

Management and Supervision

Oral Exams and Hiring Interviews

This is a synopsis and discussion of an article* published in the December 1999 “Journal of Applied Psychology.” The study concerned applicant’s Visual and Vocal cues (also called characteristics or behavior), and their affect on job interviewers. In other words, this paper was NOT about what’s SAID during an oral interview, but what’s seen and what’s heard *other than the words*. A statistically significant sampling of Managers and Supervisors provided real-world experience and input for the study. The two specific areas studied were:

Nonverbal **VISUAL** cues
and
Nonverbal **VOCAL** cues.

The nonverbal **VISUAL** cues were

1. Appropriate attractiveness (clean, neat, well groomed, appropriately dressed, etc.).
2. Eye contact (eyes up, looking towards the Oral Panel interviewers...NOT Staring).
3. Body orientation (‘lean’ towards the panel, not away. No slouching, but not ramrod straight).
4. Smiling (not grinning. And there’s *no smiling* when discussing ‘grim’ problems).
5. Hand gestures (for emphasis and expression, NOT for making shadow puppets...).

This research found that these five specific visual cues are especially likely to create a favorable impression *in the selection interview and on the job*. “Interviewees who are appropriately attractive, smile more, gaze more in the interviewer’s direction, use expressive hand movements, and lean toward instead of away from the interviewer are most likely to create a favorable impression” (In the interview, and on the job itself).

The nonverbal **VOCAL** cues were:

1. Pitch: The overall characteristic pitch of a voice; the basic frequency (high-pitched or low); . “Even though higher pitch is associated with favorable impressions for women in some jobs, we found that management orals place a premium on leadership, which is probably stereotypically associated with a deeper (lower pitched) and stronger voice.”
2. Pitch Variability: Another vocal characteristic that affected interviewers’ judgments is the range or variability of voice pitch. Speakers who notably vary their voice pitch seem to come across as more dynamic, extraverted, benevolent, and competent. However, too much variation, too many extreme changes in pitch (going high then low too often), sounds ‘sing-song’ and just ever so...crazy....
3. Speech Rate: Several studies found that faster rates of speech are also associated with perceptions of competent and extraverted individuals. Fast, but not TOO fast...The words must be clean and clear, with each word ending before the next word begins. On the other hand, a ‘drawl’ that slows your words to a crawl can be maddening to an oral panel.
4. Pauses: The number of voice breaks or pauses can affect interviewers’ judgments. “We have found an *inverse* relationship between length of pause and favorable ratings.” If an interviewee

consistently **pauses** (stops talking completely) between thoughts, between sentences, **between words**, it can express a lack of competence, confidence, conviction, or memory.

5. Amplitude variability: This represents short-term instability in the loudness of a voice. “Amplitude variability has been associated with perceptions of hoarseness, an undesirable vocal quality. For this reason, we expect that amplitude variability will be considered negatively by interviewers.” A voice breaking up like a 13 year-old boy on his first date, is not normally recognized as the voice of authority; the voice of management.

The study results showed that the vocal and visual cues work in concert with each other: “People who display engaging **visual** cues in the interview also tend to display engaging **vocal** cues.” Further, people who “**look** trustworthy, likable, and credible in the interview also tend to **sound** trustworthy, likable, and credible.”

Importantly, however, the study found that interviewers tend to react to the **full range of information generated during selection interviews**. These **INCLUDED** the applicants' well-thought-out answers to the actual interview questions, **AND** their exhibited nonverbal visual and vocal cues. Such positive reactions by panel members tend ultimately to be reflected in the oral interview score.



So; looking at the primary areas which are consciously **and unconsciously** covered during a DMV QAP or hiring interview, is there anything you can do to improve your odds? We believe so...

