

“Take the Terror out of the Talk”

PMI-SVC Job Team Presentation

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“Take the Terror out of the Talk” is a Toastmasters International¹ presentation from the *Better Speakers Series* of instruction manuals. This presentation to the Job Team combines these materials with practical experience.

Introduction

Speech anxiety affects even seasoned speaking professionals. The key is to control it and learn to channel nervous energy into a positive force the audience will feel.

From a career perspective, the ability to speak in business settings can be an asset or a limitation. In certain fields presentation skills are required; in others they are rare and a valuable skill. Confidence in being able to volunteer or step forward can be a differentiator among peers.

Root Cause

Anxiety in speaking to a group is such a universal experience that it is useful to understand that it is a primal reflex. The more important the situation, the most likely that anxiety will play a part. Even a polished speaker like Barack Obama will certainly be facing it when he steps up in a few days to deliver his inaugural address. The difference is that he knows how to manage it.

Additionally, there are medical/psychological conditions that can make even the thought of speaking in front of a group worrisome. In 1998 I was diagnosed with Social Anxiety Disorder. It followed a bad point in my life of my father's death and other factors. This problem affects 13.3% of adults at some point², but I suspect the percentage is much higher, just undiagnosed. If you feel you may have unusual symptoms of anxiety, a good idea is to seek help right away. It took me about three years to recover, and if untreated it can be career limiting, to say the least.

Techniques to relieve Anxiety

1. Experience

Regular experience in front of a smaller group will help build confidence. The group size can be increased slowly; each time bringing renewed symptoms of anxiety. The key is to feel the anxiety, give your presentation, and then experience the reassurance of overcoming the anxiety. At some point small groups are no longer helpful in building confidence; you must always challenge yourself to higher levels.

2. Mental Rehearsal

For a specific, higher profile presentation, it can be useful to spend time visualizing delivering your material as you'd like to envision it from a “better you.” Picture the venue, the audience, and the high points of your speech. Imagine the listeners responding and enjoying your message.

3. Relaxation Techniques

Physical relaxation just prior to your presentation can help. Go for a walk, stretch, yawn, breathe deeply. Clear your mind and feel confident that you know your material (you practiced, right?).

Other Tips

I once heard that the no one wants you to deliver a better speech or presentation than the audience. This is absolutely true. Especially in most business settings, there is little expectation for anything beyond a mundane presentation. It is not a comedy club with a highly demanding, paying audience, it is more likely a group of executives who would be surprised and delighted to hear an enthusiastic, concise, informative, and lightly delivered talk.

Keep a glass of water handy if possible. If your voice is cracking, you cannot hide it and the audience will be relieved if you pause for a moment to relieve your throat of this condition.

Good luck and let me know if you have any questions!

References

¹Toastmasters Local District Website (includes search for area clubs)
<http://www.district39.org>

²Wikipedia Article on Social Anxiety Disorder
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_anxiety_disorder