

Killing the Fear of Public Speaking



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My Story

Growing up I always had a tremendous fear of public speaking and I avoided it at all costs. I was comforted when I read some research study that said the fear of public speaking out did the fear of death by about 2 to 1. This means that more people would rather die than have to speak in public. Yes, I was one of them. So I avoided it at all cost. I just didn't realize what it was costing me.

I had good grades in high school and I had lots of choices. The real reason I went into Engineering was that I looked through the entire college curriculum guide and found that only two majors did not have speech in the curriculum: Forestry and Engineering. I didn't know anything about Forestry and really didn't want to know anything about it. But I was very interested in Engineering so I selected Mechanical Engineering – a good choice it turns out. Right after my senior year in college, I landed a great job with a multi-national oil company.

Within about 6 months of working there I was told, because of the size of my project, I would have to present my next project to the committee (all of management) to get the funding to move forward. It was a week away and my stomach was in a knot. I prayed that somehow this burden would be lifted from me

- but nothing, I had to face the reality. So on that day, I waited outside the conference room feeling like I was waiting for my turn in front of the firing squad. Then it came my turn and I was invited in the conference room. I stepped up to the long table with all the managers wrapped around the other side. I laid my file open in front of me and began to speak. I immediately felt a wave of nervousness rising from my feet. It continued up my body and when it got to my throat, about 30 seconds into my presentation, it was like a magic hand grabbed my throat and squeezed it shut. No more words were coming out, even as I continued to move my mouth. All the managers began to look at me strangely.

In that instant, I realized that I had just wasted all those years in Engineering School, because my career of doing this stuff was over. I had to find something new that did not require presentations. I could be as a postal carrier or something where you never deal with more than one person at a time. After all, I had always been very friendly and outgoing. I just could not speak in public.

So since I could no longer speak to the managers in that dreadful meeting, I closed my folder and walked out of that conference room. I went to my office and sat down. I would have cried but I was too angry at this cruelty of life, so I didn't cry. Then my boss walked in and said, "What happened?" I hung my head, then he said, "it's alright everyone blows it once in a while." Then he left. I felt about 12 inches tall.

Then my boss's boss, walked in and said, "What happened?" I hung my head, then he said, "it's alright everyone blows it once in a while." Then he left. I felt about 6 inches tall.

All I could think to do is go see Steve the head of another department. He was not in the horrible presentation. He had re-

cently told me that if I ever needed anything, to come see him. So I went. His door was always open and he was in, so I said, "Hey, can I talk to you?" He said, "Sure come on it. It's okay, I have already heard." I felt about 1 inch tall. He persuaded me to take a public speaking course. So I asked him how much it would cost. Then he said, "It's not what it will cost you to take the course; the question is what it will cost you if you don't take the course."

So I enrolled in the course and went to work on a very important endeavor. Almost 5 years to the day after that event. I was one of the featured speakers at a national convention. I presented to 1400 plant managers from around the country. I was on video with my image projected on the big screen for all to see. I not only did a great job, but it felt great too! And this time I said a different prayer (a thank you prayer).

After I got over my initial nervousness and starting presenting and speaking, I got pretty good at it. Part of getting good included me teaching others how to present. So I started teaching classes to help people overcome their fear of public speaking. Then in the second session, one lady came up to me after the class and said, "John look at you, you're natural, this stuff is easy for you - you don't understand, we are really scared."

That's when I realized I needed to let the class see the real me - the one who had a tremendous fear of public speaking and then went on to conquer that fear. So from then on, I told them the Engineering Story when I would start a new class. Some of the students would come up at the break and shake my hand and thank me for telling that story to make them more comfortable to face this class.

2

Think Positive

(oh, how trite)

It is real easy for me to just say “think positive.” However, I have done a lot of research and the bottom line is this. Your expectations have everything to do with what develops in your life.

I don't have much respect for excuses, I hear them all the time – and they are mostly just excuses. I have overcome incredible odds. If you really want something, go get it. I have seen countless people in impossible situations go on to fulfill their goals. I know a single mother of 3 who somehow worked and cared for her three kids and got her engineering degree. But she was never really motivated until her husband, left and promised he would go into hiding and never pay a penny to her to help with the children. She could have found a hundred excuses, but she let the event light a fire inside of her. She had a goal “locked” in her mind and she kept on searching for a way. She hit a lot of road blocks and closed doors. But she kept going and refused to accept anything less. Today she is remarried to a fine man, and she is a manager at a large engineering company. She is doing well and so are her children.

