

The Voice of Great Leadership: Evoking the Power of Authentic Presence

By Claude Stein
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Courage and Change

It is July 2000. I'm sitting at a piano in central Europe at the invitation of an engineering firm with 60+ billion euros in revenue, working with their most senior management team, asking them to take risks to free their most authentic voice.

They are in a difficult situation. Their stock is depressed and they have hired a new head of training to redesign their leadership programs. He has invited me to come and do a program using singing to “get them to feel something below their noses” - to be more emotional, more passionate, more real. At first there is resistance. I quickly take failure off the table, inviting them to sing poorly ... and to sing loudly. There is some laughter and we begin with a simple warm-up. Soon they volunteer lyrics that articulate the qualities of great leadership. By the second evening, they're belting out favorite tunes. By the third day, someone has found a guitar and remarks “we haven't felt this much camaraderie since we were youths.” The group as a whole becomes visibly more

alive and engaged in their daily programs. Their spirits are higher and they have become optimistic. Finally, at the end of the week they take to a stage to accept their completion certificates.

Suddenly the celebration comes to a halt. The manager of operations in one of their largest countries grabs the microphone: “We must revisit plans and build our nuclear plants further away from populated areas. It's not safe enough.” He reminds the group that the firm's vision explicitly states that they maintain “the highest commitment to ethical and responsible actions.”

I was utterly amazed at the risk he took to confront the group like that: upending such an enormous project during the final celebration. Freeing his singing voice with mission driven lyrics and emotion had awakened a profound voice of responsibility and leadership.

Later that night, when I got back to my room, I thought about the courage each of them showed when they dropped their guard and sang from the heart, even though their voices were untrained and their corporate culture constrained. I thought about the necessity of taking brave and uncharted risks to move forward authentically - and how finding one's true voice can change the world.

Music and Methodology

What happened during those five days of what I call “Natural Singing,” that is, singing with a more authentic intention, was remarkable. There were exercises and songs with no requirement to sing well. Little by little you could see the fears melt in the absence of criticism and feel the quality of presence and connection evolve. I used call and response exercises to both reframe the challenges and give voice to the positive values they had articulated on day one. These are exercises where I sing out a relevant phrase and the group echoes it. The very short, single line affirmations, set amid well-chosen tonalities on the piano, got them back in touch with their corporate mission and unleashed powerful qualities. The words they sang gave voice to concepts of encouragement, pride, respect, innovation and accountability. Some lines were defiant, some humorous, some had a blues feel and some were uplifting anthems. I worked until people were clearly touched by the words they were singing.

Then, I began individual coaching. I helped each person identify a core message which, when cultivated, gave far greater meaning to their words. There were visible, dramatic shifts in





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dynamics, confidence and charisma. The group became fascinated and fully engaged with each other's growth as they witnessed the new aliveness, spontaneous gestures and the truly compelling stage presence unfolding right in front of them. The room was filled with smiles and applause amidst the many triumphant breakthroughs. I had encouraged them to move beyond fear of judgment, to step outside the box and allow their full voice to be heard. They were re-connecting with what fueled their passion in the first place.

The Power of Vulnerability

Imagine the skeptical reaction of senior management teams when they find out they have been taken away from their desks in order to sing in front of each other! When clients discover I use singing as a tool for accelerating the growth of leadership and personal presence, I often hear things like "You're not going to make me sing, are you? I'm TONE-DEAF!" and "What does this have to do with the bottom line?" Often there is a look of panic. Dr. Robert Lengel, founder of the Center for Professional Excellence, told me he believes these programs can present more risk than high ropes courses. This is because singing is so personally revealing – and our voices are so closely tied to our self-image that when we sing solo in public, we are vulnerable. We

are vulnerable, but with the potential to be enormously powerful.

Singing easily touches our emotions. This is precisely what makes it such a good tool to call forth authentic leadership. We can become real, take risks and open our mouths: connecting thoughts, hearts and stance. By taking risks and being real we motivate others and create change. We become stronger leaders. But, furthermore, as groups rally in support of one another they also create a unified and wonderful culture of empowerment. A culture that encourages each and every person in the room to rise up with a strong voice. Whether we sing or provide the option of speaking is up to the corporate leader who is sponsoring the program. But whichever mode of expression, we move to a much deeper level of communication and engagement.

