

Changing Focus

by Margo T Krasne

We all know that for many people, speaking in public can seem like a fate worse than death. But did you also know that there are attorneys who go through the agonies of the damned when it comes to public speaking? It makes sense when you realize that not all who go into law choose to be trial lawyers – not that all trial lawyers are great public speakers, but that’s another subject. Many people go into law for the mental stimulation that problem solving offers, the intricacies of the law itself, and/or the love of the deal. Often these attorneys, dynamic personalities as they hold sway over a conference table, can turn into automatons when asked to stand up in front of a room and speak. The very thought of speaking at a conference, or making a presentation to a group of potential clients in the hope of attracting new business to the firm, can cause them to experience the same horrors that some of you experience when you have to present internally to co-workers or upper management.

In almost every one of my workshops, I come across participants who, when seated, have no problem interacting with others, enjoy telling stories, or arguing with me over a concept I have put forth. Ask those very same people to go to the head of the table and perform an exercise, and suddenly, their personality disappears. In an instant they take on the look of a demoralized soul desperate for a fig leaf to hide behind. Why, you would think I had expelled them from the Garden of Eden. I

always ask what happened? Why the personality change? The answers I get back can be boiled down to, “Everyone’s looking at me, judging me.” When I then ask the other participants to share what they were thinking, almost all respond with, “I was trying to figure out what I will do when I have to get up and present.” Those who had already presented may answer, “I wasn’t so bad,” or “I was terrible in comparison,” or “I’m just so glad I don’t have to do it again.” In all instances, the participants’ eyes might have been on the speaker, but their thoughts were on themselves.

Audiences do not focus on a speaker unless the speaker makes them uncomfortable!

The more uncomfortable a speaker appears, the more uncomfortable we feel; the more uncomfortable we feel, the more we want to escape. If we can’t escape, we get angry and that anger gets directed at the source of our discomfort: the speaker. I have watched trial lawyers during a voir dire who were so intent on showing off that they forgot what it felt like to be a captive audience. Yes, these lawyers were “comfortable” speaking in public, but they were so filled with themselves that they forgot about their audience’s comfort. The result: the audience, bored and annoyed at having its time wasted, turned against the lawyers and by association, the lawyers’ client.

When a speaker takes the audience’s comfort level into consideration, the



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audience enjoys itself. Studies show that relaxed audiences who are enjoying themselves, not only hear, but absorb the speaker’s content and more importantly, often put a positive spin on the content itself.

Audiences focus on bad speakers; good speakers focus the audience on the message.

It is not an audience’s job to take care of a speaker, to give assurance that he or she is doing well. It *is* the speaker’s job to take care of the audience. And that means, as a speaker, you need to deliver your information in a manner that your audience can easily digest – that is, with appropriate volume, good pacing and words that are enunciated clearly. It means that any physical quirks – playing with fingers, rocking back and forth, standing like a tin soldier – are eliminated so that they do not distract from the message. It means that the content of your message gets put into a context that relates to your audience’s needs. And, it means not boring your audience with PowerPoint slides filled with words! (Can you just imagine Martin Luther King’s *I Have A Dream* speech delivered in PowerPoint?)

How do you keep your audience’s attention *off you* and *on your message*? You need to develop the skills that give you the confidence to focus outside yourself. Easier said than done? Of

10 Tips On Speaking in Public

1. The sooner you have your presentation written, the sooner you can begin to make it yours. As you put it together, think about one thing. A good presentation is never about you, but about what you can give to your audience.
2. If you're using slides, make them truly visual. No one wants to read and listen to you at the same time.
3. Rehearse! The more you rehearse the better you'll be. The better you are, the more your audience will enjoy you.

Rehearsing does not mean going over what you want to say in your head! Rehearsing means saying it out loud – full voice.

Practice hand and body movements in front of a mirror then move away and practice your talk, using your eye contact as if you had the audience present.

4. Practice your entrance. When you take the stage (and even before) show your audience what you would want to see: confidence, passion, and an eagerness to impart information.
5. On the same note, no matter what happened to you on the day of the presentation or how you're feeling, make no apologies! Your job is to make an audience comfortable. No one likes to see pain, so don't show it.
6. Keep your eyes on your audience at all times. That means looking to see how they are taking in information, not how they are taking in you!
7. Remember your audience is not your judge. If they grimace, they probably have gas.
8. Don't weave or pace. You don't want your audience running for a Dramamine.
9. Breathe normally! You need oxygen to think, so keep it coming in small doses.
10. Remember that people who are enjoying themselves hear better, so be a good host. Take care of your audience and they will respond positively to you.

course! It takes time and training to develop into a good speaker. And while there are those whose genetic makeup might, and I emphasize *might*, find the skills easier to learn than others, they still have to train. (Think Tiger Woods. He's considered a "natural," yet he practices his golf skills daily.) I have worked with many people who are anything but "naturals," and have seen them turn into powerful speakers because they set their minds to mastering the necessary skills.

So what are those skills that can give you the confidence to think past yourself? There are the obvious ones: eye contact, voice, enunciation, body language, hand movements, and learning how to control your adrenalin so that you remain energized and relaxed simultaneously. You can find many books on the subject (mine included) that will give you exercises to help with all of these skills. The trick is to practice the skills daily. The idea is to make the skills automatic so that by the time you are in front of an audience, you can focus on the needs of those in your audience and getting your message to them.

Regarding your message – you need to rehearse it. Aloud! Too many people avoid the rehearsal process or think that memorization is rehearsing (not!), or that thinking about what you want to say is the same thing as saying it (wrong!). Shakespeare said it best with his, "Speak the speech I pray you trippingly on the tongue." You need to rehearse aloud what you want to say as you want to say it – that includes standing up, using hand movements, and moving your head in different directions as if you had an actual audience present. If you can rehearse in

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