Now back to you. Yes I know you might feel lots of fear right now. It is real. You may have sweaty palms. You may feel light headed when you go up to speak. You may feel that aliens are taking over your body. I have had students sit down on the floor because they felt they were going to pass out. I have

had students just freeze up in the first few seconds. I just let the problem pass and then when they were ready we continued. ALL of these people go on to graduate and every one of them is happy he/she continued on and got past the fear of public speaking. I keep them focused on the goal and they ALL sooner or later get there.

You may have heard of the “Law of Attraction.” Well it doesn’t sound like much, but I do believe it is a law of life, just like the laws of physics. If you keep saying “I can’t,” “I will never be able to,” or “No one will help me...,” then the Law of Attraction will prove you right. But if you change your attitude start believing in yourself and see yourself achieving your desired future, the Law of Attraction will help you fulfill your mental vision.

I started from rather humble beginnings and have gone on to achieve many things. It took my disastrous failure as a speaker to make me mad enough to say, “Enough is enough.” I am going to conquer this fear – and I did! Once I conquered this fear, I began to envision myself achieving so much more. And I continue to achieve what I envision. So get a positive mental picture of what you want. Let’s start with you being a pretty fair speaker and only a little bit nervous when you start a presentation which no one else can even detect.

Now I also want to say that a positive attitude is worthless without positive action. You have to DO something. Envision yourself doing a great job as a speaker and start working on it. Start turning that vision into today’s reality. So first, get the vision, and second, get to work.

3

Don't Try to Make the Perfect Presentation

Try to make a good presentation, because shooting for perfection puts a lot of unnecessary stress on you. I don't think anyone is expecting you to deliver the perfect presentation, not tomorrow and not next year in your conference room at work.

What if the audience was a bunch of school teachers and you asked them to evaluate your presentation. What if they gave you a "C+"? Could you live with that? For your first presentation, you should be fine with it. That is a passing grade. After you get more practice, focus on getting a B. Still do your best, but allow yourself to get a "B." You will still be an honor student and sometimes you will pull off an "A"!

I have had the honor of seeing lots of speakers. Some spoke grammatically perfect and moved like the finest of trained and polished actors. And they were perfectly boring !!! Then I have seen others that have done many things wrong according to acting and speaking school and they were spellbinding!

I saw a 96 year old man speak, all bent over, standing beside the podium and holding on for dear life. His suit hung off him like a wet sack. He was not well shaven and his hair was a mess. He was introduced and someone helped prop him up on the

podium. He began to speak in his poor old cracking voice. He proceeded to tell us some of the stories of the events in his life. It was an audience of about 140 people. One minute into his talk, it got very quiet. I have never been in such a quiet audience. It remained that way for the next 45 minutes. No jokes – no laughter. I mean you could have heard a page turn on the other side of the room. No one wanted to miss a word. We all sat tall and motionless. We could not wait to hear his next sentence. Yet he did everything wrong.

He did not start with a joke or an exciting anecdote. He ended it wrong too. He ended with, “that is all I can think of right now....” Yet this was one of the most memorable talks I have ever heard. Yes I do recommend that you groom yourself and dress well. But don’t obsess over it. Obsess over the message. Think as if you are in the audience and what you would want to hear. Quit thinking about yourself and think about the audience. They are not here to critique you and criticize you. They are here to get some useful information or to here why they need to be in favor of your view point.

I have also seen Colonel Oliver North speak. He was very good. But at one point he leaned all over the podium and got closer to the audience. What a speaking school violation – he put both his elbows on the podium and his chin in his hands. But he was connecting very well with us. He was excellent.

Well you may think, “I don’t have such a spellbinding story, so what do I do with this business presentation.” Well do this: pay attention to good speaking practices, but mostly to remove the distractions. You want people paying attention to your message, not wondering where you bought that lime green necktie. Remove the distractions so your audience will not focus on you. Work to keep the focus on the message.

4

The Start

The beginning of your presentation is very important and it is also when you are dealing with the most nervousness. The beginning should set the tone for the rest of the presentation. So I do recommend that you memorize only the first one or two sentences.

Walk up to the front. Pause, breathe, pause again (to let the butterflies figure out an escape route), and then start. Or as one of my trainers taught me, "Sit in the saddle before you kick the horse in the ass." (Her words, not mine) Anyway, I remember that lady who trained me every time I go up there to start a presentation. I used to go up and start immediately and then I felt like I was picking up speed (and trying to fight the nerves at the same time).