The Technology of Authenticity

Although we are using voice and music as a tool, many people quickly forget that we are singing any note, any key, as a way to tap into feelings, presence and right brain activity - and not to become good performers. They fall into the trap of striving to sing well. And this is how our authenticity and power gets derailed. We can hear the notes go off key when we are too self-conscious. This ego and fear driven agenda of wanting to

do well hijacks our original intention and fullest possibilities. Some of this is survival instinct: to achieve success and avoid failure, shame and embarrassment. We do this even at the potential cost of losing our authentic selves. But it can also be a defense mechanism that conceals our true selves.

Authenticity stems from a re-energized connection with our original desire – something I like to call a "core" intention. You could define it as the change you would like to bring. In Natural Singing, it is the intention that justifies the lyric and organically drives the dynamics of self-expression: tone, volume, pacing, inflection, eye contact and gestures. These are the things that inspire trust, inform presence, create engagement and a successful presentation of one's message.

Let me give you an example: Someone wants to sing a lullaby to their child but can't/won't, because they don't think they have a good voice or the right words. Their primary agenda has become sounding "good." But the original change they wanted to bring was an expression of peace, gentleness and safety to the child. If they stayed with that more authentic intention, every note they sang, no matter in or out of tune, would bring those heartfelt qualities forth.

Finding Core Intention

A client of mine from a Fortune 500 firm wanted to sell a multi-million dollar website to the state of Nebraska. She had been through presentation coaching courses all of her career. Here she was, with a small stack of index cards in hand and a tried and true method of triangulating all of her language towards the benefits of her value proposition. She was using an approach that was formulaic, that curtailed the richness of her authenticity. After five minutes of some persistent detective work I discovered the core reason she loved what she was doing was that she believed in her heart that “computers bring us all closer together.” I asked her to be convincing, to persuade with a whisper, then speak and then sing this core belief while I played the piano. Then we launched into the prepared presentation.

In the end she went to that meeting with only one index card sitting on the podium in front of her: “Computers bring us all closer together.” This acted as the driver of her energy, her spirit, the dynamics of her voice, her comfort and confidence and interestingly enough, her knowledge capital. The comment from her boss was “That was the most articulate you

have ever been.” The presentation was a success and the sale went through. When we are true to our most real, authentic intention, comfortable being seen and unafraid to support our words with genuine emotion, we become far more persuasive and charismatic.

Storytelling

I was coaching a leadership team at N.A.S.A. to improve their ability to tell the N.A.S.A. story. Not just the story of scientific discoveries, moon landings or the exploration of Mars, but rather the unequivocally relevant story of benefits reaped here on Earth: fire retardant uniforms for firefighters, advanced imaging for early cancer detection and cat scans, cutting edge solar panel technologies. The list goes on and on and yet it's not the story that is often heard when we talk about the benefits of investing in space exploration. Members of the leadership team took the stage individually with their memorized presentations. One by one, I asked each of them again and again what really excited them about why they were there and what got them into science.

Then, by cultivating the energy of that inspiration and seeding it through their prepared language,

each person became compelling and got spontaneous positive feedback. Their spirit was felt. They were better storytellers because they were THEMSELVES. They were in the moment. Emotional. Connected. Real. The common feedback was how people got to really know each other. The room was filled with the pride they took in their noble achievements and the excitement of being pioneers at the leading frontiers of space exploration.

Passion and Presence

Several years ago I had the privilege to coach a congressman on his floor speech in the House of Representatives. He had been successful in gaining much needed compensation for victims of Agent Orange and now was looking to do the same for Gulf War Syndrome victims. Sadly, he had been suffering from Parkinson's disease. His voice was debilitated and not projecting with much resonance or volume. It was time to call in his original motivation: the core intention. The reason that he was so passionate in the service of these ailing veterans was that he had an enormous sense of duty and was himself at one time on the battlefield. After some digging, tears came into his eyes as he



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exclaimed, “We all have blood on our hands.”

