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Own Your Words to Gain Authority

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As a manager, how often do you find yourself in a situation where you are voicing the ideas, thoughts, or demands of another entity in your organization? Whether you are conveying your CEO's wishes to a colleague or explaining that "sales needs an update" to your team, speaking for others is a common practice in organizations. In management and communication research, this is termed managerial ventriloquism¹ drawing on the analogy of a performing ventriloquist (the '*vent*') who makes their dummy (the '*figure*') appear to speak on their own, even though it is really the vent's words that are heard²³⁴.

Unlike the vaudeville art of ventriloquism, however, the study of managerial ventriloquism focuses not on how the vent "throws their voice" but on how managers play "language games"⁴, where they position themselves (or are positioned by others) as figures²³⁴. Playing these language games can be valuable, even essential, to fulfilling the role of a manager.

¹ Wright, A., Kuhn, T., Michailova, S. & Hibbert, P. (2023) "Ventriloquial authority in management learning and education: A communication as constitutive of organization perspective." *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 22(2), pp. 312-330.

²Cooren, F. (2016) "Ethics for Dummies: Ventriloquism and Responsibility." *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 24(1), pp. 17-30.

³ Cooren, F. and Sandler, S. (2014) "Polyphony, Ventriloquism, and Constitution: In Dialogue with Bakhtin." *Communication Theory*, 24, pp. 225-244.

⁴ Goldblatt, D. (2006) *Art and ventriloquism*. London: Routledge.

However, our research¹⁵⁶⁷⁸ shows that when managers play this game badly, it can harm their credibility, damage company culture, and hurt their organizations' reputation and profits. It is important, therefore, to ensure managers are aware of ventriloquism, how to deploy it effectively, and when doing it can harm them and their firms, as we'll explain below.

<box> About the research

The authors conducted four ethnographic studies in FT500 firms and public sector organizations. They immersed themselves in the everyday workings of firms, and recorded and transcribed conversations and presentations made by leaders and managers in a variety of workplace settings to identify and study ventriloquism in action. They also draw on their own consultancy and academic experiences helping managers and students develop alternative scenarios of managerial ventriloquism that they then test and implement in the workplace.

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Managerial ventriloquism in-context

The following examples are of managers playing managerial ventriloquial language games:

"The CEO needs this by the close of play" -- Manager, soft drinks manufacturer

"Head office demands a response from us" -- Development engineer, telecommunications firm

"The board requires answers immediately" -- HR consultant

⁵ Hollis, D., Wright, A., Smolović Jones, O. & Smolović Jones, N. (2021) "From 'pretty' to 'pretty powerful': The communicatively constituted power of facial beauty's performativity." *Organization Studies*, 42(12), pp. 1885-1907.

⁶ Smolović Jones, O. & Hollis, D. (2023) "Technology and Leadership". In Schedlitzki, D., Larsson, M., Carroll, B., Bligh, M., & Epitropaki, O. (Eds.) *SAGE Handbook of Leadership* (2nd Edition). London: SAGE, pp. 296-308.

⁷ Wright, A. (Accepted online) "I, strategist." *Management Learning*. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076221122835>

⁸ Wright, A. & Hollis, D. (2021) "Routinizing". In Cooren, F., & Stücheli-Herlach, P. (Eds.) *Handbook of Management Communication HAL series*. Berlin, Ger: de Gruyter Mouton, pp. 247-262.

In each of these examples, it is not the manager requiring action from their team, but a distant vent (“*the CEO*”, “*Head office*”, and “*the board*”) whose demand is being conveyed by the manager. Such positioning is commonplace and natural, but when managers rely on it to excess, it is usually an indicator of one of two issues in the organization: Either managers possess so little autonomy and are compelled to speak the words of others (typically, the firms’ leaders); or, as is the case in most organizations, ventriloquism has become so ingrained as a habit that managers automatically adopt the figure role even when they aren’t necessarily being pressured to. So, by routinely saying “*the CEO needs...*”, for instance, a manager can create a perception within her/himself and among colleagues that such pressure exists and that they lack the authority to resist or ease it. Over time, excessive figure-positioning engenders a managerial culture where responsibility is forever being passed over to someone else, with no one willing to take ownership for decisions.

