

Presentation Skills

Most degree programmes and careers require presentation skills. Anyone who understands some underlying techniques and principles about presenting will be a more confident speaker. Speaking effectively and persuasively is something anyone can learn and develop with practice.

So what's the big deal?

Exactly! The main reason why so many people shy away from speaking in public is fear; the fear of going blank or forgetting what one had planned to say, the fear of sounding stupid or of boring the audience to death. Quite often, the anxiety provoking thought is that your name, career or reputation is at stake. The deepest fear is that you are being judged, not just what you are saying.

There is a big difference between being nervous before speaking and feeling terrified. A certain amount of anxiety and tension before addressing a group is natural and even energising. What you need to do to succeed is to turn the experience around and focus on the positive implications of giving a presentation, rather than on the negative ones.

The level of anxiety before speaking to a group will be influenced by the following factors:

Your knowledge of the subject The more you know about the subject to be presented, the more confident you will be. Dealing with material that is new or that you have not fully researched may add to your level of anxiety.

Your advance preparation

How you initially organise the amount of information and knowledge on the subject matter is equally important. Often people put off preparing the speech until the time to deliver it has almost arrived. Lack of structure, planning and preparation will contribute to your feeling nervous while delivering the speech. Effective presentation relies on adequate preparation.

Who are your audience?

Your anxiety as a speaker can be influenced by the composition of the particular audience. Consider the following questions:

1. What is the demographic background of the audience in terms of age, sex, status and work experience?
2. Do they have a vested interest?
3. Will they be a friendly audience? Who is hostile?
4. Does a member of the audience already know something about the subject?

Your familiarity with the venue

The better you know the venue, the less anxious you will be. If the presentation takes place in your own classroom, or in the conference room of the company where you work, preparations will probably be less complicated. The size of the room can influence how comfortable or uneasy a speaker will be.

What is the purpose of your presentation?

Your level of comfort may be influenced by the occasion and purpose of presentation. You may feel more anxious in a formal or confrontational occasion than in a casual, informal gathering.

So what can I do?

The most effective ways of overcoming public speaking anxiety are:

Being proficient in subject and very well prepared.

Anticipating potential problems and preparing probable responses.

Having the ability to handle whatever happens spontaneously as it occurs, making instant decisions.

Gaining plenty of practice and experience at presenting.

Preparation

Preparation is everything. Getting the answers to the following questions can increase your confidence, because you will be more in control. In addition, answers to these questions will help you make some necessary decisions in advance about the structure of your presentation.

Who is your audience?

The more you know about your audience, the more accurately you will be able to select the appropriate data for your talk. If each individual in the audience knows as much as everybody else on the subject then you can use certain technical terms and concepts. However, if the audience is unfamiliar with the subject, you may need to include more basic information. What you are aiming at is to balance what your audience already knows and what it needs to know.

What points do you want to convey?

It is important to be clear on the number of points that you want to convey. However, bear in mind that people will only remember a number of points; you cannot expect to present a lot of ideas in a short period of time. You may find it helpful to write your key points as a check list and select the ones that you regard as most important.

How long is your presentation to be?

The length of time that has been allotted to your talk has critical implications for what you select for the content. This will influence the degree of detail that you can deal with. Consider the amount of time that the talk will take, including or in addition to any question time. Twenty minutes is the ideal length of time for a speech that will keep an audience listening. If there are other speakers, you should consider in what order the presentations will be made. The first or second speaker has an advantage as the group is fresh and paying attention. As the day goes on, audiences become tired and it is more challenging for speakers to keep their interest.

Structure

Your responsibility to the audience is to be clear, accurate and analytical. A strong structure is one of the most vital points to distinguish a good presentation from an average one. In order to keep the listeners interested and involved, you must arrange facts and ideas in an effective manner.

(1) Introduction / Beginning:

The beginning of your presentation should motivate your audience to focus on you and your words. Give special emphasis to the first five minutes. The following techniques for opening your talk might be useful:

An overview of the presentation outlining the issues that will be covered and stating the

end objectives.

A statistic or a shocking fact.

A quotation.

A question.

(2) Middle:

Develop the argument, positions or explanations that you indicated at the start. You explain, clarify and justify your positions. You need to decide in what order to put each of your key points, e.g. the most important point first or last, a sequence based on chronological order (past, present, future).

(3) Closing:

You have similar choices for ending a talk as you do for beginning one (i.e. story, quotation etc). In the closing, you summarise what you told to your audience, you restate your objectives and what you want from them.

Notes: Consider using notes instead of relying on your memory. Rather than writing pages of paper, or using the overheads and slides as prompts, try to use record cards. On each card you might write one of your key ideas, followed by words to remind you of the example that you plan to use. Note cards are convenient and allow you to be more mobile during your talk.

Keep visual aids covered until you need to show them. Remove them when they have served their purpose. Remember, that when you are using visuals you should not turn your back to the audience. You may also want to reproduce your slides or acetates on your cards.

The presentation...

Other key elements involved with the ability to get our message across and that effect the quality of the presentation include the following:

Keep eye contact. By looking at each face you are signalling to the listeners that you like them, that you are honest, open and direct. Make the audience feel that you are addressing it.

Use your hands in a variety of gestures. Do not fidget with your notes, play with your clothes or put your hands in your pockets. Use your hands to describe and reinforce your verbal message. Avoid pointing at the audience.

Be aware of your posture. Stand straight, with assurance, chest up, shoulders relaxed. A little movement is helpful so long as you do so with clear purpose.

Be aware of your voice. Talk louder than normal and try to vary the pitch of your voice. Project your voice to the back of the room, not down at the table in front of you. Speak slowly enough for the audience to capture the meaning of what you are saying.

Face your audience. Bear in mind that your facial expression should reinforce your message. Smile from time to time.

The warmth that you will emit can affect the listeners' level of interest or motivation.

Your clothes. Do not wear clothes that distract attention from what you are saying. Dress comfortably and appropriately.

Word Choice. An audience's ability to understand is effected by the vocabulary we choose. Long words are harder to understand than short words. Eliminate words or phrases that may be inappropriate, insulting or stereotypical. Avoid overuse of similar words. Consider using a thesaurus when preparing in order to avoid this.

Further reading:

Argyle,M.(1988). Bodily communication. London: Methuen.
Mandel,S.(1988). Effective presentation skills. London: Kogan Press.
Tierney,E.P.(1994). Show time: A guide to making effective presentations. Dublin: Oak Tree Press.

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