

"Fear of Speaking" Can Make You a Better Public Speaker

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Sounds counterintuitive, Doesn't it? Read on.

Fear of public speaking is the number one apprehension in the United States. This was first pointed out in a survey of 3,000 Americans by the Sunday Times of London in 1973. The survey found that 41% of the respondents listed "fear of public speaking" as their number one fear, while 19% listed "death." The findings have been validated by countless other surveys and studies over the last three decades.

For the businessperson, either in a small company or a large corporation, the ability to speak coherently and persuasively is a vital skill, but "fear of speaking" holds many otherwise competent people back, but it need not be so. Speaking skills are relatively easy to acquire once the fear of speaking is controlled. Note I said controlled, not vanquished.

In the hundreds of workshops I have conducted, I have found a high percentage of intelligent people becoming apprehensive at the prospect of giving a presentation. If you suffer from that same anxiety, rest assured you are in the main stream of the American public. In this essay, I'll provide advice on how to make this nervousness work to your advantage so that you actually become a better public speaker.

DON'T KILL THE BUTTERFLIES

Among the physical manifestations of nervousness can be a queasiness frequently labeled "butterflies in the stomach." Someone in the field of speech training once said you didn't want to kill the butterflies, just get them flying in formation.

I certainly agree with the basic premise of controlling, not eliminating, nervousness. I find it disheartening to see or hear colleagues and competitors in the field of presentation skills training promise in their books or workshops that if you only buy their book or attend their workshop, you will never again fear speaking in public.

That is absolute rubbish and dishonest huckstering. It causes people to make overcoming stage fright their main objective. I have seen many nervous speakers do an excellent job because they believed in their message, and I have seen speakers so calm it seemed rigor mortis had set in. Their calmness made them appear indifferent, and they bombed.

You want to be somewhat nervous. It releases the adrenaline that gets you "pumped," that shows passion and enthusiasm. It is the same as the pre-game jitters of athletes that allows them to perform at a high level. These athletes are converting nervousness to energy. Presenters must make the same conversion of what is frequently called stage fright into positive energy which demonstrates the presenter's belief in his or her message.

A TRIO OF FEARS

There are essentially three reasons, which cause presentation phobia. Here are these three fears, with recommended antidotes.

1. FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN.

As human beings, we tend to be more afraid of what we don't know. For presenters, the audience is the great unknown. You will wonder: "What do they expect of me? Do they know much more about the subject than I do, etc.?" You will have the tendency to magnify the knowledge of the audience at the expense of your own knowledge.

ANTIDOTE:

Convert unknown to known. The more information you gather on the audience and the more intensive your practice session the more the unknown will be converted to known.

Guard against procrastination, however, because we tend to accomplish what is in our comfort zone, and put off more difficult tasks, such as a systematic Audience Intelligence collection and rigorous practice. Bite the bullet, and you will have those fears of the unknown dramatically reduced.

2. FEAR OF FORGETTING.

When told they will have to make a presentation, most people are consumed by the fear their mind will go blank, and they will stand in front of the audience without the slightest idea of what they are to say.

The play it safe solution is to write out their presentation, and read it verbatim to the audience. This is normally a recipe for disaster. Audiences want to listen to a speaker who is connecting with them, is looking at them, not at sheets of paper.

ANTIDOTE:

The two-card tango. If you have practiced diligently, even a temporary "power outage" of your brain can be handled. The solution I have always used is what I call the two-card tango. Place a startling statistic or interesting fact that you have had to delete for reasons of time on a 3x5 card.

On a second card, place a bullet outline of the main points of your presentation. If convenient, place these cards in your pocket or on the lectern.

When the "My mind has gone blank" syndrome sets in, merely take both cards and say to the audience "Let me digress for a moment and share with you...." Then relate the information on the first card. If you have prepared well, your mind will probably kick back in, and you can continue where you left off.

If it does not, slide the second card to the front, and look at the bullet points. Select one point and continue the presentation. Your audience will be none the wiser. If you are using PowerPoint, your slides can become your memory joggers—just don't read every word from the screen!

Although I always advocate honesty with your audience, I do not recommend that you say "I forgot what I was going to say." You may get temporary sympathy, but audience

members will wonder why they are sitting there if the issue is not important enough for the speaker to remember what he or she was saying.

3. FEAR OF UNANTICIPATED QUESTIONS.

Many people are not unduly worried about making a presentation, because they are "on their turf." These same people, however, are terrified at the prospect of answering questions, believing they will be embarrassed by not being able to answer questions.

ANTIDOTE:

Anticipate the questions. If you have been able to acquire accurate "intelligence" on the audience's needs, concerns and problems, then you should be able to preempt certain questions, and anticipate others.

No one expects you to be able to answer every question, but they do expect you to be honest. Don't give a false answer to avoid the embarrassment of saying: "I don't know." That honest phrase, followed by the words "but I'll get that information for you," must be in every presenter's vocabulary. When you make that commitment, remember that you have a moral obligation to follow up and provide the answer, through some means, to the questioner, and perhaps to the entire audience. Admitting you don't know the answer can, paradoxically, increase your credibility because you are being honest.

Apply these antidotes, and you'll find that the "fear of speaking" will be the catalyst to make you a better speaker.

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