The good news is that subtle shifts in how language games are played can have big payoffs. Identifying when and why managers unnecessarily adopt the figure role helps them to realize that they often have more autonomy than they and colleagues assume. Minor adjustments in language-in-use allows managers to demonstrate autonomy, and also showcases to senior colleagues that they are deserving of greater autonomy. Further, moderating how often they act as figures and paying attention to what they say in this role boosts managers’ credibility, effectiveness, and fosters a healthy corporate culture where responsibility is clearly assigned and claimed. Next, we introduce examples from our research of how managers position themselves and others in their talk, why they do so, and with what effects.

Language games in action

The excerpt below is a quote from the UK CEO of a global retailer (headquartered in the US). It’s taken from her address to a team of national sales managers during the firm’s annual town hall meeting, held at the London head office:

“I’ve just had a call with New York to kick-off the new fiscal initiatives. Meryl [the US-based founder and global CEO] says “I want to do bigger, better, fewer”” -- Lucy, UK CEO of a global retailer

Lucy’s statement may seem unremarkable, a simple case of a leader relaying information from a conference call. But we can see how Lucy is playing a language game. She is not the one stating what the firm’s sales initiative will be, but rather conveying what “Meryl says”. By directly name checking Meryl, the UK CEO is explicitly positioning² the global CEO as a vent who is making her ‘speak’. Lucy’s reference to “New York” implicitly positions² the firm’s global headquarters as a vent too, since the assembled management team knows that this is what “New York” refers to. “New York” also acts as a synecdoche—when a figure of speech represents something greater—for power and business acumen, lending outside authority to the statement.

Leaders and managers have many motives for playing such language games. Lucy, the UK CEO, positions Meryl, the global CEO, as a ‘vent’ to lend weight to the statement (and to herself), as she explained in an interview:

“They [the team] put that little bit more trust in you because you’re talking directly from the creator of the brand”.

However, this positioning also assigns responsibility for the decision to Meryl. Should the “bigger, better, fewer” strategic initiative succeed or fail, Lucy has communicated it to her team in such a way that responsibility for the decision will be viewed as resting firmly with Meryl.

The problem with this type of positioning is that it also holds the potential to damage a manager's credibility. Notice how a colleague's perception of Lucy's statement is very different from her own:

*"Sometimes I think it's too much, because it can sound a bit like, "Meryl thinks this", "Meryl thinks that". When, you know, sometimes you need to inject a bit of your own personality into something" --
Marketing director, global retailer*

Excessive positioning damages managers' and employers' credibility externally, too. We noticed that clients began to avoid booking in-person meetings with managers they termed "Meryl-bots", preferring to only make telephone or online appointments with them instead. Losing the opportunity to give live demonstrations of the products they were tasked to sell cost the retailer sales and managers valuable commission. Gaining a reputation for being robotic through social media posts (e.g., *"I've seen feedback from our clients on Twitter who are saying "have your own opinion!"*"--*E-commerce director, global retailer*) can also dissuade potential clients from making purchases. Inappropriate positioning, therefore, not only harms managers' credibility, it also inflicts reputational damage and monetary costs on organizations.

How to play the ventriloquial language game

While its excessive use can be harmful to organizations, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with managerial ventriloquism. In fact, it can be beneficial to the workplace. A few subtle shifts to how managers use language can reap big rewards. How might Lucy have communicated her discussion with Meryl differently to maintain her own credibility and authority with her team?:

She could have modified the original statement with an addendum:

“Meryl says ‘I want to do bigger, better, fewer’ but you’re telling me about the pressures that your [UK] teams are facing, so I’ve decided that we focus on doing fewer initiatives first”

Through the addendum (“*so I’ve decided that*”), Lucy is signalling to her team that she is asserting her authorial voice into the exchange. She does so after positioning herself as a figure between two vents (Meryl and the UK teams) that are making her ‘say’ different things; what the firm’s global initiatives will be and what the national pressures currently are. Adopting this role is beneficial in this instance as it allows Lucy to strike a middle-ground between two stakeholder groups, as she is still relaying head office’s directive but also adapting it to account for the team’s context and challenges.

