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## Where's the fire?

Some of us have probably heard that question asked by a police officer while we were sitting in our car by the side of road. The implication is pretty clear. Unless we can convince the officer that we are indeed a fire fighter racing to a fire, we're in trouble. What is he or she really saying to us? *SLOW DOWN!* Yes, we have someplace to be, but what's the hurry? Wouldn't it be better to get to our destination calm, composed, and ready to participate rather than out of breath, confused and a bit scatter-brained? So, why don't we treat our communications the same way? Wouldn't it be better to converse in a calm, composed, and reasoned manner than just spilling out whichever words first come to mind? The rewards of slowing down are amazing. How do I know this? Funny you should ask.

Years ago, my speech mentor, Dr. Barry Guitar at the University of Vermont, put me through a rather rigorous series of treatments designed to slow down my speech in an effort of help me overcome my stuttering and become more fluent. This particular treatment is called "Delayed Auditory Feedback." At that time, the treatment consisted of a large set of earphones with an attached microphone. When I spoke into the microphone, it re-played my speech into the earphones at a slower speed. The goal was to slow down my speech to match the speed, or rate, that I was hearing through the earphones. I started out speaking *very slowly*, and, over a couple of days, gradually built up to a "slow normal". I was working in a lab at the time, so it made for a couple of interesting days. I think I drove my lab-mates a bit crazy with my slow talking, but everyone knew what I was up to and were very supportive.

Before we go any further, we should probably ask, "How fast do people normally speak? Like so many questions, the answer is: "It depends." For example, native New Yorkers, Rhode Islanders, and many others on the upper East Coast seem to talk very fast in comparison to those who live in the South. Meanwhile, the New Yorkers visiting in the south or Midwest often finds themselves attempting to finish people's sentences. On average, people speak between 110 and 150 words per minute. Auctioneers (and hockey announcers) can crank it up to 250 to 400. The world record is held by Steve Woodmore at 637 words per minute.

A particularly useful benefit of slowing down our speech is that it allows your brain a few extra moments to dig down into that large reservoir of vocabulary we all carry around with us. Using the correct words make you feel confident and indicates to your audience that you know what you are talking about.

Children often talk fast because they are trying to get or maintain the attention of an authority figure. When we talk fast, we can come across this way too. If you want to be taken seriously and be viewed with greater authority, slow down. People who speak slower often receive greater respect and credibility.

If you are speaking to someone (or a group) who is unfamiliar with the subject matter, speaking slowly will help them better understand what you are saying. You may even need to speak slower than what your normal "slow" rate may be. Your audience will appreciate it, especially if the subject matter is complicated.

Speaking slowly also allows you to "think" before you speak. How often have we gotten into trouble by speaking too quickly? Slowing down gives you the chance to change "direction" if you sense your listener is not on board or losing interest. It also provides the opportunity to organize your thoughts on the fly.

Nervousness can be held in check by slowing down. Adrenaline is directly related to stress. The more stress we are under, the more adrenaline our body produces, which in turn increases heart rate and respiration. Elevated heart rate and respiration not only make you more nervous; it makes you *look* nervous. When we slow down, we are more likely to have a positive impact on our adrenaline level, which will have a positive effect on our nerves.

So let's review. Speaking more slowly makes us look and feel more in control, improves our vocabulary, enhances our credibility and allows our audience to better understand what we are saying. In addition, it helps us control our nerves and gives us time to think before we speak. I think that sounds like a winning combination!