Now, I walk up front, I adjust my notes, adjust my microphone, take a deep breath and smile at the audience. Then when I feel ready, I start. I may first do a sound check and ask a few people in the back if they can hear me okay. This also gives me time to calm down and get comfortable up front.

Frequently, I start with a question (e.g., How many of you would like to have an extra technique available to deal with difficult employees?). I get a show of hands. This does two things; it helps me settle in and it gets the audience immediately involved. By

the way, asking a question to start is rather safe, because everyone does have an opinion, but if you tell a joke, everyone may not laugh (painful experience).

Never drink alcohol to relax yourself before you start. This can backfire in an ugly way. I would rather appear nervous than a little tipsy and out of control. If I am nervous, I can stop, take a deep breath and then continue.

5

It's Not a Drag Race

Pace yourself. Pause frequently and sometimes even stop. People need time for the information to soak in. It is hard for you to imagine this because you know the material well and you have rehearsed it. Remember this is their first time. If you want them to remember any of it, you need to slow down and even stop at times.

It is a good idea to summarize what you have said about a point. If you talk for 5 minutes about one of your topics, you might remind them of the most important idea to remember about that last 5 minutes.

Stopping and pausing sounds easy. Yet it is one of the most problematic areas that needs work. Just ask any speaking coach. If you speak constantly without pausing, it is tiring for you the speaker and it wears the audience out too.

Pausing is difficult for new speakers, because one or two seconds of silence seems like a long time. But it allows the audience to think and it allows you to organize your next set of thoughts. Try it! Your presentation will improve dramatically. You will also find your nervousness evaporating too.

6

How You Look & Sound

Dress to remove stress and build confidence. One guy joked that he was going to wear adult diapers under his suit. Well, if you have to – go ahead. But I think you will soon be able to go on stage without them.

However, I would be less than honest if I didn't tell you that I had diarrhea immediately before some of my early presentations. I still did a great job and no one knew, except me (and I guess now you know too). But you will survive. Just remind yourself that you know the material and you have practiced.

Don't worry about your hands. Just drop them by your side. It doesn't feel nature, but if you watch yourself on video, it does look natural. Do use your hands. Watch friends talk to each other in a small group. People use their hands – some. Just don't overdo it or they will become a distraction. If you never use your hands, you look lifeless.

Don't try to have a perfect appearance. Dress nice and make sure it is appropriate for the audience. Once I spoke to a bunch of Field Service Workers. They were all in their coverall and boots. I did not wear a suit. I just wore nice slacks and a dress shirt (no tie, no jacket). I was taught to always dress one notch above your audience. I think that is good advice.

You dress nice for two reasons:

1. To look professional for your audience
2. To make yourself feel confident

What about your voice? Don't expect yourself to have a newscaster voice. In most cases, your voice is fine. It may sound strange when you first hear it recorded, but it is fine. Others have been hearing your voice all your life. If it wasn't fine – trust me, someone would have already told you.

Most people do not need to work on the sound of their voice. However, most all of us could do a better job pronouncing our words. When you speak, there is another benefit to slowing down. It allows you time to thoroughly pronounce your words. You are working hard to make sure your message gets across. Do yourself a favor and make sure the audience can clearly understand your words. Speak at a speed that feels just a little slower than natural. This will allow you time to speak clearly and punch out the really important words.

As you go slower and pronounce your words, you will again find your nervousness evaporating.

7

Never Read Your Talk

It is fine to read an excerpt from another body of work or something you want to state verbatim. But never read more than about 1 minute or people will tune out. Remember when you were little and people would read to put you to sleep – *it still works.*

Some people think they can put in all the work up front, planning the presentation and then just read it and it will come out good. I used to work for a plant manager of a large plant and he would present to all of us at least once per year. He would read his presentations. They were okay. He actually did it better than most I have seen. He would read for a while and then look up to inject a personal note. During that personal part when he would stop reading, he made a nice warm connection with the audience. I could not help wondering, “Why doesn’t he make his whole presentation that nice warm connection?” I guess that would require more rehearsal time. I don’t care how busy you are as an executive. If the audience is important, you will find the time to prepare.

There is another problem with reading your presentation. Where are your eyes? Your eyes spend most of the time on the page, reading. So if your eyes are on the paper reading, they are not looking out at the audience creating the personal warmth and connection.

You can work off an outline, but please don't read it, unless for legal reasons you must do so. Otherwise create an outline of the ideas you want to cover and then develop your message for each topic. Practice it and use your outline only.