There are inevitably times, however, when managers will have little or no say in shaping organizational decisions. When this happens, we encourage managers to be as transparent as possible about their positioning.

In such a scenario, Lucy could have made the following qualification:

“Meryl says ‘I want to do bigger, better, fewer.’ I understand the pressures we’re under, but I want you to know that these are global initiatives that we all have to follow”

Qualifying the original statement with “*I understand the pressures we’re under*” means that the UK CEO acknowledges that she has no choice but to position herself as a figure who is being made to ‘talk’ by her boss. We all take on figure roles, at least some of the time, and there is no shame in admitting this. In fact, transparent positioning can earn a manager respect from peers for their honesty and openness.

A less noticeable word play is also in effect here. “*We’re*” signals to the team that Lucy is one of a collective, rather than merely a vessel through which Meryl ‘speaks’. Modifying pronouns is one small but effective way that managers can boost their credibility and foster a sense of togetherness within their teams. However, managers should use the pronoun “*we*” with care, as those to whom it is directed often interpret it not as representing an agreed upon collective view, but as the manager shifting their decision-making responsibilities to an absent and ambiguous ‘other’ (e.g., “*We cannot pay bonuses this year*”).

Positioning can also help managers to advocate for their teams to senior leaders. The following statement from a partnership manager (Alison) within a construction company illustrates how this happens:

“Obviously, I love strategy’s upsell messaging; however, the team’s telling me there’s not enough stock to sell.”

The senior sales manager is pitting the strategy department’s authority against her team’s on-the-ground experience. Alison is therefore adopting a figure role and playing one vent off against the other; ‘pushing back’ on strategy’s message and drawing on the salesforce’s experience that they simply do not have enough stock to sell to the client; let alone to “*upsell*”. In doing so, the senior manager is skilfully advocating for her team while also taking care not to denigrate the strategy department.

Playing the language game well can also help managers to navigate potentially difficult conversations. With practice, positioning can be an effective bargaining tool that assists managers when negotiating with customers. The following quote illustrates how Daniel, a sales

manager within a technology company, adeptly positions himself, his employer and an unnamed vent to help swing a negotiation with a client in the firm's favour:

“CorpCom insists existing clients should always receive a 10-point demo, but I’m aware that you’re a “legacy client”, so I’ll go bespoke.”

Daniel opens the negotiation by positioning himself as a figure who is being made to speak by a higher authority (“CorpCom”) about the way the firm typically services its clients. Notice how Daniel then switches to being the figure of a second (unnamed) vent when he says *“I’m aware that”*. Daniel is carefully creating an impression that he possesses some sort of ‘inside knowledge’, which leads him to ‘say’ that the customer deserves the status of *“legacy client”* rather than a ‘normal’ client, and so is entitled to a more individualized tour of the product than that usually provided.

This illustrates how managers can skillfully position themselves in multiple figure roles, from one moment to the next, to take charge of negotiations and to achieve desired company outcomes. Alluding to, rather than directly naming, vents can be particularly impactful when negotiating, as the impression that a manager is in ‘the know’ is often more important than the source of that knowledge (in this case, we know from our experience researching the firm that the CRM software led Daniel to the “legacy” attribution). The overarching point is that, with practice, positioning can take on additional importance that goes beyond improving managers’ credibility and effects the bottom-line.

An effective approach to ventriloquism

Our research and consultancy experiences show that ventriloquism is a communicative skill that, with practice, managers can develop and become more proficient at while gaining increased credibility. An effective approach requires the appreciation and consideration of three elements: acceptance, awareness, and action.

Acceptance

Whether we like it or not, we all act as vents and figures in our personal and professional lives. In our work as professors, we play the role of figures whenever we introduce a theory or framework to students. However, if we merely relay the material without critically interpreting and contextualizing it, we run the risk of being seen as a mouthpiece for the ideas of others, damaging our credibility and standing with students and stakeholders. The goal is not to try and eliminate ventriloquism from the workplace or to stop managers from being figures, as this is neither desirable nor realistic. Instead, we encourage managers to accept that, at times, they will have to adopt the position of the figure. With acceptance, managers can develop awareness of how to act as figures most effectively.

