

# How Strong is Your Core?

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Every athlete knows that if you want to perform well, you have to have a strong core. They also know that the time to strengthen their core is not while running a marathon or playing 18 holes of golf. It needs to happen long before and gradually over time. The same is true for a presenter. You have to have a strong core.

Your core consists of seven key skills. The critical skills you need to internalize and get into your “muscle mind” before an important event or presentation are eye contact, posture, pausing, gestures, facial expression, vocal inflection and movement.

## Eye Contact

**Eye contact** is a key skill for building trust and credibility. With solid eye contact you instantly appear transparent and confident. You project sincerity and demonstrate respect. However, remember that being nervous can cause your eyes to shift and dart. There is a big difference between glancing at someone and really connecting with them. Not only will poor eye contact make you appear unsure, but it may also result in you and your message being dismissed. Practice sustaining eye contact by finishing a complete thought or sentence with one person at a time when you are with friends or family in social situations.

## Posture

**Posture** signals that you are confident and open. It is important whether you are standing or sitting. Most of us remember the message our mothers preached when we were children, “Stand up straight.” “Sit up straight.” However, when we are nervous we quickly move to what feels comfortable. Sometimes, what is comfortable conveys the opposite of what we are trying to project. To practice good posture, balance your weight equally on both feet and let your hands rest at your sides in a neutral position if you are not using them to make a point. Practice this open posture while waiting in lines at the supermarket or theater.

## Pausing

**Pausing** at the end of a sentence or thought for a breath will help you to think and to let your listeners digest your thoughts. However, while pausing makes perfect sense, it is very difficult for many of us. It may even seem counter-intuitive. Practice pausing by recording your voice. Before leaving a voicemail, play back the message to see if your sentences come to definite ends. Do this 4-5 times a day. If you hear non-words, um’s, ah’s, etc, you are undoubtedly not pausing enough. Keep practicing until you there are no filler words and the pacing is slow enough for your points to stand out.

## Gestures

**Gestures** are a perfect way to emphasize an idea or thought. When we are relaxed, we automatically gesture. When we are nervous, we fidget or clasp our hands. The more you let energy out, the more your listeners can see the conviction you have for your topic. Get feedback from a colleague on whether your gestures come from the shoulder, versus the wrist or elbow. Ask the friend to notice if your gestures are repetitive. Obviously, variety keeps listeners engaged. Any distracting gestures will make people pay attention to your hands and not your words.

## Facial Expression

**Your Face** speaks volumes. It lets listeners know how they should react to your topic. There is obligation when a speaker smiles. Listeners feel they should smile back. Also, when the speaker smiles, it relaxes others. Tension is reduced. It is never a good idea to have a poker face. Ask friends and family to give you feedback on how animated your face becomes when you are speaking. If you are one that doesn’t easily smile, consider wearing a rubber band around your index finger or wrist as a reminder.

*Continued on page 2*

## Inflection

Listeners pay attention to speakers who have **inflection in their voices**. No one enjoys a speaker with a monotone voice. A voice with inflection has highs and lows; words are emphasized in each sentence. To check your voice for inflection, use your cell phone and record it or leave yourself a voice message. If your voice sounds flat, practice reading business materials out loud, emphasizing two or three words in each sentence. Tell a story to your preschoolers. Children demand that the storyteller be exciting.

## Movement

**Movement** makes a speaker look confident, as long as the movement is purposeful. Swaying or a shifting is distracting. When the speaker directly points to individuals in the audience by moving in their direction, it is compelling. However, movement has to be prompted by the eyes of a listener. It is not natural to move away from someone or to move backwards while talking to them. To practice, the speaker first needs to move away from his laptop and his notes. Then, he or she needs to think that he has a very important message to share. Next, he must engage the eyes of someone in the audience, move in that direction and finish his thought.

Mohammad Ali, Michael Phelps, Patrick Kane and Phil Mickelson are well known athletes in their respective fields. Each one of them would stress the importance of a strong core to performance. If you want to win at communicating, you must practice the seven core skills we have identified until you don't even think about them. You just do them naturally. As your proficiency increases, so will your effectiveness as a speaker.

***Question:** Think about a recent presentation and assess yourself on the seven all important delivery skills. How well have you internalized these? What goals have you set for yourself? Are you practicing getting better at these skills on a daily basis? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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