The results of embedding this passion into his speech as subtext brought fire into his voice, conviction into his body and as a result he deeply impacted his audience. Votes were influenced. He came alive bringing forth the change he wanted to see in the room.

Reconnecting to Mission

These stories highlight a theme in which corporate, community and personal mission are interwoven and elevated. At the leadership academy of a world-renowned hospital, we begin with the basics of vocal physiology and some exercises to warm up, build confidence and project. I give tips for correcting nasality, shrillness, softness, breathiness, monotones, memorization, etc. Then, we focus the authentic intention, aligning with the hospital’s mission statement: “... to deliver the very best health care in a safe, compassionate environment ...” As participants each give their presentations, passion and personal presence emerge as they communicate facts and information. By day’s end all

are more relaxed and confident, engaged and re-energized.

At a telecommunications company with 55 million customers there were many marketing research presentations with hundreds of data points. Dry as a bone right? Not after singing their true credo. When the speakers conveyed their honest desire to support their customers with the finest possible service, their words came to life. The senior VP in charge of the group said they were “the best presentations the team has ever given.”

There was a manufacturing crisis at a major pharmaceutical company. Confidence had been shattered, trust broken. My colleague and I walked into a room filled with heavy energy. We asked the group to identify the key aspects of the company that they were proud of. Weaving those aspects into their presentations worked wonderfully. Smiles emerged and pacing picked up. Their speaking revealed their personalities and hope was restored.

At the 5th largest nuclear company, spirits were low as they were coming off some of the

largest fines in history from the nuclear regulatory commission. All of their training had been geared towards identifying problems and possible dangers in such a high-risk environment. After coaching each executive in front of the group, I required all feedback to be positive. They refocused their listening on the improvement in each voice and presentation. By the end of the morning their excitement was palpable as they re-energized around their great skills and their sense of purpose. They re-engaged as individuals and as a team.

Intention as a Driver

Why is this? Why does a core intention so influence tone, tempo, volume and presence? Why and how can it bring about such an organic, trustworthy and engaging flow?

Most speech and presentation coaches direct people from what I call the outside – in. “Drop your jaw.” “Speak from the diaphragm.” “Lower your pitch.” “Now, raise your pitch.” “Pause here.” “Do this with your hands.” “Emphasize that line.” “Find four friendly faces in the audience to look at.” “Choose different parts of the stage for fundamental points.” It’s your typical presentation coaching. But it’s only from the outside in.

I have coached at the Juilliard School, the New York Actors Institute, the National Speakers Association and worked with artists on every major record

label. I also teach from the outside in. I can help you to stay hydrated longer, breathe from the diaphragm, create more resonance, better diction and increase projection. There are techniques to eliminate a monotone, to speak through a cold, to quiet a racing heart and to memorize a text. However, the effectiveness of all these techniques PALES in direct comparison to working from the inside out.

Your primary intention is the key driver of the sound and dynamics of your voice. When there's a crisis, we use better diction. When you need a cab in New York City, a loud voice comes out. When the umpire misses a call, ditto. You don't stand there, thinking about dropping your thyroid cartilage (voice box), creating space in your pharynx (for resonance), trilling your lips or articulating your consonants. You just want the cab. You just want the kid to fall asleep with the lullaby.

Whether we choose to use whispering, speaking, or singing as a way to energize and bring emotion to our core intention (the change we wish to bring), once we do, we imbue our speaking voices with an exquisite variety of organic dynamics from the inside-out.

Why Singing?

Singing is particularly effective as a tool for building presence. For the most part, words tend to derive meaning from their context. Language plus context yields



meaning. Try saying the word “right” a few ways and you’ll see what I mean: “Yeah. Right. You want me to sing an operatic solo in perfect 18th century Italian.” Or, “Riiiiiiight. I see what you’re saying.”

The secret lies in how music provides an enormous variety of contexts for meaning and how it triggers emotion. We have an endless assortment of rhythms and harmonies at work that put us in touch with our feelings and deeper meaning. Music accesses emotions and passion more readily and reliably than speaking which can often be purely informational and conceptual. As both head and heart align the results are inspiring. When we sing in front of others we are quite vulnerable, thus it provides the perfect opportunity for risk-taking, acceptance, group support and personal triumph.