Awareness

To avoid the risk of overplaying the figure role, managers should be aware of three main points. The first is the sheer variety of vents that make managers speak as figures. “*Head office*” is an obvious one, but managers also regularly become the figures of technologies (“*our algorithm states...*”), documents (“*the mission statement proposes...*”), business models (“*agile management requires...*”), business environments (“*the market is demanding...*”), organizations (“*Inc.Corp views...*”), governing bodies (“*faculty must have this by...*”), management ideologies (“*lean management leads us...*”), organizational departments (“*marketing is asking...*”), firm’s hierarchies (“*the C-suite is*

calling for...”), company traditions (*“the Inc. Corp way is...”*), and key performance indicators (*“the bottom-line says...”*). The universe of things-as-vents is so large that managers often fail to recognize when they have become figures. Second, managers should be aware of the direction in which they are venting. Managers often position themselves as figures through such statements as *“R & D confirms”* as a means of impressing those in higher positions. This is achieved by using the same vocabulary they hear being used, so as to associate themselves with an aspirational group. ‘Upward venting’ like this can become tedious and tiresome if it’s overplayed. ‘Downward venting’ too often can be particularly unfair, as managers’ and vents’ demands (e.g., *“the chairman needs...”*) can unnecessarily magnify the pressure on junior colleagues. Finally, managers should be aware of timing. Venting escalates at times of uncertainty, pressure points, and looming deadlines. Reactive venting like *“the CFO needs it by...the close of play...the end of the day...by lunch”* is frequently unfair on the (often junior) colleagues managers direct it to. Rather than fall into the trap of desperate venting, managers would be better advised to consider why such last minute requests are routinely made.

Action

Managers need not only to have an awareness of ventriloquism, but develop the skillset to avoid adopting the role of a figure too frequently and unnecessarily, in order to establish and maintain their credibility with colleagues, clients, and other partners. We propose five actions to help managers develop this skillset:

1. Observe—Pay attention to how often colleagues make things and people ‘speak’ to you as vents during conversations. Observing will alert you to how and when ventriloquial acts (e.g., *“head office”*) can enhance, detract from, or make little difference to colleagues’ claims.

2. Reflect—With this realization, question whether your own ventriloquizing is necessary or has become a habit. For example, if you ventriloquize “*head office needs,*” is this *their* requirement or *your* tactic for getting the team to do something by way of attaching additional weight to your statement? Such over-venting will eventually weaken your credibility.
3. Counterbalance—Post-reflection, consider whether balancing out ventriloquizations with your own view (e.g., “*I know this is a priority for head office, but*”) is possible. If it is, then counterbalancing will help you establish credibility with your colleagues and engender better working relations.
4. Tailor—Know your audience. Self-check when ‘upward venting’ to senior colleagues. The temptation to assign agency and authority to others can become a habit and lead to an impression of a manager who avoids making decisions. If you feel you are credible, there’s no need to rely on the extra weight an external vent may carry. Also, you’ll be demonstrating original thought and the desire to assume responsibility. Particularly avoid over-venting ‘down’ to junior colleagues. If done too much, it can result in them doubting your authority, weakening your own position and causing them avoidable stress.
5. Time—Identify ‘pinch points’ when you most regularly ventriloquize. For example, do you tend to do so during important meetings for impact? Or are your ventriloquizing acts triggered by pressure (e.g., deadlines)? Ventriloquizing intelligently rather than reactively makes a big difference to how others perceive you.

When managers better understand who is *really* speaking, and consciously exercise their agency in choosing how to communicate decisions and information, they can enhance their credibility,

cultivate a sense of responsibility and ownership among their teams, and enhance effectiveness across the organization. Managerial ventriloquism is commonplace: we are all, at various times, figures being made to speak the words of others. Rather than ignore this phenomenon and its effects, an approach that involves acceptance, awareness, and action lets managers develop their skills in its art and practice to ensure their preferred outcomes are achieved.