OF course first and foremost, you must develop the storehouse of knowledge needed to answer the questions posed during the interview. Truly, you can ‘look and sound marvelous’ but if there’s no one home in back of the clean face, below the nice haircut, or behind the strong voice, the interview score will reflect that sad fact. Conversely, if you are an expert in all areas of the job you want, but you **don’t** sufficiently ‘**look**’ or **sound the part**, this study indicates that your score will suffer....But we can work on that.

Look at the graph below. Mark column 2 with the appropriate S or W from YOUR point of view...but be honest, or none of this will help you on your next interview. **IF** you feel strongly about promoting, **AND** you can take constructive criticism, ask a supervisor to score you from THEIR point of view.

We feel that by recognizing these subtle/not-so-subtle cues and how they affect interviewers, you can make the decision to work on them....You can do voice exercises to gain more control of your voice; you can practice, practice, practice **LOOKING** at the interviewers instead of looking at your hands folded in your lap; You can get those hands out of your lap **SOMETIMES**, to help make a point; you can ‘pay attention’ by leaning towards the interviewers, rather than looking like you’re ready to break for the door. You can fix any miscues, and turn them into strengths on future interviews *and on the job itself*....

Characteristic or Ability	Strength or Weakness	Comments
Appropriate Attractiveness		Dressed the part; well-groomed and neat, or shaggy, baggy, dusty and thread-bare?
Eye contact		Do you <i>gaze</i> towards interviewers or <i>stare</i> at the floor most of the time?..(Or STARE wide-eyed and wild at the interviewers?)
Body orientation		Leaning slightly TOWARDS the panel, or falling back in fear....How BAD IS their breath??? Or are you flopping ONTO the table? WAKE UP!
Smiling		Does a pleasant smile play across your face...or do you sit stony & sullen? Are you grinning? Smiling at <i>inappropriate</i> times?
Hand gestures		Graceful gestures of emphasis or do you look like you're catching butterflies? Sitting on your hands?
Pitch		Are you talking low as possible without sounding like you have a cold, or do your nerves make you sound like you've been sucking helium? There are voice exercises to easily lower your voice.
Pitch Variability		Are some words more important than others, or is everything spoken in a sleep-inducing monotone?
Speech Rate		Talking too slow? ortoofast ? Like the 3 bears, it needs to be just right...just right in the middle.
Pauses		Do you pause too much? <u>KNOWING</u> the material leads to confidence....confidence can reduce pauses.
Amplitude variability		Sound like a 14 year old pimply-faced boy talking to a beauty queen? Perhaps a lozenge just BEFORE the interview will reduce the dry throat.
Knowledge		The bottom line. Without knowledge of the subject, there is no foundation to the interview.

There are other areas important in the interview: Exhibited attitude (though the visual & vocal cues go a long way to explain this, there are other characteristics like tone of voice or talking down to the panel); vocabulary, general demeanor, etc. But these 11 points set the overall tone of the entire interview...You can try and harmonize with the interviewers, or you can go for discord:

“They can just take me the way I am or leave me alone.” Whispered the whiny, purple haired, nose-ringed, dirty-nailed, slouching avant-garde fashion statement. Yes, that’s true. But who loses with those levels of preparation, respect and attitude? Well, the Department MAY lose an outstanding candidate, but the applicant will almost surely lose. Is that ‘fair’? Well, that’s the other half of the study....

“Our results show that both visual cues and vocal cues **can predict job performance**.” The full, official title of the study is “Why Visual and Vocal Interview Cues Can Affect Interviewers’ Judgments **and Predict Job Performance**” SIGNIFICANTLY, it seems that those want-to-be managers who TEND to exhibit the best visual and vocal characteristics in interviews actually TEND do the job better in the real world. So, consciously and unconsciously, the interview is

doing exactly what it's supposed to be doing: Putting the candidates who can best do the job in the top ranks of the list. That's not always the case, but it is the general tendency of interviews.

There's a mechanism called "self-fulfilling prophecy" and it just might come into play here. This study (and years of observed behavior) indicates that if an individual has problems with these 11 points during an interview, those problems MAY also affect the individual in the performance of the job itself.

