

Public speaking for people who cannot speak in public

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Public speaking can be learned and is a powerful business tool.

CAN YOU DO PUBLIC SPEAKING?

- Is the idea of public speaking terrifying or just very uncomfortable?
- If you could learn to do public speaking, would you do it?
- Are you willing to invest some time in training?

If the answers to the above are yes, by all means gain this valuable skill.

Public speaking is an important skill for service professionals. It must be used when speaking to internal teams or clients in presentations. Done well, it can also be a powerful resource for developing business. But despite the importance of this valuable tool some people find it very difficult - and some find the prospect downright terrifying. This article offers some practical advice for those of you who either cannot speak in front of a group or do so with great anxiety.

As consultants and trainers we frequently address the issue of extreme fear of public speaking with our clients. People in an extreme state of stress are in a state of "fight or flight", which means all of their resources are being used to cope with the stressor - which in this case is simply getting through the presentation itself. Once their presentation is completed, usually in a very mechanical manner, they feel drained, both mentally and physically. People in this post-stress state will not be able to function well during the question and answer session, much less in casual conversation with individuals after the presentation. And it is the question and answer session and the casual conversation afterwards where communication exchange should be optimum.

Most people WILL be able to speak in front of a group, but only if they follow the right steps.

Let's face reality: some people are never going to be good at making presentations, period. Fortunately, they are in the minority. If you are anxious about public speaking but willing to give it a try the results can be very good. Speaking comfortably to groups is not an innate ability; it is a learned skill, like doing a tax return, programming or analyzing business procedures.

§ **Step one** - Be prepared to invest some training time by going through the proper stages. You must learn how to prepare material. You must learn how to speak to a group. You must gain comfort gradually and overcome your fears. You must learn to answer questions from the audience. Literally, you must learn to speak while sitting before you learn to stand. Good public speaking involves more than can be covered in a brief article. You will benefit most from training by people who know how to do public speaking, not just generic "coaching." This article will, however, get you started with some of the basics.

§ **Step two** - make sure you know how to tailor a presentation to the specific audience. One of the major mistakes novice public speakers make is talking over the heads of their audiences. You probably know more than your audience or you wouldn't be doing a presentation. In fact, you probably know a great deal more than your audience. Keep it simple, repeat key points and get some feedback from your audience along the way.

§ **Step three** - make sure you understand the value of rehearsal. For a major presentation giving the same talk ten times in front of a spouse or even the mirror alleviates many of the jitters people experience when speaking to a group. Rehearsal also helps you avoid body language distracters, e.g., playing with your tie or running your fingers through your hair. You will also learn to avoid talking too fast. And of course, you will improve each time you practice. Even if you only have time for one quick rehearsal before a 2:30 pm presentation, one quick rehearsal will help.

continued

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§ **Step four** - if you haven't done much in the way of presentation, start by speaking to a small group while sitting down, and then give the talk standing up. If you are comfortable with public speaking you will find this hard to believe, but it is true: many people who can comfortably talk to twenty people sitting down absolutely panic if they have to stand up. This fear goes back to the stress-overload phenomenon. Standing places more focus on the speaker and his or her body movements (movement of hands, posture, etc.) all of which creates stress. First, make sure you are comfortable with speaking to a group of friends while sitting, and then try it standing.

§ **Step five** - when in doubt, use a microphone. In small groups you usually won't have, or even need, a microphone so you may need to speak up. Don't make the common mistake of using your "giving a speech" voice. Have a conversation and don't shout or distort your voice. If you do have access to a microphone, use it, and remember it is an ear not a megaphone.

§ **Step six** - realize that you never talk to more than six people no matter how large the audience. You will learn that you don't have to interact with every one of the ten, thirty (or even three hundred) people in the audience. Rather, the best strategy is to focus on six points in an audience row (middle, left, right and front and back) or six points in a circular or L-shaped chair grouping (and don't forget the people closest to you). If you do this, every person in the audience perceives direct eye contact.

§ **Step seven** - learn to answer questions - including the ones you cannot answer. Even if you are cramped for time, take at least a few minutes to anticipate the most likely questions. And when that nightmare occurs - the question you cannot answer - the magic response is "I don't know, but that's an interesting question. I'll find the answer and get back to you." This answer is of multiple benefit. First, it allows you time to think and get "off the spot", second, following up with the answer is a great way to build a relationship with that person and third, it maintains and builds your "expert" status in the client's eyes.

SUMMARY

Public speaking doesn't come naturally to most people but it can be a powerful tool for various purposes. Individuals who develop their skills in this area value it and never lose it. Follow the guidelines in this article to get started.

BIO SKETCHES

The Rose Consulting Group (RCG) has served management teams and professional individuals for almost 30 years in all aspects of team building and individual development.

Dr. Robyn W. Porterfield is a Principal with RCG. Robyn worked in sales and marketing for over ten years before completing her PhD in Industrial Psychology at the University of Texas at Arlington. She consults to management on topics such as; hiring, training, coaching, management succession planning and conflict resolution. In addition to her work as a consultant, she is also a professional mediator.

Dr. Robert G. Rose is also a Principal of RCG. Bob received his PhD from the Florida State University. He has consulted to top management teams in virtually every industry and his books on testing are required reading by major test companies. He is a frequent public speaker and has written articles for numerous business journals.

Robyn and Bob emphasize that good teamwork begins with a strong focus on the individual and finding the win/win fit between the individual's talents and needs and serving the clients. That principal applies to developing a practice, hiring, team building and all aspects of organizational health. Contact Robyn at porterfield@roseconsultinggroup.com if you have any comments or questions about this article.

