

Live Long and Prosper: 16 Tips for Successful Public Speaking

By Norman M. Goldfarb

According to an oft-quoted survey, many people fear public speaking more than death. From business meetings to industry conferences, clinical research offers many opportunities for public speaking. FDA guidance documents do not specifically sanction the death penalty for even the most disastrous public speaking performances, so the downside is probably no worse than humiliation and disgrace. On the upside, accept the opportunities and your career will move forward, provided you understand a few basic tips from the experts:

- **You Are the Expert.** You will be invited to speak because someone thinks you know your topic. When you step up to the lectern, you are automatically the expert. All your audience wants is a few pearls of wisdom, delivered in a relatively painless manner. If you leave a few smashed body parts on the podium, well, that's why people watch car races, right?
- **Make Stress your Friend.** There are three kinds of stress: the bad kind is called "distress"; the good kind is called "eustress". The really bad kind is called "blind terror." Many of the best athletes, singers, academics, and even professional speakers, get nervous before a big event. Their secret is to make their nervousness into eustress, thereby becoming more alert and energetic. Their blood literally flows faster through their brain. Convert your anxiety into positive energy. Provided your head doesn't explode, the audience will see only the energy, not your nausea.
- **In the Privacy of your Home, No One Can Hear You Scream.** Practicing your speech in front of a mirror is probably an early symptom of psychosis. If you want to try something really scary, practice in front of a family member who is convinced you have special needs. I'm not even going to mention a video camera; that is simply cruel. Flipping through your slides as if you were presenting the material is like pretending to jump off a chair to simulate base jumping; it lacks a certain verisimilitude. Your best practice value is probably to make your presentation to an empty room. If you take any shortcuts, you are missing the point of the exercise. The worst that can happen is that your furniture will stop talking to you for awhile.
- **Better Safe than Very, Very Sorry.** You have not experienced true fear as a speaker until you've walked into a room filled with people but without the slides or notes you had expected to use. Send a copy of your slides to the meeting organizer. Bring a copy on a laptop that you can revise at the last minute if the previous speaker uses your joke. Bring a copy on a CD-ROM and another on a flash disk. Bring a hard-copy. Do not make any assumptions about the slide projection system or even that the room will have electrical power. You have been warned.
- **What They Don't Know Can't Hurt You.** No-one in the audience has read the script for your talk; it doesn't exist. At most only one person in the room knows what you are going to say, and that's giving you the benefit of the doubt. If you skip a key point, you are just creating an opportunity for someone to ask a good question, assuming anyone noticed. If you jumble something up, anyone paying

attention will probably assume that everyone else understood your brilliant subtleties, and he/she should start listening harder.

- **Two Eyes vs. a Hundred.** 100 eyeballs are scary to even think about, much less face in an auditorium. Don't believe me? Just close your eyes and imagine 100 eyeballs, floating in space, staring at you. (Imagine them staring up at you from a serving bowl. Yuck.) In contrast, you are probably relatively comfortable talking to a single person in a private conversation. When addressing a large crowd, deliver each point to a different individual in a different part of the audience. The human race has evolved to know when someone is looking at them; it probably has something to do with not getting eaten by lions. It takes some practice to become automatic, but simply turn your speech into a series of one-on-one conversations. Everyone else in the room will eagerly wait their turn.
- **You are the Center of your Audience's Universe.** Your audience can focus their eyes on you, or it can focus them on your slides; it cannot focus them on both. You want them focused on you, or your slides might get the promotion we just promised. Keep your slides concise. Do not include full sentences on pain of speaker death; nobody intelligent has read text to your audience since they were 12 years old. Use your slides to cue your memory and reinforce the points you make. If you want your audience to read something, give them a handout later or a web address. You, of course, could not be this stupid, but tell your friend with the upcoming speaking engagement to never, ever turn away from the audience to read the slides. In case the people who set up the room don't understand this basic point, bring a hardcopy of your slides with you, I mean his slides with her, I mean, well, you get the point,
- **Speak Slowly.** Important people with important things to say, *s p e a k s l o w l y*. If you rush your words, your audience will assume you have nothing important to say. If you do have something important to say, allow your audience the courtesy of letting them hear it all. The bigger the room, the more slowly you should speak. You will not be able to judge your own speaking speed. A tape recorder can come in handy; if you don't have one, leave a telephone voice message for yourself. When you step up to the lectern, you will forget this advice, so bring a post-it note to remind yourself to *s p e a k s l o w l y*.
- **Pause.**

