





# *Silence Is* **GOLDEN**

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## *7 Ways*

### TO REDUCE THE “NOISE” AND INCREASE YOUR EFFECTIVENESS

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BY MAX DIXON

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**L**ittle did I know that I would have an experience during my senior year at DePauw University that would take decades to understand. At the time, I was a clerk and stock boy at the campus bookstore and responsible for examining and pricing all used books for the coming semester. When I picked up a large volume, titled *American Government*, and opened it to the middle of the book, I was shocked to see that every word on every line of both pages was highlighted in bright yellow. I think about that moment with uncommon frequency. *How could everything be of equal and heightened importance?*

Flash ahead. In August 2009, I watched the great Jamaican sprinter, Usain Bolt, set a new record in the 100-meter sprint in Berlin. I noticed that the second- and third-place finishers exerted enormous effort and strained every muscle to its limits while Bolt seemed to float effortlessly to first place while setting a new record. Last month, Bolt became the only man to successfully defend both the 100- and 200-meter titles at the 2012 London Olympics.

In each case, he expended the resources he needed at the time to win the race ... *and no more*. Bolt engaged his muscles, thoughts and feelings for the purpose at hand.

The rest of him was silent. There was no unnecessary noise in his muscles; just silence and calm amid explosive speed.

Living in a culture of cacophony, we often wake up to meet a world highlighted in yellow that screams, “Everything is important. Deal with it all ... now!” But as professional speakers, we’re expected to be impervious to stress. Others seek us out to help them perform effectively and to embrace speed appropriately. We are meant—and expected—to set records in providing exceptional service and stunning clarity. The less of our own “noise” we bring to the occasion, the more available we are to hear *their* story.



### What's the Noise All About?

In communication theory, “noise” is whatever gets between the messenger and the intended recipient of that message. Noise interrupts the transmission and arrival of the message. Our culture can send information around the world in seconds, but still wrestles with the challenges of one-on-one communication.

“Noise” is also a term used by bodyworkers to describe unnecessary muscle tension. I once overheard a massage therapist say, when seeing a person with a tight back and hunched shoulders, “There’s sure a lot of noise in those shoulders!”

Audiences are suspicious of stiffness and rigidity. A little nervousness is acceptable and expected, but tension results in redundant, limited gestures and movement (i.e., noise).

Many speakers have noticed that behavioral habits—another form of noise—get in the way of effective communication. Here are some examples of noisy *non-verbal* language:

- Vocalized pauses (‘uh’)
- Unvaried jabbing, punching gestures or lack of gestures
- Rapid, clipped speech
- Monotone
- Nasality
- Habitual pacing
- Lack of pauses
- Pausing only between sentences
- Tight throat voice
- Drooping shoulders/depressed chest
- Forced laughter
- Puffed out chest
- Shallow, unsupported breathing
- Stern facial expression

### Enough already!

Almost always, these factors are signs of unresolved inner tensions and the body’s habitual, dysfunctional ways of dealing with those defensive feelings. As speakers and coaches, we need to prepare for the next race. We must *not* carry tensions and rigidities built up over a lifetime of armoring against threats real or imagined.

We must adopt the practice of creating *silence as an embodied value*. In other words: More Usain Bolt and less yellow highlighter.

### How Can We Achieve Silence?

There are many procedures and practices for eliminating distracting habits. Some of them can also help us avoid developing those habits in the first place. With some guidance, we can choose what we need and then formulate a plan of action to reduce the noise:

#### **1** *A Quiet Mind*

In 1974, I was introduced to transcendental meditation (tm.org), which has helped me experience silence and an inner calm that has been crucial. But any practice that provides a speaker with such a gift, if only for a bit, provides an overwhelming advantage. Whatever your focus, be it keynoter, coach, facilitator, humorist, trainer, talking tap-dancing clown for children’s parties, or sage on stage, you will have no better friend than inner calm.

Whether you learn transcendental meditation, dive into a contemplative religious practice, read a magazine article called “Be Quiet, Speak Better,” or just adopt the practice of sitting on a bench at Green Lake watching the geese be beautifully strange, finding a way to experience

a quieting of the mind can help you be more fully present and relaxed when you are serving others.

## 2 **A Flexible Body**

Whenever I return to my practice of soft stretching and yoga asanas after an occasional lapse, I'm reminded of the difference it makes in my comfort on the platform when my body feels flexible and available, and I have no doubt that my performance shows it. This reduced tension helps lay the foundation for other elements, such as a more fluid walk. My gestures, voice, visual focus, humor and mental capacity also are affected in positive way.

Investigate yoga classes and other programs devoted to gaining greater flexibility, or at least a well-designed physical therapy program, or check out a gym in your area. Find one that feels right and add some of your favorite stretches. My favorite book is Bob Anderson's *Stretching*, which was first published in 1980. Also visit [mayo-clinic.com](http://mayo-clinic.com) and type "stretching" next to Search and then click on *Slide show: A guide to 10 basic stretches*. It's nice and simple.

And I wouldn't be without my *Stretch Deck* (cards) by Olivia H. Miller.

For muscles that need deeper attention, I recommend Roling, Hellerwork and/or SOMA. They are approaches to structural bodywork and movement education. Hellerwork and SOMA employ appropriate dialogue with the client. They all address the body's deep connective tissue. I've directly experienced Roling (once) and SOMA (twice). The SOMA Bodywork series is 11 sessions long. I used Joseph Heller's book, *Bodywise*, as a text when teaching movement to MFA program actors.

## 3 **Voice and Breathing**

Voice often receives the least attention from most speakers, even though it is of high importance. Visit [www.MaxDixonCommunication.com](http://www.MaxDixonCommunication.com) where you will find some guidelines for developing vocal skills and vocal silence under "Resources." It's called "Improve Your Voice, Improve Your Story" and addresses breathing, vowel and consonant management, volume and projection, voice quality, articulation, tongue flexibility and pitch variety.

## 4 **Body and Mind Integration**

Here are two ways to achieve a tension-free body and mind:

- Trager psychophysical integration (also called Tragerwork) reduces restrictions in movement through table work and movement training.
- Feldenkrais Method® Awareness through Movement (250 workshop hours) re-educates the body in integrated movement. I used this program in actor training with exciting results.

## 5 **The Alexander Technique**

"Imagine a technique that begins with one simple movement and transforms every muscle in your entire body—a technique so easy you can learn it yourself, and so amazingly effective that your whole life may change for the better," writes Sarah Barker in her book, *The revolutionary way to use your body for total energy*. Every professional dancer and actor knows it and uses it. It deals with the relationship of the head and the spine.



## 6 **Muscle Toning and Strength**

It's great to feel the support that adequate But you must engage in flexibility work, too, or the long-term effect will be more restricted mobility as you age.

## 7 **Walking**

It's a great way to provide some hemispheric integration for the brain by balancing the left and right. The contralateral action activates the corpus callosum, thereby heightening the level of brain function. Let your arms swing.

By following these tips, you'll experience a greater sense of well-being and exude more confidence onstage.



*Max Dixon is an international speaker, author and coach to financial advisors, attorneys, executives, celebrities and civilians. With degrees in political science and theatre/speech, he taught performance skills for 31 years. Now he speaks and coaches on presentation skills and the power of story and metaphor.*