You diminish your fear of speaking by knowing your topic, not by reading it. I once witnessed a young lady reading a presentation and the pages got mixed up and she became very nervous. Don't read it – know it and tell us about it.

Caveat: Some professionals, such as news casters who present frequently, read off a teleprompter. They have been schooled in that art. They do it very well. They have the job because they auditioned for it and proved they can read off the prompter and make it sound rather natural. President Obama can also work the teleprompter very well. But I think his presentation skills fade quickly without it. Learn to present without a teleprompter or by reading your presentation and you can always add a teleprompter when you start working on national TV.

President George W. Bush could have used more structure in his notes/outline. He often lost his place mentally when speaking. You have to be a smart person to get to be the President of the United States. But if you don't organize your thoughts and then practice them, you will lose your place and make a lot of mistakes – and not look very smart.

8

Have an Outline

(at least in your pocket)

What if you go blank? Sometimes you get into your topic so much that when you finish that piece you forget what is next. I see seasoned presenters do this. When it happens, just pause a second, look at the outline and pick up on the next topic.

I was taught to slow down and put more pauses in my presentations. If you are doing a good job, you have stimulated your listeners minds and you are making their mental gears turn. If you don't pause and let them digest some of your information, they will feel like they are sipping from a fire hydrant and then will be missing some good parts of your presentation as they are thinking about your last point.

I have actually talked for a while and then returned to my outline and said, "Okay let's see what's next" and then I continued right on with my presentation.

I don't do it as much as I used to, but I would have an outline with about 10 points. Then I would build a word picture for each topic. Then I would hook the pictures together mentally.

For example:

I could have a mental picture of an old lady in a rocking chair (Topic 1), with her chair sitting on top of a red car (Topic 2), and

the car knocking over the yellow goal post (Topic 3), and as the goal post is bending over, a bottle rocket (Topic 4) is shooting off the top, and on and on.

The amazing thing is that with 8 to 12 topics chained together in a vivid picture, with some practice you can easily move through the topics and talk about each one smoothly without referring to notes, allowing you to walk around. It is fun to do and you will feel confident.

I usually keep a 3x5 card with the topics listed on it in my breast pocket just for added confidence. I have had audience members come to me after the presentation and ask, "How did you do that – you talked for almost an hour and you didn't have notes and you never missed a beat?" I just tell them I use mental word pictures.

9

Know Your Subject Matter

I remember reading one of Dale Carnegie's books on presenting. He said, "Know 10 times more than you are going to present and your confidence will soar." This certainly helps if there is going to be a Question and Answer session after your talk.

Q&A or no Q&A, you still should know much more about your topic than what you are actually presenting. Your confidence will soar. However, unless you are a subject matter expert and you have been presenting on the same topic for a long time, it may be hard to know 10 times as much as you are presenting.

Often times in realistic business situations, you will be working on a project and exploring new territory. You are learning lots of new stuff for the company and now you have to share it. You may not be able to learn 10 times more than you are going to present. But you still can take Dale Carnegie's advice and know more than you are presenting. It will build your confidence which in turn reduces nervousness.

10

Never Memorize

Except for your opening sentence, or two and your closing sentence at the end, do not memorize your talk.

Although it is possible, memorization of an entire presentation is very hard to do. I do not recommend it. If you get a little nervous, you will forget some of it. And if you forget something, you will become more nervous. Plus you will be worried about forgetting what you have memorized - this will make you more nervous. So, don't memorize your talk.

Also, if you memorize your talk, it will not sound as natural as you just talking about your topic. Learn your topic and tell us about it – just like you would tell 2 of your friends.

11

Lay Out Your Presentation Logically

A good logical flow feels natural and you will feel better about it. And when you feel good about your presentation, your confidence goes up.

Use an outline or PowerPoint (or something) as a reference to guide you from topic to topic. Know your material and tell us about it. That's all you have to do. Don't make it any more difficult than it has to be. Several times during a longer presentation, I like to do mini-summaries. This helps me as well as makes sure the listeners are with me.

The beginning and end are the most important parts of any presentation. Think about where you want to start your presentation and think about where you want to end. Then draw a mental straight line between the two points. In between, you should have only 3 to 5 other main points at most, depending on the length of time you have to present.

Now you have your main points and when you speak, make sure you make these points very clearly. Everything else is to support the point you are making. Once you lay out your presentation this way, you will begin to feel confident about it. And feeling good up front, will kill nervousness during your presentation.