A few-second pause to gather your thoughts can seem like hours, but there is one thing in this troubled world that you can absolutely rely on: your audience will barely notice. Professional speakers sometimes pause more than they talk; to understand the power of a pause, watch Gregory Peck in the movie *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Pausing gives your audience time to thoroughly chew the food for thought you just fed them. It makes your audience think you just said something important. It creates anticipation and curiosity. You can't go wrong with a pause (just ask Christopher Walken the next time you see him), and they are really easy to articulate.
- **Bring Down the Wall.** The lectern is a speaker's worst friend. Sure, you can clench it with your bloody fingernails, but it also hides you from the audience. If you are going to personally connect with your audience, the last thing you want is a physical wall between you and them. Request a lavalier (lapel) microphone. At minimum, occasionally step to the side of the lectern to assure the audience that you are not an alien being whose lower body has turned into writhing tentacles. If you are short and cannot escape from behind the lectern, insist on something sturdy to stand on.

- **The Audience is on your Side.** Your audience is desperately hoping against hope that you won't make them look like fools for showing up. Give a good speech and you help them with their self-esteem issues. Remember, most of them would rather be hand-feeding worms than standing with you on the stage.
- **Be Yourself.** The only people who don't come across like idiots trying to act like a professional speaker... are professional speakers (and some of them come across like idiots anyway). You have a successful career because of who you are. Be yourself and you are half-way there. In fact, a little awkwardness demonstrates sincerity: "Nobody that clumsy could possibly be lying to me"; "nobody that slick could possibly be telling the truth". It helps you connect with your audience; they will empathize with your trials and tribulations. Speak naturally without larding on a lot of two-dollar words. If you naturally use humor and are not my brother, use it in your presentation; it may be the only thing your audience remembers. If you can't tell a joke to save the lives of a rabbi, priest and minister, don't even try. (Note the witty allusion.) If you do make a joke at someone's expense, make it at your own expense, or prepare to flee the room. Remember: they wanted you; they got you. You go girl.
- **Converse, Don't Declaim.** Good speakers don't speak at their audience, above their audience, below their audience, or even to their audience. They speak with their audience. If you can make that personal connection, your audience will forgive even the worst gibberish.
- **Resonate.** Good speakers, whether on Broadway or at the county fair, know how to project their voice. You can give a good speech with a weak, reedy voice, but probably not a great one. Borrow a book on speech technique or hire a speech coach for an hour. Practicing a few simple techniques like standing up straight (duh) can make a huge difference.
- **When No-one is There.** Speaking to room, especially a dark one, when everyone is hiding in the back, makes it almost impossible to personally connect with your audience, so herd them to the front if you can. If you can't do that, bring a small battery-powered light for the middle of the room so you can see at least a few people. Audioconferences with the audience on mute are really tough. Try talking to a wall for an hour; even your best jokes won't get many laughs. If possible, unmute a few friendlies; it will make both you and your audience feel more comfortable.
- **Learn from the Masters.** Attend a few public speaking events on topics that interest you, not. Focus instead on the speakers' techniques. Take notes. Appreciate their triumphs. Feel their pain.

Public speaking is not brain surgery; slip up and your audience will probably live to hear you speak again. Practice makes perfect, so take every chance you can to stand up, speak up, and move up.

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