the junior about writing a song, it may be the first time the staff have realised that he has any feelings".

There are 2 obvious drawbacks to suggesting vocal training in business – the objection "I'm tone-deaf" and management disbelief. Both are exaggerated, says Ogden. "Generally, what a teacher told you at school about being tone-deaf, and what you've believed ever since, is correctable".