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A Quick Guide to Public Speaking

by Bo Bennett, DTM

"I have a dream..." Who can forget those immortal words spoken by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. on August 28, 1963. Dr. King managed to influence millions of people and change a nation, not because he was rich, or in a position of power, but because he was an effective public speaker. Dr. King and other highly influential people before him, like Winston Churchill, Mahatma Gandhi and Abraham Lincoln, just to name a few, mastered the art of public speaking and earned their place in history. Mastering the art of public speaking may not make you world famous, but it will most certainly help you to succeed in anything you do.

In just about every well-paid position, some form of public speaking is required whether it be presenting to the board of directors, giving a group sales presentation, speaking to a committee, or just a group of peers. The large majority of people are either terrified or just very uncomfortable with public speaking. This means the high paying jobs and the advancements are left for people like us who know that we can become effective public speakers if we put our minds to it. Better yet, we can even learn to enjoy it. So let's jump right into my quick guide to public speaking.

There are three general styles of speeches: impromptu, manuscript, and extemporaneous. In an impromptu speech, you have little to no time to prepare. For example, your boss asks you, on the spot, to bring the rest of the team up to date on what you have been working on the last week. If possible, it is best to gracefully excuse yourself for a few minutes and jot down a few key points. Then, you can be sure to cover the important points without making it sound as if you have nothing to share.

The second type of speech is a manuscript speech, which is written like a manuscript and meant to be delivered word for word. This is fine for public figures where every word uttered is vital, but when it comes to building a connection with the listeners, an extemporaneous speech is the best way to go. This kind of speech uses ideas to trigger thoughts rather than exact words. Knowing the material well will allow you to present a speech in a way that best keeps the listener's attention while allowing you to make changes based on the response of the listeners. Both the extemporaneous and manuscript styles have their own benefits so choose the style that best fits your content and your personality. Impromptu speeches should be left for impromptu situations only.

If you remember just one thing about public speaking remember this: have a point. All too often speakers stand up in front of an audience and blabber out one long stream of consciousness. Since we are masters at goal setting by now, consider your point the goal of your speech. Do you want to influence your audience? Do you want to sell them something? Do you just want to entertain them? Know your goal and build your speech around it. Here are some other suggestions that I have found to be key elements of any successful speech or presentation.

- **Have an introduction, body, and conclusion.** Follow the age-old advice, "Tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and

then tell them what you told them." Most people find writing the body first is most helpful, then either the introduction or the conclusion.

- **Prepare.** You cannot "over prepare". The better you know the material the more confident you will be when presenting and the more flowing the speech will sound. Videotape or record yourself if possible, or at least rehearse by watching yourself in a mirror. When you are delivering your speech live, the same adrenaline that makes you nervous also helps you think better and find the right words to make your speech sound fluent.
- **Vary the pace.** Vary the pace at which you deliver the speech. Slow down, then speed up. This will keep the listener's attention. Be careful not to talk too slowly or too quickly.
- **Have good eye contact.** If you have been taught to look over the heads of those you are speaking to, forget it. Good eye contact means making a connection with your audience by looking them straight in the eyes. If the audience is small enough, try to make it a point to make eye contact with everyone.
- **Use note cards not notepads.** Notepads are bulky, noisy, and most of all, distracting. Use note cards or notes on card stock for extemporaneous speeches. Never be afraid to use notes—even the best speakers rely on notes to ensure they communicate the points efficiently and effectively.
- **Anticipate questions.** Take the time to think about any question a listener may ask and formulate a positive answer that supports your presentation. It is OK to say you do not know the answer and tell the person you will get back to them if needed. The "I don't know" or "I can't say" answers are most effective when followed by "but I'll tell you what I do know..."
- **Try to keep your speech under 20 minutes.** Several studies have shown that 20 minutes is about the maximum amount of time listeners can stay attentive, after that, the attention levels begin to drop. Speaking is more stimulating than listening so although you may be excited to talk for longer, the chances are your listeners are ready for a break.
- **Establish credibility.** Who are you to speak about the subject on which you are speaking? Why should your audience listen to you? Establish your credibility by sharing your credentials with the listeners in a tactful way. For example, "When I was President of XYZ Corporation...", not "I was once the President of XYZ Corporation."
- **Have a strong introduction and a strong conclusion.** The introduction should be used to gain the attention of the listeners and persuade them to listen to your entire presentation. You are essentially selling them on why they should listen. Be sure you address their needs and not yours. The conclusion should consist of a powerful statement, quotation, anecdote, or other attention grabber. Never end a speech with, "that's all".
- **Have a second conclusion prepared.** After a speech or a presentation usually comes a question and answer period. Once the questions stop coming, it is best to end on a strong note. This is a great time to get your "last word" in.
- **Act on every opportunity you can to speak.** Anxiety of speaking is best subsided by experience. Also, volunteering to be the one who gives the speech will get you noticed and you will stand out as the leader. Join your local Toastmasters club (toastmasters.org) for some really great practice.

It has been said that most people fear public speaking more than death itself. While this does not mean people would rather be dead than speak in public, as some authors would like you to believe, it does illustrate why communication of ideas through public speaking is often avoided by

professionals. Those who make it a point to embrace public speaking will have a major advantage over their coworkers and/or competitors. Who knows, the next time an author writes about great public speakers, your name can be on that list!

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