

Microphone myths leave you speechless

"Tcheck, tcheck. One, two...Is this thing on?!" Dr Karl is used to microphones, but the things people do as they come to grips with a microphone has him baffled.

By [Karl S. Kruszelnicki](#)



I do a bit of speaking at universities and conferences, and so I have come to know the audio-visual (AV) people quite well. They've told me how a few common "mythconceptions" about microphones make their job hard.

Now here's some background info.

The human brain is marvellous at listening to a specific source in a noisy environment. Not only can it filter out all the unwanted stuff, it can also bring into the foreground what you are concentrating on, such as another person's conversation in a crowded room.

But our current technology of the combination of a microphone and an amplifier is not yet that clever. Today's mike and amp will make everything louder, both the unwanted background noise and the signal you want.

Suppose that you are speaking softly into the microphone, which is what most people do. The mike technician has to crank up the volume on the amplifier.

This will make your voice loud enough for the audience to hear, but unfortunately it will also make the background noise louder. The audience will notice this unwanted and amplified noise.

But when you speak more loudly, the mike technician can reduce the overall volume. The background noise will not be so loud, because the amplifier has been turned down.

And yet, you will still be as loud to the audience as before. Why? Because you are speaking more loudly.

Enough with the background, on to an important microphone myth.

There is a belief that you do not have to speak loudly into a microphone.

Some people think that the mike will somehow magically make just your voice louder. So widespread is this belief that most people will actually speak more softly than normal into a mike.

And when they hear their own amplified voice coming through the house speakers, they do not see this as a sign of success, which it is.

Instead, they will deliberately speak more softly and/or move their mouth away from the mike, until they can no longer hear themselves.

The AV technicians at the back of the hall are now left with only one option: to increase the amplification of the microphone circuit.

The microphone will now pick up the speaker's own voice coming through the loudspeakers, and the faint mouse-like whimperings of the speaker.

This can then set off the squeal of the dreaded "feedback loop". In response, most speakers will talk even more quietly, while the AV technicians at the back of the hall get more annoyed, because the audience now blames them for the bad sound, not the poor microphone technique of the speaker.

I have been present at practice sessions when the technicians have had to come onto the stage, and ask the presenter to speak more loudly. The presenter then speaks at exactly the volume level.

For some unknown reason, some people have a real reluctance to speak loudly on stage. But think about actors on stage. They *project* their voices.

I saw one technician use a neat trick to get the presenter to speak more loudly. She would say: Imagine that your child is drowning in a river, and that you want to call for help. Now start calling.

In many cases, that simple exercise would open the floodgates, and then the presenter would start speaking more loudly.

So next time you're on stage, get close to the microphone, never tap it, do speak loudly. And the only feedback you'll get will be applause.

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