BUT, if one overcomes these 'problems' sufficiently to have a favorable interview, those problems may be overcome on the job as well. No guarantees, but if one dresses and looks the part of a supervisor during the interview they may continue that trend *on the job*....then customers and employees may TEND to treat that person like a supervisor. If the individual trains themselves to make eye contact during the stress of an oral interview, they are more likely to use that 'tool' on the job, like during the stress of encountering an irate customer. If they train their voice to sound calm and authoritative for the interview, that voice can help them in their daily job as well. And on and on through all of the other vocal and verbal cues.

Naturally, if the individual studies technical and/or managerial source materials so completely that they are very well prepared for the interview questions, that knowledge is not lost....it comes into play during their day to day duties.

So....preparing to succeed in these important areas, making real change where necessary, is preparing to **succeed on the job** as well as on the oral. Those knowledgeable and prepared people are the ones we want at the top of our lists and in the supervisory positions at DMV.

Though this study only concerned interviews for management positions, many (if not most) of these points appear equally important for virtually all *interviews and jobs* in DMV. 'Conquering' these cues and making them an integral part of your daily routine can make that routine easier for you; smoother, more professional, more effective, more productive, less stressful, etc.

Your next QAP might not be for quite a while, or it might be next week. There may be a hiring interview in your near future. **The time to assess your strengths or weaknesses is NOW.** The time to work on them is immediately. Be truly ready by the time of your next interview!

"Study what you don't know" is the advice usually given. In this case, find out where you might be weakest *in the areas covered here*, and work from that knowledge (Study what you don't DO well....). Video tape might be your best friend in this endeavor. Speak to the camera like it's the interview panel. Watch your hands, your eyes, your posture. Listen to your speech patterns, pitch and pauses. Fix what's 'broken'. The better prepared you are for your oral interviews, the more likely you are to perform your daily duties more efficiently, professionally and effectively.

Hurry! We need you.

-TUG (The Usual Gang...)

*"Why Visual and Vocal Interview Cues Can Affect Interviewers' Judgments and Predict Job Performance", 1999 by Dr. Timothy DeGroot Department of Business and Economics Catholic University of America and Dr. Stephan J. Motowidlo, Department of Management University of Florida. <http://uhaweb.hartford.edu/lboudreau/visintcu.htm>
Dr. Motowidlo is ALSO the primary creator of the Low Fidelity Simulation format used on many DMV written tests.

SOME PRACTICAL PRACTICE

VISUAL COMMUNICATION

"The face is the mirror of the mind, and eyes without speaking confess the secrets of the heart."
-- Saint Jerome (342 AD - 420 AD)

One statistic frequently cited to show the importance of EQ (*Emotional Intelligence Quotient*) is that 93% of communication is nonverbal. More specifically, Albert Mehrabian's research in the 70's at UCLA showed that *7% of communication came from the words we use, 38% by tone and non-word sounds, and 55% through expression and body language.*

So while it is not reasonable to say that 93% of ALL communication is based on **emotional intelligence**, it certainly is interesting to see that the perception and management of emotions strongly affects our thinking about communication. During Oral Exams or Hiring Interviews, these concepts are not just interesting, they are vital to a successful outcome. For most of us, the following points will require thoughtful, concentrated practice (& maybe a video camera.....). These should become a natural part of your posture, presentation and demeanor. If you wait until the interview itself to 'practice,' you'll come off as stilted, nervous, and unprepared.

I. Visual Cues you can work on before (**WELL BEFORE**) your next job interview:

Sitting Posture: Don't slouch - it is disrespectful. Don't cross your legs - it's too casual for a business setting. Sit up straight, feet flat on the floor, back straight most of the time, except when you lean forward a little while speaking...this makes you physically and communicatively closer to your interviewer (or the customer at the window...).