I regularly teach a program for change leaders who are turbo-charging a large operational transformation at a chemical company. They sing about their aspirations for the organization but they also sing their own

leadership song - sometimes bold, sometimes animated and sometimes terribly tender. The audience encourages each participant, taking the stage one at a time over the course of the evening to sing and receive coaching. This uncritical support creates the empowering space where people can emerge as stronger leaders. Soon each one becomes more open, more transparent and impactful with this permission from the group, the role modeling of their own senior leaders and some guidance from me. I am always touched by the joy and collective, humanistic possibility that is unleashed for the organization in these sessions. The voice holds the key to their full leadership presence.

Whole Mind

Musical arrangements set evocative contexts for language. We have the discursive, concrete, conceptual world of words (left brain), interacting with the feel, sound, expressive world of the music (right brain). So if a particular quality or message is challenging, I can support that expression by the way I play the

piano (context) and offer a simple lyric in call and response style. Knowing the quality of great leadership that each individual wants to bring forth, I compose a simple line of song to sing and frame it with an evocative context at the piano. I also step in with some practice exercises. It takes a remarkably short time to get this kind of alignment going. Whether it is a small group or an interactive keynote with hundreds of people, these energetic shifts occur with amazing speed.

The Result

Groups bond on a deep and common ground as we become more of who we really are. We have aligned our inner and outer message: head, heart and mission. Voices ring out effortlessly, fearlessly and honestly. Casual at times, poignant at times, but absolutely, undeniably real, authentic and inspiring. Spirits are lifted. Courage is fostered. Communication is clearer. Innovative ideas come out of the quiet person who is no longer captive to their shyness, or from the brusque speaker driven by ego who is no longer controlling and cut off. People risk being seen and heard. They are creative, highly competent, vulnerable and powerful. They become animated and excited about their work. They give more of themselves. They create stronger leaders around them. They have renewed confidence and their talents are better leveraged. And having evoked the power of authentic presence, they re-engage with the world, **speaking with the voice of great leadership.**

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Claude Stein is an internationally celebrated voice coach and director with 32 years of experience. His unique VoiceLEADER programs have been offered in the United States House of Representatives and to the senior management at Siemens, JPMorgan, Sprint, General Electric, N.A.S.A., Vistage, Johnson & Johnson, Genzyme, The Hartford, Altria, the Center for Creative Leadership, Maersk Shipping, N.Y.U., the MIT Sloan School of Management, The Conference Board, Zachry Construction, PixelMEDIA, the Young President's Organization and the Women's Leadership Forum.

He is a Multi-Platinum award winner whose private clients include artists on Atlantic, Island, Elektra, Sony, Virgin, Polygram, Warner Bros., R.C.A. and M.C.A. Records and his Natural Singer Workshops have been featured at the Juilliard School, the Rubin Academy of Music and the NYU Graduate Program.

He is on the faculty of the Massachusetts General Hospital Leadership Academy (Harvard's teaching hospital), Mobius Executive Leadership, the Center for Professional Excellence, the Omega Institute, Esalen Institute, the New York Open Center and the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health.

Claude has been a main stage keynote speaker for the National Speakers Association, the International Coaches Federation, The Creative Problem Solving Institute, The Qualitative Research Consultants Organization, the Global Sufficiency Network and the California Workforce Association.

He studied composition at Bard College, vocal physiology with the Voice Foundation sponsored by Jefferson Medical College, directing at the Actors Institute and vocal technique with several of New York's premier instructors.

Pro-Bono programs have been offered at Every Voice Counts for disadvantaged youth in Australia, the Mastery Foundation leadership forums for Arab and Israeli community activists and Catholic and Protestant community leaders in Belfast, Ireland and the Global Sufficiency Summit.

The approach Claude developed blends easy-to-learn vocal skills with the techniques of professional performers who embody power, creativity and authenticity. It is an innovative and highly experiential method which engages both the right and left brain and that quickly empowers both beginners and professionals alike. The results have received rave reviews from top industry experts in the fields of communication, leadership and creativity.