12

PowerPoint, Flipcharts and Other Visuals

Used correctly, visual aids can help take a lot of pressure off you just standing up there by yourself. Imagine how mesmerized the audience would be if you could hold up a couple of shrunken heads from Peru and discuss the differences in techniques used by the different head shrinking gurus.

But unfortunately, you will most likely be presenting something of a business nature and your props will be colored charts on a PowerPoint slide. That's okay - just make sure the slides are relevant to your talk. Develop your talk first and then add in the visual to support the points you are making. Be careful not to let the visuals take on a life of their own. Now sometimes you can use analogies to make your point. Such as showing shrunken heads to make the point, "The market we are competing in has shrunk like these head and it is not coming back – we must diversify our strategy into new areas."

Remember that you are the presenter, and the message should be there with or without the visuals. Use the visuals only to enhance the presentation. I even weave in some short YouTube videos sometimes. With Wi-Fi it is rather easy now. Plus the multi-media effect can add some zing to your presentation. But be ready just in case the media stuff fails – because it can.

Electronics can and occasionally will malfunction. Don't learn the hard way; be ready just in case. Be flexible and be ready to make adjustments.

I once was invited to do a presentation at an association that met monthly at a nice facility right after work each first Wednesday of the month. The lady warned me that these were field guys and they had a short attention span. When I got there, I told her I had about 40 minutes worth of presentation all supported with PowerPoint slides.

She said, "Oh no, you have to cut it down. They will just get up and leave after about 20 minutes." So while they ate dinner, I worked frantically to take out about half of all my slides. Then she introduced me and I gave them 20 great minutes.

Afterward, one of the senior members said, "That was one of the best presentations we have ever had, I only wish it was longer." They were so interested that they started asking questions and through the Q&A, I almost included all of the deleted slides of my original presentation.

The moral of the story is, be ready to be flexible with your visual aids. You may have to change things to meet the needs of your audience.

13

Video Yourself Presenting

Okay I know this sounds painful, but videoing your presentations will help in several ways. It will help you notice any annoying habits such as scratching your nose, jingling change in your pocket, twisting earrings, etc. Forget trying to look and move perfectly. That is for someone in theater.

If you look at seasoned speakers, they just move naturally. That is how you talk to a friend when you have some exciting news to share. Just be yourself and remove anything that might be distracting.

Also videoing yourself will get you comfortable seeing yourself up front presenting. Have you ever had a friend say, "Hey, that's a good picture of you." And then you immediately start criticizing it because, your hair is sticking up a little in back, your collar is not just right, and the light is good on one side of your face, but not the other. This is happening because you are looking at the parts. Other people aren't looking at the parts; they are looking at the whole.

So when you see yourself on the video, remember don't look at the parts. The audience will look at you in total, unless you are doing something distracting like repeatedly sticking your finger in your nose.

You may find it uncomfortable seeing yourself up front at first. Remember, the world has been seeing this total picture of you for a long time. They are comfortable with it.

Now YOU need to get comfortable with it.

14

Find 3 Friendly Faces

You will not be able to look at each audience member with equal timing unless you are only presenting to 5 people. But any more than that, you are scanning the crowd periodically and then landing on friendly faces.

Talk to an individual in the audience for a little while and then move on. You will normally find some of your audience members very pleasant to look at when you are speaking. They will nod and smile. It's as if they are mentally cheering you on. The truth is, the audience members want you to be successful. No one wants the discomfort of a speaker getting nervous and doing a poor presentation. They are pulling for you!

I find it is helpful to arrive early and talk to some of the attendees. Ask what is going on in their business. Ask what other speakers they have heard at this event. Shake a few hands and get comfortable with the crowd. I once went to an event where the speaker was at the door and he shook hands with all 70 of the attendees. Then a few minutes after he took the stage and he felt very comfortable and so did the audience. The presentation went very well. When speaking, make friends with the audience – or at least a few of them.

15

Plan a Mistake on Purpose

This might just be the best tip in this whole book. Once I was working with a client in Los Angeles and he told me he had to give a presentation in a few days and he was really nervous about it. I asked him why he was so worried. And after a bit, he opened up and said he was worried about making a mistake.

So I suggested that he plan a mistake into his presentation on purpose. Then he would not have to worry about making a possible mistake, but focus on a sure thing! So we discussed it a bit and found a good spot to plan the mistake into the presentation. He needed to say \$600,000 on one chart and he was going to purposely say \$60,000. Then a few seconds later, stop talking, then physically walk backwards a few steps to where he was a moment earlier, then pause and say, "Excuse me, I think I just said \$60,000. I made a mistake – I meant to say \$600,000, not \$60,000." Then continue on with the presentation.

