



The
Speech Improvement
Company

A white paper on

How to Choose a Speech Coach



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Introduction

When you are charged with finding and selecting a vendor to help you or your employees strengthen their communication skills, you are taking on a crucial task. Whether it's helping a colleague prepare for a major presentation, learning to navigate difficult conversations yourself, or developing an organization's leadership team, you need to closely match the learning needs to the training skills.

This is even more important if the participant is a member of the C-Suite. Communication learning done well is career-changing and life-enhancing. If done poorly, not only is it a waste of time and money, but it can also be professionally and personally embarrassing.

I served as Chairman of the Training and Development Division of The National Communication Association. They assisted me with a 3-year research project to identify and evaluate the best practices for those wishing to become speech coaches/communication trainers. That effort and the association's endorsement were instrumental in my co-authoring of [*The Handbook of Communication Training*](#). It sets the standards for speech coach practitioners and is being used in colleges and universities as both a text and resource for learning to be a communication coach/trainer.

Prior to that, I founded [*The Speech Improvement Company*](#) and spent many years teaching at both Harvard and MIT, as well as coaching executives at hundreds of well-respected organizations such as Apple, Bank of America, Fidelity, Johns Hopkins, Pfizer, TJ Maxx, and even the White House.

In this article, I'll be gleaning from my research, coaching, and training experience at the executive level; I will focus on helping you to select the most appropriate vendor for the communication learning that is needed in your situation. Of course, there are many aspects of communication, such as presentation, interviewing, group effectiveness, conflict resolution, management, leadership, etc. This guide will help meet your or your employees' communication challenges.

Effective Communication

We all know some people are "*good on their feet*" or "*a real people person*." They seem to gain attention quickly and command respect and admiration with relative ease. We also know some people are "*just shy*," "*withdrawn*," or not "*a real talker*." These are people who folks often try to avoid. It's a tiresome effort to be kind and tolerant of them.

Communication is a very individualized human characteristic. Speaking persuasively, with confidence and clarity while building strong connections with your listeners can be learned and practiced.

You have been presented with a communication problem. Your job is to implement a solution. There are many decisions to be made in this process. Your due diligence will help you uncover the actual needs and variables within the scope of the problem.

Skill Development

It's important to decide whether your employees, strategy, and budget will require telling, teaching, and/or training. These three activities are significantly different, each requiring a vendor to exhibit specific communication skills. The vendors you consider may have all or none of them:



Telling is the transfer of information from one individual to another without the expectation of action or reaction.

Teaching is the transfer of information from one individual to another with the intent of understanding. It often includes exchange and interaction with the intention of understanding for definition and clarity.

Training is part telling and part teaching. The difference is that training requires the learner to demonstrate good knowledge and ability with the intent to then utilize the skills learned.

Most likely, your needs and the needs of your other learners will include all three.

In addition, you must also evaluate the format in which the desired communication skills are to be developed. Here are a few of the more popular current formats for learning. Established communication firms should be familiar with each:

Small Group Workshop: Typically, a group of less than 12 learners gather, and someone tells, teaches, and trains them about a particular skill(s); then, the learners are expected to demonstrate the ability to perform the communication skill(s) in the group setting.

One-on-One Coaching: Always customized to the individual learner and can be especially beneficial when coupled with group training.

Online Learning: The use of Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or similar technologies to conduct webinars, training, coaching sessions, etc.

Graduated Program: A combination of the other formats offered over time with learners progressing from introductory/basic to advanced/master levels in the chosen communication skill(s).

Beyond the individual or small groups, if you are part of a bigger organization, the training should include strengthening communication skills that are appropriately needed across departments, geographies, and cultures. Often referred to as a **Culture of Communication**, it enables people, regardless of role or seniority level, to implement the best practices that support effective communication as a core characteristic of the organization.

Vendor Selection

When you have considered the type of learning (telling, teaching, training), the format (workshop, private coaching, online learning, graduated program), and your organization's communication culture, as they relate to your requirements, it will be time to seek out a training vendor. You will likely visit many websites, read online reviews, and ask your colleagues/friends.

When researching, call the vendor's office (don't just email). How do they answer the phones? Do they respond to calls, texts, website chats, or emails on time? What reactions do you have? What impression did they make on you? All these are very important in assessing if they are a good choice for you or your organization.

You certainly will review marketing materials and visit their website. Also, check out their LinkedIn and/or Facebook page. Are they clearly subject matter experts? Do they share their expertise with others in the community? Have they authored communication-related webinars, podcasts, articles, or books? Do they at least maintain an active blog with helpful information? Do they stay current with understanding evolving research in human behavior such as brain-mind and consciousness? Each of these little items will give you further information and reinforce that important gut feeling on which to base your decision.

Is the foundation of their training academic or theatrical? Be careful if they emphasize their expertise on the stage or background in acting. Theatre-based training can work great for professional actors and can provide some fun games, but in the business world, some executives may feel like they are being inauthentic. It may indeed be fun, but do the techniques hit the unique psychology of each participant? If the coach has an academic background, graduate level, post-grad, Ph.D., or beyond in related communication disciplines, ask how they will ensure participation by all learners.



Questions to Ask

Eventually, you will have a short list of potential providers. At this point, you want to interview each of them. In addition to addressing your project-specific needs, here's a list of questions to ask each candidate for the job. Remember, as you get answers to these questions, you are hearing a mini presentation. How effective is the vendor in clearly providing you with this information? Are they good communicators themselves? It will indicate how effective they will be, should you engage with them.

1. Are you an individual coach or part of a larger company?
2. What is the background, education, and experience of the specific person(s) who will work with us?
3. Can you provide male or female instructors if required?
4. May I contact or even meet them?
5. How long have you been doing this work?
6. What other services do you offer?
7. What is your fee structure?
8. Who are some of your clients? What did you do for them and please be specific?
9. What experience do you have working with a company like ours?
10. Will you give me references?
11. What is your company's approach to training these particular communication skills?
12. How will you assess my (and possibly other participants') needs?
13. How many participants do you suggest for each session?
14. How customized with your training be?
15. How do you help participants identify their listeners' needs?
16. What materials will you use, and can I review them?
17. Do you provide any pre-session work?
18. How do you reinforce the learning so that participants remember the key points?
19. How do learners practice what they learn?
20. How do you deal with personality issues and conflicts among the participants?
21. How do you help learners who are reluctant or nervous during learning?
22. How do you deal with the various skill levels within a group?
23. How do the coaches on the team stay up to date with the latest research and trends?

There may be many other questions that are germane to your specific needs. Think them through, write them down, and be prepared to ask them of each vendor you interview.

Regarding question #10, be aggressive about pursuing any references. Don't settle for online reviews or posted comments. You will derive valuable insight from the information you receive personally. When asking for references, don't ask, "Can you give me the names



of other clients in industry X (your industry)?" It's far better to ask, "Can you provide some clients who dealt with problem X (your communication need)?" Also, ask the reference *why* they chose the trainer/speech coach or communication firm you're considering.

Final Thoughts

If the training will be delivered to a group, one important question that warrants special consideration is "How do you advise that we introduce this training to our participants?" It's not uncommon that some of your participants will be reluctant or embarrassed about participating. Schedule and ego may be real obstacles, and an experienced vendor can be helpful in overcoming these barriers.

Learning communication is unlike learning any other subject, you are entrusted with a serious responsibility. Choosing the right vendor can provide important life-long skills, stimulate the right forces, and unleash human potentials not even known to the participants.



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