

BUSINESS SKILLS

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Public Speaking with Confidence: The Top 10 Secrets

You may already have bulletproof confidence when addressing a group. If so, just skip to the next article. If, however, you find stage fright affects your ability to enjoy and be effective at public speaking, stay here.

You have probably heard that public speaking is the number one fear. It even beats out death and dismemberment. Some theorists suggest you toss your fears aside and courageously step into the unknown. I try to find a middle ground.

If you ignore or suppress your fears, they will only catch up with you later. I have met speakers who say they have no stage fright, but I can see their body betraying their lack of confidence. Their fingers twist and play with the mic cord. Sweat beads form on their upper brow. They take a sip of water and start choking.

If you ignore and suppress fear too long, it can become toxic. A petrified tree has no life. It cannot receive water or nourishment. Similarly, if you are petrified around public speaking, you can become one of those inhuman-type speaking machines that are all polish and no substance. Fear around public speaking makes you human. Some of the most successful speakers and entertainers say they often feel nervous going on stage, even after years of practice—Carol Burnett, Johnny Carson, Jack Canfield, and Jimmy Carter, to name a few.

All our emotions, both positive and negative, play an important role in our

lives. Fear lets you know you need to pay attention and proceed with caution. Fear also lets you know you are stretching your edges. Stretching into new areas of life is like stretching your body for exercise.

Your body resists initially, but if you are gentle and breathe deeply and pay attention, eventually the muscles let go and relax. If you push too hard or bounce your stretches, the opposite happens. The muscles tighten up even more. My suggestion is to be gentle, pay attention, and breathe when you are stretching into public speaking. Love your fear and it will melt, slowly but surely.

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Here are the Top 10 secrets that most professionals know about moving through fear and being confident on the platform.

- 10. Focus on the benefits (not the challenges) of public speaking.**
- 9. Be prepared, inside and out.**
- 8. Change anxiety into excitement.**
- 7. Practise, especially your introduction.**

- 6. Focus on serving others.**
- 5. Fake it 'til you make it.**
- 4. Don't take anything personally.**
- 3. Choose a topic you are passionate about.**
- 2. Be compassionate with yourself.**
- 1. Breathe.**

10. Focus on the benefits

To find the courage to face stage fright, it helps to see the price you are paying for staying petrified. Ask yourself how this fear is holding you back. From a promotion perhaps? The ability to public speak could mean you move up the corporate ladder? Perhaps you have a cause you believe in . . . a health care or social issue. You know that public speaking will make a big difference to spreading your message. If you are a writer or consultant, public speaking will bring you the increased exposure you need.

Answer these three questions.

1. If you had better public speaking skills, what would you gain? List 5 benefits.
2. What could these skills bring you in the future?
3. Who else might benefit if you were an effective public speaker?

It will be important to focus on these benefits. Just like anything that is worth it, public speaking can become challenging, especially in the beginning, when you are new and lack the wisdom of experience. There is a great quote that

goes like this: “Good judgment comes from experience that comes from bad judgment.” I created my lifesaver (or perhaps face-saver) toolkit from bad judgment. You already have a toolkit started or you would not have come this far. Your mistakes can help you add more tools, if you choose to learn from them.

9. Be prepared, inside and out

Many speakers only prepare notes and logistics. Because I have a background in theatre, I luckily had many tools for opening my voice, grounding my body, and feeling connected mentally and emotionally to my material. Take a basic acting course to learn some of these invaluable tools.

8. Change anxiety into excitement

All emotions have their negative and positive side. Like a coin that has two sides, you cannot feel great love unless you can also feel great hatred. The flip side of anger is passion. On the other side of sadness is joy. The truth is your

anxiety about speaking can easily turn into excitement with some conscious choosing. It is the same basic vibration with just a more positive charge. Focusing on the benefits, doing something fun, reading something inspirational, getting some exercise can all help you change the charge of your emotions from negative to positive.

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7. Practise, especially your introduction

Once you prepare your material, it is best to memorize your opening comments. During the beginning of your talk, you will

feel the most nervous. If you feel confident about your opening words, that will help you relax. It is unnecessary to memorize all your presentation notes. In fact, I recommend you don't. You want to have some sense of spontaneity during your talk.

6. Focus on serving others

If you approach public speaking as a service for others, it will help you become less self-conscious. Speakers who are self-conscious are challenging to watch. If you care about people and connect to them, you will forget about how you are doing. This can make all the difference. As Cavett Roberts once said, “They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.”

5. Fake it 'til you make it

Your physical stance can help you move into a place of more confidence. Walk onto the podium as if you felt very comfortable. Walk tall, with erect posture, chest up, breathe smoothly, and flash a great big smile. This stance will

help trick your mind and your audience into thinking you are confident. What you put forth will come back to you.

4. Don't take anything personally

No matter how great a speaker you are, there will always be critics. As soon as you stand before a group and state your point of view, someone is bound to disagree. We all see the world differently. Decide ahead of time that no matter what people say or do, you still have a valid perspective. At the same time, you may get value out of constructive feedback from a trusted source.

3. Choose a topic you are passionate about

Try to find something about your topic that you love. Your enthusiasm will become infectious to the audience.

2. Be compassionate with yourself

As you learn, you will make mistakes. It's best to learn how to laugh and learn from your mistakes, rather than let them stop you.

No matter what happens when you speak, you will survive and you will learn valuable insights.

1. Breathe

Practise conscious breathing throughout the process of public speaking. It is the simplest and probably the most effective way of building and maintaining confidence. While you are sitting in the audience waiting to go on stage, try this breathing technique. Inhale slowly to the count of 7. Hold your breath to the count of 28. Exhale slowly to the count of 14. Do this activity seven times. Your brain chemistry will produce a relaxation response in your physiology. If holding your breath for 28 seconds feels too long, then just focus on slowing your breath down and smile. Try smiling at the voice in

your head that is worrying, as you would smile at the antics of a child. This will help you to not take the content of your mind all that seriously. No matter what happens when you speak, you will survive and you will learn valuable insights.

Just remember, as Woodrow Wilson once said, "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent." ▲

Carla Rieger is an expert on sales presentations especially using humour, stories, and audience participation. The author of two self-study manuals, *Captivate Your Audience* and *Speaking on the Funny Side of the Brain*, Carla helps leaders add a powerful **creative** edge to their management toolkit.

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