A few days later, I was back in Houston and he called. His presentation went great. He told me he used the planned mistake and it went fine. And no one had any kind of negative reaction, they just nodded in agreement with him when he did it. He said

he also made another mistake later in the presentation, but not on purpose. He simply corrected it and went right on. Then he thanked me for the great idea of a planned mistake.

So the moral of this story is: Stop worrying so much about making a mistake in your presentation. You might even try using a 'planned mistake.' This should reduce your nervousness and prove to you that mistakes are not such a big deal. Just correct yourself and move on.

16

Tell Your Stories

If I asked you to tell me about one of the best speakers you have ever heard, I would bet you would say that speaker had some good stories. The stories you tell don't even have to be a personal story, just relevant.

A story about how Clint Eastwood solved a movie production problem could be very relevant to your presentation and most likely very interesting. A well told story comes to life.

The good news about personal stories is they are your stories. When speakers are telling their own personal stories, they make a comfortable solid connection with their own stories and forget about any nervousness. Also most listeners can relate to personal stories because they have their own personal stories too.

Now the bad news – business presentations don't lend themselves to an abundance of stories like telling the Women's Networking Association how you can survive in the wilderness. Nor do you have the time to develop such stories. Let say you have to do a presentation to top management to justify why we should upgrade the chemical circulating pumps to the expensive new ultra quiet 'green' fuel efficient pumps. Well you most likely will just present the current situation against the future situation along with the cost vs. benefits, supported by some kind of return on investment time period.

This will suffice, but it will probably be a bit dull. You might want to weave in a very short story on how your grandfather lost most of his hearing working around loud machinery and a very short story on what a group of mission workers could do with the equivalent fuel saved each year to deliver food to the starving kids in a poor village somewhere.

I want to emphasize that these stories woven into financially based business presentations need to be very short or you might get some over-riding comments from a senior member of management saying, "Let's get to the point, we have another meeting after this one." These stories may have to be limited to just a few sentences to properly fit in and improve your presentation.

The biggest problem I see and hear with business presentations is that people easily get lost in numbers and mentally drift off. You need to mentally re-anchor the listeners periodically and it is even better if you can use an analogy.

For example: "So far in my presentation I have given supporting evidence for moving ahead to buy the land across the highway for the new expansion. Our business is growing like a healthy city and we must think ahead for planning our infrastructure. Now let's look at how we can pay for it all."

Tell stories during longer presentations such as luncheons and at association meetings. For short focused business presentations, tell 3 sentence stories and/or use analogies.

17

Use Humor Carefully

I have some tried and true humorous stories I tell. Some go at the opening and some go at the end. The others fit in where needed. The more formal the business presentation to your peers and superiors, the less humor you should use.

If you are presenting as a member of your industry association at an annual conference, they will expect more humor. Be ready if the humor falls flat and no one laughs. For each joke or humorous story you tell, prepare a follow-up comment in case they don't laugh. Sometimes your humor might touch a nerve concerning a current event at the company, of which you have no knowledge.

If the humor does fall flat, be ready with something like: "While some find that humorous, it can be hard to laugh at it because..." or "The point of that joke is that it all depends on your perspective, which explains why some people won't even laugh at that."

Be careful, because it is getting easier to offend people. I gave a presentation on Tuesday and I got rave reviews. Then on Friday, I flew to another city and gave a shorter version of the exact same material. One of the written reviews said she was very offended by something I said. I am still not sure what. Then again, lots of different things are going on in the lives of each of your listeners and you just never know when you make a com-

ment that will trigger someone's negative emotion. Anyway, be as sensitive as you can to different genders, backgrounds, nationalities, et cetera.

So now where do I get this humor, and who do I poke fun at? First off, the safest person to focus the humor on is 'yourself.' Whenever you make someone else or some group the subject of your joke, you have a greater chance of offending your audience. I was recently listening to a comedian on the radio, and he was offending lots of ethnic and social groups and his audience was laughing it up. But then again he is a comedian, and he is in a night club with people drinking. They came to party and see a comedian. They are kind of expecting this type of offensive behavior. Your business audience however, is not expecting it. They are expecting you to be politically correct and socially correct. So be careful.

Let's talk about finding humor. I was taught by members of the National Speakers Association, to keep a Humor Journal. Go to the store and buy a notebook in your favorite color. Get a marker and write 'Humor Journal' on the front of it. Now start listening for humor and start taking notes. Skip the dirty jokes, because you can't use them here. In fact, I really respect a good comedian who can keep the language clean and still be funny. These are the ones who work hard to not offend others. They just poke fun at situations. These are also the type of comedians that get invited to be on the popular late night television shows.