Hands Position: Don't stick your hands in your pockets; it looks disrespectful. Don't wave your hands like you're conducting an orchestra. It's okay to rest your hands (but NOT your elbows) on the desk in front of you.

Eye Contact: Don't look down at the floor; you appear insecure. Don't let your eyes wander around the room too much, it looks like you're avoiding the interviewer. Make and remake eye contact with the interviewer(s), as it shows respect, confidence, and the ability to focus.

Facial Expressions: Don't show exaggerated surprise, fear or disappointment; it looks too emotional and unbusiness-like. Tend to use a calm "poker face" with a hint of a smile; you want to look relaxed and pleasant, while not revealing any extreme feelings. Do use your facial expressions to appropriately react to issues your interviewer brings up.

VISUAL/VOCAL AREAS TO AVOID:

Frequently touching your mouth/face	Biting your lip
Tight or forced smiles	Swinging/tapping your foot or leg
Folding or crossing your arms	Slouching
Picking at invisible bits of lint	Repeated rapid blinking
Loud sighs	Repeatedly Swallowing
Loud breathing (gaspings)	Staring at the interviewers (or anything)
Faking a cough or clearing your throat to think about the answer to a question	

"I'm starting with the man in the mirror. I'm asking him to change his ways."
-- Michael Jackson

VOCAL COMMUNICATION

II. TONE/PITCH

Research Says...We determine if someone is lying by facial expression and body language, plus an **assessment of tone and sounds**. (Zuckerman, DePaulo, and Rosenthal "Verbal and Nonverbal Communication of Deception," Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 1981)

What follows are some exercises to enhance voice tone, pitch, speed, etc. A word of warning, however: Always work gently when you do voice exercises. The voice may get tired as other muscles do when you use them, but it should never HURT.

* * * *

Strangely enough, the four 'sounds' best left out of all interviews (and conversations, for that matter) are great vocal exercises for strengthening and deepening a voice: Um, Ah, Uh, and Oh. If you have a couple of months before your next interview, you can use these sounds to lower your voice significantly and permanently by then. To be effective, the exercise routine needs to be done at least 4-5 times a day, every day. Give it a try:

1. Inhale slowly and deeply through the nose, filling your lungs as fully as possible. Exhale completely, VERY SLOWLY through the mouth all-the-while saying "Ooohhhhhhhhhhh" in the deepest voice as you can make. Repeat four times (but don't hyperventilate...).
2. Do exactly the same thing as #1, using the word "Uuummmmmmmmm" Repeat 4 times.
3. Do exactly the same thing as #1, using the word "Aaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh" Repeat 4 times.
4. Do exactly the same thing as #1, using the word "Uuhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh" Repeat 4 times.

Again, if this exercise is practiced 4 to 5 times a day or more, every day, at the end of 2 or 3 months, the change should be obvious. And again, if your voice gets tired, that's probably okay, but if the exercises 'hurt,' don't do them.

III. VOCAL VARIETY:

One common problem in interviews is the **monotone**; every syllable and every word being spoken in the same voice, with the same speed and stress on each word. A monotonous delivery gives listeners the perception that you're tired, bored, or upset. On the other hand, a rushed style, or one where the pitch gets too high and tense makes people think that you're nervous, uncomfortable, or "emotional". One way to improve one's delivery of 'normal' phrases is to practice on some difficult ones. At least once a day, read and repeat out loud the following sentences as if you're at a **poetry reading**; **p**ause appropriately, "**p**unch" important words, **p**roject to the last row; **p**ronounce each word crisply, correctly and separately.

High roller, low roller, lower roller.

I need a box of biscuits, a box of mixed biscuits, and a biscuit mixer.

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked.

Friday's Five Fresh Fish Specials.

Rubber baby buggy bumpers made of red leather, yellow leather.

She sells sea shells by the seashore,

Eleven benevolent elephants ate six sick slick slim sycamore saplings, Susie.

Like all exercise regimens, the time to start is today....And you HAVE to stick with it to get results.