How *not* to talk:
TalkWise Worksheet

Doing things badly can be a great way to learn how to do them better, so long as one is prepared to face up the embarrassment of one's own mistakes, admit the errors and learn from them. Here's one example from VoicePrint founder, Alan Robertson.

Cold caller: *'Hello, I'm Tamsin and I'm calling you from the technical department of [a well-known software provider] about a problem with your computer.'*
Me: *'I don't think you are.'*

This could have been the end of the conversation. I had stated my position and did not really need to say anything more. But I didn't.

Me: *'I don't think you are who you claim to be. I think this is a scam call and that you're simply phishing for information.'*

This is what I believed, but it was more than I needed to say, and more than the occasion required. More often than not, a busy cold caller would have given up on the conversation at this point too, realising this particular call was not going to lead to the results they were seeking. Again, that's not what happened in this case.

Cold caller: *'Why don't you believe me? I* am *from the technical department of [the aforesaid well-known software provider]. There is a problem with your computer…'*

I heard indignation in the cold caller's voice. Indignation is very contagious.

Me: *'No, you're not, you're a scammer.'*

I had raised my voice, delivered my retort, and put the phone down. Again, we might expect that was the end of this conversation. But it wasn't.

The caller rang back. Assuming it to be someone else, who had been waiting to get on the line, I picked it up. And got the full blast of his original caller's rage. It wasn't a cold call any more. It was an overheated one.

Cold caller: *'I'm not the scammer. My supervisor will tell you.'*

The cold caller had raised her voice. A raised voice is such an important conversational cue. In VoicePrint terms it's a clue that the speaker has just crossed the red line between the functional and the dysfunctional form of voice. If you recognise that, then it's a useful early warning signal that says, *'Wait a moment; think carefully about what you're going to say next and how you're going to say it.'* But of course you have to pick up the cue before you can use it. I missed the cue, raising his own voice in response.

Me: *'Well, if you're a scammer, your supervisor is going to be a scammer too, so what's the point of that?'*

Cold caller: *'I'm not the scammer. You're the scammer! You're the scammer! You're trying to scam me!'*

The conversation had reached a crescendo of absurdity. Although I was angry, the situation had become so extreme and nonsensical that it made me laugh, and laughing snapped him out of the pattern he'd got himself into. That's why humour can be so useful for defusing tension: an unexpected turn can change the trajectory of an interaction. But funny for one person may not be funny for another. The cold caller was certainly not amused. My laugh probably sounded to her like just more evidence of disrespect on my part.

Cold caller: *'Yes, you're the scammer. You're the scammer.'*

Having had the last word, she hung up the phone.

So what's the point of this real and un-admirable episode?

It's not about a close analysis of particular elements of VoicePrint. That aspect of the story is simple enough: poor use of advocacy can quickly degenerate into poor use of challenge, by both parties. Rather, it's a regretful admission on my part that however much you think you know about VoicePrint and about using the voices well, it's always easy to do it badly, especially if you're triggered. It's especially easy to talk badly when you're feeling tired or irritable or intruded upon. I plead guilty as charged on all counts in this case.

It also happens when you jump to a conclusion about a situation; assumptions dull your willingness to listen as well as your ability to hear.

But there's a deeper point too, I would suggest. We cannot choose all the interactions or conversations in which we find ourselves. But we can choose how we respond to them and how we conduct ourselves when we find ourselves in them. A good default approach is to start in an exploratory manner, *'What are you hoping for from this conversation?'* The answer will inform your choice of response. Even before it does that, the question itself gives the other person not just a hearing but the respect, and the opportunity to present themselves and their purpose, to which everyone should be entitled.

Reflect on the following questions:

- When is the last time you found yourself in an unexpected conversation?

- What was the situation?

- How did you feel about being in this conversation?

- How did you initially respond when you found yourself in this unexpected conversation?

- How much time and energy did you give to listening to the other person before you started to talk?

- Which voice or voices did you use when you did start to talk?

- Was this an appropriate choice, or would another voice have served the situation better?

- Were there any clues that you were using the voices in their dysfunctional forms? Did you notice this at the time, or only now from a position of looking back?

- How promptly and clearly were you able to articulate what you expected and needed from the conversation?

- What could you have said to remove yourself from the conversation, or to postpone the conversation to a more convenient time for you? [You may also be interested in the How to say No VoicePrint worksheet]