When you start listening for humor and start filling your journal, you will be surprised how much material you can find. For example: When my son was six years old, he and I went on a "guy trip" vacation for a few days. As we entered the first stage of security in the airport's international terminal, two ladies were standing there in uniform, and one lady looked at his passport

and started asking questions. She asked, "Where do you live? What is your name? How old are you?"

Then she asked, "When is your birthday?"

He said, "August 27."

She said, "What year?"

He said, "Oh, it's every year."

The other lady started laughing so hard at the lady asking questions, that it caused a big disruption in security. That was not a joke, it was a humorous situation and it was very funny. I shared that with one of my audiences and they had a good laugh too.

I listen to other speakers on TV, in person, in Church, at conferences, in movies, in the hall, etc. You don't have to copy their humor, but it will give you some ideas.

If you are new at speaking in public, go very light on the humor or not at all - because if it falls flat, you will suddenly feel nervous. Not good. You will be much safer starting your presentation with a rhetorical question and then giving the audience a few extra seconds to think about it. This will also let you settle in and your nervousness will go down significantly. Just ask the question slowly, then stand there while they think about it and look smart for 5 seconds. Then continue on with your presentation when you are ready.

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Go In, Before You Go On

I always try to arrive the night before and go check out the room. The hotel staff or convention center staff will look at you funny, but just tell them that you are presenting tomorrow. Sometimes they are very helpful and let you test out the sound system.

You can also learn some things about the shape of the room, the sound system, the stage, for example. Your goal is to minimize surprises and get comfortable in the setting. I also like to ask the staff what is going on next door during my time slot tomorrow. A supervisor or manager will usually have an agenda.

I once had a high school dance adjacent to my presentation room during my time slot. But I knew about it ahead of time and I was ready. I made sure the sound system could handle it. I even worked it into my presentation. I used the sound of their party as an analogy for making one of my points.

I find that I am much less nervous already having 'made friends' with my presentation environment, versus walking into a large room full of people for the first time. I like to go in early and see the empty room slowly fill up with attendees. I feel much less nervous than walking into a very full room.

Also, I like to sit near the front and watch the room fill up. I feel much less nervous being introduced and walking up from 'right there' on the side versus walking up from the back of the room. Make friends with the room and get comfortable in it before it is time to present.

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What Do You Say at the End?

Do not say, “Well that’s all.” There are a lot better ways to end a presentation. I frequently say, “I would like to close my presentation with this last comment.” Then tell your last little story or reiterate the most important point of your presentation or have a call to action. Then I follow up with “Thank You Very Much.”

Regardless of what words you want to use to close, the closing should be some kind of “call to action.” Why did you give the presentation? Even if it was an evening talk just to entertain the audience, you most likely are trying to convince the audience to do something differently (e.g., “So remember, your happiness is mostly up to you and your attitude toward life.”). Regardless, remind the audience what you want them to think or do before you close your talk. (e.g., “So in closing, please remember to support this project which is in every employee’s best interest.”)

Also, if you have spoken for 30 or 40 minutes (which goes by quickly), some listeners are wondering when you will be done so they can go to the restroom. So if I have 7 or 8 minutes left, I will frequently say something like, “So as we enter the home stretch, I want to make a few last points.” Then I continue.

Jokes are rarely good closers. Even if you have used some humor during your presentation, it is now time to get serious again and leave your audience with a crowning statement. If you use a joke, keep it short then follow up with a serious call to action.

Another way to end, if you are allowed time for Questions and Answers is to say, "That concludes my remarks, and now I would like to answer your questions."

You may have other ways to end your talk. That's fine; just make sure it is obvious to the audience that it is the end.

How to Control Q&A's

First, ask the host of the program if he or she even wants questions at the end. Frequently, they do not have time for it. But if it is agreed upon ahead of time, have the person introducing you mention that there will be a few minutes to ask questions at the end.

If you don't let them know there will be Q&A at the end, you will catch the audience off guard and they may go blank and have not questions for you.

After you conclude your presentation, tell the audience that you have a few minutes for questions. Then say, "Who has the first question?" If no one asks a question, it is very awkward. So have a typical question ready. Then I say, "While you are thinking of a question, there is a question I frequently get, which is (fill in your question)," then answer your own question.

Usually by then, they will have thought of some questions. If not, just say, "Well, I thank all of you for coming, that concludes my presentation."

