



Terrified of public speaking

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DEAR CHIEF: For my job, I am required to give speeches and presentations to large audiences. Every time I speak I get extremely nervous and I know it negatively impacts my performance. People tell me I do a good job speaking but I believe they’re just being nice to me. When I listen to others speak, I’m envious of how comfortable and effective they are. How can I get over the sick feeling I get in my stomach every time I speak or give a presentation?

NERVOUS WRECK



DEAR NERVOUS WRECK: You’re not alone. Recent studies show that speaking in front of a group of people is one of the greatest fears of most people. It ranks ahead of the fear of dying, riding in an airplane, or failure in other areas of one’s personal life.

Unless someone is highly unusual, at some point in their life, when they had to talk to a group of people, their knees shook, voice quivered, head ached, or their face became flush--and the only dry place on their body was the inside of their mouth.

Public speaking is not easy regardless what anyone says or how easy others make it look. But just like other skills in life, one can become effective at it or master it. Here are some techniques and tactics you can employ in preparing for and giving a speech or presentation while maintaining a manageable degree of comfort (or discomfort).

First, never underestimate how important good preparation is to reducing anxiety. When you know what you want to accomplish, what you are going to say, and how you are going to say it, you will be less anxious. Mark Twain claimed it took him approximately

3 weeks to prepare for an “impromptu” speech. Another great speaker, Winston Churchill, said it took him 6 to 8 hours to prepare for a 45-minute presentation.

Another key factor is knowing your topic really well if you’re not already an expert on it. When you are knowledgeable about something, you are naturally more confident to talk about it. You should also imagine the questions your audience might ask then come up with answers before you give your speech. Either incorporate those answers into your speech or hold them ready in case they are actually asked. This will give you tremendous credibility.

Additionally, prepare more material than you think you will use. It’s better to pare down, if necessary, than to run out of things to say. One time I was scheduled to speak for 50 minutes at a symposium and I was done in 27 minutes. I was unprepared for this and staggered through ineffective efforts to keep the presentation going for the remaining 23 minutes. I felt like a fish out of water and it was very embarrassing.

You should also arrive early and look over the setting before your speech time. Find out where you will be speaking, check the room’s acoustics, and sit in a chair to see the room or setting from the audience’s perspective. Test all the equipment. Assume nothing! This approach will give you an added feeling of security, which in itself, increases your natural comfort level.

If you get that queasy feeling of “butterflies in your stomach,” then get those butterflies to fly in formation! You can do this with positive self talk and a few subtle, deep breaths before the spotlight is shined on you.

During your speech, focus on the audience and not on yourself. When you start thinking about how you might look or sound, your stage fright increases and the quality of your performance suffers.

Television broadcasters are aware of this. They avoid looking at themselves in the monitors while the camera is on them. They say if they watch themselves, they become distracted and overly conscientious.

If your hands shake when you speak, simply place them on the lectern. If they shake when you hold notes, then put your notes on a clipboard.

Lastly, don’t worry so much about how you may appear to your audience. Trust me, you do not look as nervous as you feel. I once gave the commencement address at a college graduation, and although I felt nervous, it didn’t appear that way when I watched myself on video later on. At points where I remember trembling, I actually looked calm and collected.

All of these suggestions are only a glimpse of the techniques and tactics you can use for becoming a confident speaker. You can learn a lot more by reading the following book by Karen Dwyer: *Conquer Your Speechfright: Learn to Overcome the Nervousness of Public Speaking*. It may also be very beneficial for you to practice public speaking by joining a speaking group like Toastmasters International.

With much preparation, you can give great speeches with a high degree of confidence. Having this skill in your professional arsenal will give you a significant advantage over your peers and can go a long way in your performance as an effective influencer and communicator.



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