

HOW TO PREPARE YOUR SPEECH AND OVERCOME SPEAKING ANXIETY

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Introduction

It has been reported that the fear of public speaking is the number one phobia in America today. There are currently at least 27 books in print on the fear of public speaking. When you type in “Fear of Public Speaking” in the advance search engine of Google, you get 14,100 web hits. Organizations like Speaking Circles®, Dale Carnegie® and Toastmasters International®, active in 80 countries, are devoted to helping people overcome their fear of public speaking and improve their willingness and ability to give a speech in public..

There are many clinics, workshops, training courses and seminars all designed to help people get over the fear of public speaking. Some take the psychological or psychoanalytic approach investigating the “causes” or historical contexts for each individual that may give rise to the fear. Some take the experiential approach, suggesting that if one speaks in public often enough and in a successful enough manner, one will “get through” the fear. Recent research by Inroads, LLC suggests that the two biggest fears regarding public speaking are:

Not being perfect (or good enough)

Mentally going blank

This research also shows that the size of the audience has an effect on whether someone experiences significant fear in a public speaking setting. The people surveyed experienced more anxiety or fear when the audience was 50 or more people.

The purpose of this article is to provide insights on a new, successful set of strategies for eliminating, or at least greatly reducing, the fear of public speaking. These strategies all begin with our “philosophy of public speaking.”

Philosophy of Public Speaking

Early, youthful attempts at public speaking are often “tests” in a school, church or other setting where the youthful speaker expects to be judged and where the goal of the speaker is to pass some test or meet the standards (either implicit or explicit) that key people in the audience have set for the speaker. These key people include parents, teachers, fellow students and peers. These “speeches” are often based on the memorization of some text written by others and the speech is given to an audience composed of people whose primary interest in the speaker and the speech is to judge the speaker and the speech rather than to learn from or be entertained by the speaker.

This form of public speaking is unnatural and, thank goodness, uncommon in the real world. This type of public speaking, as a “test,” is just as hard as practicing a speech to a mirror and not losing eye contact with yourself. This is not what takes place in the real world and the good news is that giving a speech in the real world is a lot easier than the early speaking auditions that we put people through to test them in their youth.

Three Keys to a Successful Speech

There are three keys to giving a successful speech:

Connection with/knowledge about your audience

Clarity about the purpose of the speech

Knowing your subject matter and presenting it at the right level and tone for your audience.

Based on these key anchors to give a good speech, the rules for overcoming public speaking anxiety become very clear:

The Rules for Excellent, Fearless Public Speaking

Know your audience and build a strong relationship with your audience.

Know exactly why you are giving the speech or presentation.

Know your subject matter and narrow the speech to only a few key topics or themes.

Show up for the speech early, with all logistics handled.

Prepare the speaker for the event as much as you prepare the speech.

Use spontaneity in the speaking process to your advantage.

Use visualization (see yourself give a great speech) in the preparation for the speech.

Fully grasp that giving a speech is an act of leadership, not a mere performance.

Be very clear about the results you want to achieve with your speech.

Be prepared to challenge your audience rather than merely having them challenge you. Audiences love to be challenged.

Get coaching in advance and feedback after you give every speech.

Record your speeches, with video if possible.

Keep a written record of your speech, but do not read your speech to your audience.

Regarding your “introduction”, be sure to write, or at least approve this in advance, especially if someone else will be introducing you. Know what will be said in your introduction and tie it into the first section of your speech. Be sure to realize the importance of the introduction. It prepares your audience for who you are, what you do, why you’re qualified to speak on the topic and why the topic is important to the audience. Make sure the introduction is brief, informative and tied in with the basic theme of your speech.

Never Let Fear of Public Speaking Interfere with Your Desire to Express Yourself

The sources of speaking fears can be unconscious and may have been developed by you many years ago. Having “butterflies” before a speech, before the beginning of any athletic event or whenever your body or brain is called upon to undertake an activity that is unusual and not in your common routine, is actually a desirable state. Instead of trying to overcome, suppress or ignore these physical feelings we call “butterflies,” allow them to “take their course.” They often completely disappear as you get into your speech.

In fact, the major anxiety that you may experience as you begin to think about giving a speech, may fade quickly as soon as you commit to becoming an excellent public speaker or to give an excellent speech on a topic of great importance to you and your audience.

A second key element to overcoming fear regarding public speaking is to understand that faith trumps fear in life. (Remember the wise old saying, “Fear knocked; Faith Answered; No one was there.”). In order to generate ‘faith’ regarding your speech you must know that for each speech you give:

why you need to give this speech

how what you will say in your speech could make a real contribution to your audience,

what you intend to accomplish by the speech.

Tips on Overcoming Speaking Anxiety

Besides having these strategies in place, here are some proven ways to help you handle public speaking related discomforts and anxieties.

In whatever way works best for you, rehearse or practice your speech or performance to get comfortable with it. This could be walking through it in your mind or physically on stage. Be sure to practice with the same passion and same delivery you intend to use during the real speech.

Worry is using one's imagination in a negative way. Be aware of any negative "self-talk" going on in your head. Instead of imagining things going wrong, imagine them going right.