Assuming you are getting some questions, repeat the question so that you can make sure all the audience members have heard it. This also gives you time to think more about how you will answer the question.

Sometime when the topic is a hot one, they will have lots of questions. Be aware of the preset time limit set by your host. When you have used up the time say, "Okay, who has the last question?" Tell people that you will be available after the presentation to answer their questions. Then answer the last question and thank everyone for coming and perhaps thank the host for having you.

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To Keep Killing the Fear, Present Often

It has been well over 20 years since I first faced my incredible fear of public speaking. Trust me, that fear was real. So if you have some of that fear, I truly understand how you feel.

But if you face the fear, it continues to back down. Today, I rarely go up to present feeling absolute zero nervousness. There is usually some at first. But right after I get started, the fear evaporates.

If you truly want to kill the fear, keep attacking the fear. This means present regularly. Don't start big. Start with small meetings. Join a club where you have to present each time to the small room of members. Once you get comfortable with that, join an association and sign up for some of the committees. Then later, maybe become a board member. This way you can slowly ratchet up your audience size.

Nervousness usually is a result of the unknown (what can go wrong). So here are some things you can do to decrease nervousness:

- Know your material well
- Practice your entire presentation several times
- Be very familiar with your handouts and slides
- Be ready for your projector to die

- Be prepared for your microphone to screw up
- Go in ahead of time and get familiar with the room and sound system
- Don't let distractions derail you, just pause, then continue
- Don't try to do a perfect presentation
- Know your time limit and make sure you practice the timing too
- Be ready to cut it a little short if you get squeezed on time
- Believe in yourself
- See yourself doing well

If you do enough presentations, you will get to experience the unexpected. Sometimes the unexpected will be an equipment failure. What if your PowerPoint projector dies or the bulb burns out? Are you ready to continue and finish without it? You should be.

This is when you just pick up your outline and say, "We can continue without the projector." Then just keep talking. This means the outline you had on the screen is no longer there. So make sure you are familiar enough with your paper outline so that you can continue.

The bottom line is to go find opportunities to present regularly and then seek to increase the audience size over time. Yes, I know this all sounds crazy, but if you will start small and battle the fear, you can kill the fear. The more often you present, the more comfortable you will become with all the little possible variations that can occur and require you to make adjustments.

The Pay Off

As the saying goes, “Speakers lead, Leaders speak.” If you are ever going to make it anywhere up the corporate ladder (or with your own business), you will have to develop the skill of presenting so you can sell your ideas to other people.

These other people will normally be other members of management. Or it could be customer or investors. When you are looked upon as someone who can calmly and confidently share your ideas with other members of the company in a group, you will also be viewed as someone with upward mobility – a leader [leaders speak, speakers lead]. Of course have to have good ideas and work hard for the company. But look at the opposite. I have seen lots of people with good ideas and who also work hard for the company, but they just lack the will to develop the confidence to present – it is a career anchor. It will slow you down tremendously.

I have witnessed some extraordinary occurrences by good presenters. If you think that looks are all you need, let me tell you about a talented woman I’ll call “Wilma” (not her real name). Physically she was not what typical society would consider attractive. However, when she would present, she was polished and in command of her message and the audience. Her messages was well researched and on target. The rest of man-

agement could not ignore her messages and her conclusions. They bought into her ideas and she began to move up in the company. She was brilliant and because of her presentations, everyone knew it. Forget her looks - her abilities were just too valuable to be overlooked.

If you have a valuable message, we need to hear it.

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One Final Thought

Very few people are just naturals at presenting. Most of the good presenters and speakers you see have worked at it. They have stumbled and sometimes fallen flat on their faces.

But as the renowned actor, who started as a kid in Hollywood and has acted all his life, Mickey Rooney once said in an interview, “You always pass failure on the way to success.”

Keep focused on your ultimate goal. Start right now and visualize yourself as a successful presenter and go to work to make it happen. And if you keep working on it, it will happen.

I remember in the original movie “The Karate Kid,” as part of Daniels training to learn the martial arts, his trainer ‘Mr. Miyagi,’ showed Daniel some of his bonsai plants. Daniel commented that they were beautiful and he wanted to know how it was done. Then Mr. Miyagi showed Daniel a full juniper bush (about 2 feet tall) in a pot.

“Now in your mind make a perfect mental picture of the bonsai tree you want. Then he handed Daniel some pruning shears pointed at the full juniper bush and said,

“Now make picture.”

***Killing the Fear of
Public Speaking***

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