Be aware of negative thoughts or uncomfortable feelings you may have. Just gently notice them. Don't judge them or fight them.

Rather than "labeling" or stigmatizing your butterflies as anxiety or fear, think of these feelings as excitement and enhanced physical awareness.

Slowly and easily, do deep breathing to relax your body and mind before your speech.

Think of a person in the audience that you know. Imagine seeing, hearing, and feeling that person and the rest of the audience giving you a fine reception at the beginning of your speech and acknowledgment at the end of the speech. See yourself relating to your audience during the speech.

Trust that part of you that guides you along and knows exactly what to do.

The Secret of Public Speaking

The major secret of public speaking is that it is a wonderful learning device. In order to prepare your speech or presentation you will need to learn about your audience, your subject matter and your intended outcomes. As you speak, your mind will be working for you and you will learn not only from the questions and audience interaction, but you will also learn from the act of public speaking itself. If you surprise yourself by starting to say something during your speech that you did not expect to say when you planned the speech, the odds are that it will be a very good addition to the speech and will be the result of your realizing during the speech itself that you had something important to say to the audience that you had not realized was important to say when you were preparing the speech. Trust yourself to make these "spontaneous" additional comments that come to your mind during a speech as they are the result of your learning, your heightened attention and your being "in the moment" of giving the speech and the learning that led up to giving the speech.

A second major secret of public speaking is that it is one of the purest forms of making a valuable connection with a large audience. Writing "articles" is another great form of making a valuable connection with a large audience and it may be appropriate to write an

“article” or memo and give it to your audience either in advance of your speech or at the time of your speech.

There are some techniques for writing key words or key notes, highlighting certain phrases in your speech and using audio visual support that is beyond the scope of this article that may bear some investigating. Since every speech has an opening section, and that section is vitally important, here are the basic elements to the art of giving a successful opening section to a speech. In the opening section of a speech, which should last no more than a minute or two, follow these three rules:

Say something that only you can say.

Say something that can only be said on that day in front of that audience, and

Say something that will show the audience that you know why they are there, that you care about them and that you understand their goals.

Take the Next Step

Once you fully commit to becoming a good speaker, the next step is to take action and find opportunities where you can begin to speak in public. To find public speaking opportunities take a look at your work, your social organizations, your volunteer activities, your clubs, conferences and government public hearings and find a subject, cause or idea about which you would like to speak in public. Then get clear that you are an appropriate person to say what you want said. Make the arrangements to get yourself invited to give the speech or get yourself put on the agenda of an event to give your speech. Social clubs like the Rotary or Kiwanis, public hearings, nonprofit organizations and church gatherings are always open to hear someone speak on many topics.

It is worth repeating that it is important to get a coach to help you prepare for the presentation. There are many professional speech coaches and if paying for one is an issue, a friend who is willing to sit and listen to the speech five times and spend a few hours with you is certainly better than not using anyone as a critical sounding board. Then, at the right time, at the right place and in front of the right audience deliver your speech, with passion for the subject matter and gratitude for being given the opportunity to share your views with a public that is willing to listen to you. Finally, get feedback on your speech and do it all over again and again.

Conclusion

A major penalty of the fear of public speaking is that it shuts people down. Speaking anxiety can have negative consequences on careers and accomplishments. Over the years, not being able to eliminate or greatly reduce the fear of public speaking can cost a person dearly.

The fear of public speaking is broad in that many people experience it. However, it is not deep. It is like a large lake that is only a foot deep. When you look at it from the shore, it looks huge and deep. But when you step into it and realize it is only a foot deep, you realize that it is easily manageable.

Finally, we must add one insight about speeches and humor. The best humor in speeches is situational and spontaneous. Never tell a joke you hear in someone else's speech. Your speech is about your story. It is your gift to the audience. Remember, "If you are not going to give your own speech, who will?"

The overwhelming majority of audiences want you to do well, are supportive of you, want to learn from you, laugh with you and truly appreciate the fact that you are taking your time, energy and personal resources to stand up in front of them and share yourself with them. Don't be any harder on yourself before your speech or after your speech than your audience will be during your speech. We hope you find this article useful in your path to giving great speeches and enjoying the process of preparing and delivering speeches in public.

About the Author

Herb Rubenstein is the President of Sustainable Business Group a consulting firm to businesses. The headquarters of the Sustainable Business Group is Denver, Colorado. He is co-author of Breakthrough, Inc. – High Growth Strategies for Entrepreneurial Organizations (Prentice Hall/Financial Times, 1999). He also served as an Adjunct Professor of Strategic Planning George Washington University, and has been an Adjunct Professor of Entrepreneurism at George Mason University and Colorado State University. He has his law degree from Georgetown University, his Master of Public Affairs from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, a graduate degree in sociology from the University of Bristol in Bristol, England and was a Phi Beta Kappa/Omicron Delta Kappa graduate from Washington and Lee University in 1974. His email address is herb@sbizgroup.com and he can be reached at 303 910-7961. To learn more about the Sustainable Business Group, see www.sbizgroup.com.