

Speak Up Now: How to Talk Down Your Inner Critic

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US comedian Jerry Seinfeld says he was amazed that in surveys most people frequently rank their fear of public speaking above their fear of death. As the internationally lauded stand-up performer wryly points out in his punchline, that means the average person at a funeral would rather be in the casket than standing before the crowd while delivering the eulogy.

To Seinfeld and his audiences that's funny. Executives, in particular, might have an even finer appreciation of his black humour given a career in management or climbing the executive ranks inevitably involves fronting the crowd. The need to speak informatively, entertainingly and confidently has given rise to a stream of courses on how to become an effective public speaker – many run by actors.

"Even 30 years ago, business executives would have found the idea of actors teaching them anything hilarious," suggests Peter Fisher, a co-facilitator of the Leading from Within program at the Australian Graduate School of Management (AGSM). Fisher worked as an actor for 18 years, and now teaches personal leadership, development impact, influence and communication to executives across the private and public sectors.

Author Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence in the 1990s triggered a realisation of the importance of "soft skills" in business, Fisher reflects. "Goleman wrote that what differentiated the highest performing executives was their ability to influence people, and therefore build trust and relationships – whether that be with customers, direct reports or peers." Fisher defines influence as the ability to create a shift in the way that people think, feel and behave. "When it comes to public speaking, executives need to get a better understanding of this. It's not just words that motivate people, it's feelings too."

Fisher believes the ability of executives to "think on their feet" is a key factor in public-speaking success. "I use 'corporate storytelling' and the use of stories and metaphors to get strategic messages across," he says. "There's something very profound when executives start telling 'why I do what I do' stories. We get a stronger sense of their values and beliefs, and the more you communicate purpose, the more you build trust and, therefore, relationships. If speakers begin with a personal story, they forget their nerves and engage us very quickly."

Speeding Up Communications

There's nothing new in the need for great managers to be great communicators, says Shawn Ket, national client strategy manager and Queensland general manager of consulting for workforce advisory and management consultants Chandler Macleod. "But in the communications and information age, everyone is expecting high-quality communications instantaneously," Ket points out. For executives, public speaking is now simply a requirement of the job – anyone from a general manager upwards is frequently asked to speak at events, both internal and external to their organisation. "The nature of work is changing rapidly, and these changes need to be communicated successfully."

Ket sees a lack of public speaking skills as a barrier to a lot of emerging leaders, with shyness or a "reluctance to get up on their feet" holding people back. "I also see the flipside, with people who are very confident, but like the sound of their own voices, but don't actually have much to

say. Most people would rather hear from someone who has something compelling to say, even if their delivery isn't so good."

A successful public speaker has to develop their own style, and be "comfortable in their own skin", insists Ket. Anecdotes and humour are important, as is research and knowing your audience. "It's about having respect for the people you're talking to."

However, it's not necessary to be a "rock star" entrepreneur, like Richard Branson or the late Steve Jobs, in order to motivate a workforce. Different styles can be effective as well, according to Ket. He cites the example of Westpac CEO Gail Kelly, whose persona is much more humble, and yet, he believes, every bit as inspirational. "Charismatic leaders are valuable, of course, but can bring their own problems. We are seeing this with the death of Steve Jobs, and the uncertainties of the future of Apple."

The National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) has been teaching public speaking and presenting skills to executives for 15 years. Thousands of people pass through these courses annually, not just from the corporate world, but also from government, universities and small businesses.

"Many core acting skills, such as vocal technique, physical presence and the ability to affect and change your audience, can be adapted to a business context," says Sean Hall, corporate course manager at NIDA. "Some people have a natural ability to do this – a lot of it is about confidence, and understanding what the audience wants." But even with natural ability, it needs to be refined to include important communication techniques, including eye contact and physical presence.

Waiting to Exhale

One secret that the acting world is sharing with the world of business is intercostal diaphragmatic breathing – "a breath that's making contact with a deeper part of their body", says Hall. "If you have a shallow breath, you're getting less oxygen to the brain. A deeper breath calms you down, slows the heartbeat, and helps you remember what you're saying. Importantly, it centers you and brings you into the moment, so you don't worry about what happened before, or what happens next."

Hall's star performers in the world of public speaking include NSW premier Barry O'Farrell – "cool, funny, personable, succinct, and relaxed, even live in a media throng" – and Senator Penny Wong. "I've seen her drilled on shows like (ABC TV's) Lateline, and she doesn't budge. But the guy who takes the cake is Barack Obama – he's almost flawless. He has such great gravitas, everything seems important, and there's a genuine charm there. Clearly, he believes in what he's saying."

Jo O'Reilly draws on her background as an opera singer and in comedy and improvisation to teach executives in the General Manager's program at AGSM about the relationship between verbal messages and non-verbal communication in presentation. Her work falls into three areas – content, voice and physicality. "Great communicators have these three things working together and well-aligned," O'Reilly emphasizes.

"People's content is often well-prepared, but when I ask them, 'what is the essence of what you want to say, in 25 words or less?', they are often unable to answer. So we apply some real rigour to that part of the process – articulating what they want to say and what's in it for their audience."



affectus

On voice and physicality, O'Reilly asks clients to focus on how they want their audience to experience them. "That's what people will remember. If they can recall three key points from your speech, you're doing brilliantly, but they'll always remember the experience of what it was like to be in the room when you presented. Good performers recognise that a good presentation is not about you, it's about the 'other'. The moment you start to engage with your inner critic, you're focusing on yourself instead of your audience."

"Oratory is not a perfect art," notes O'Reilly. "The best speakers and performers give themselves permission to fail, regroup and reconnect, and they enjoy riding that wave."

Fast, But Formal

In workplaces, communication has become "informalised", observes Peter Ryan, regional learning and development manager for the John Holland Group, Australia's largest contracting organisation in heavy industry. "The challenge for managers today is frequently to get the message across, and to be inspirational and informative at the same time – often in the corridor!

"When I entered into management, I found I needed to be able to consciously structure communication in a way that met my goals of team motivation and engagement. I also found that, as a manager, I had to be a 'filter', because I didn't want to damage team morale or team engagement. Harsh business realities and 'raw feedback' is seldom what people need to motivate them," Ryan says.

One important change that Ryan discovered on moving into a management role was that he was used to relating to his managers in a formal way, but to peers in an informal way. "When you become a manager, almost all communications are formal and business-related, and should have a business objective attached to them. The whole ball game changes."

Ryan has found that, even in a formal presentation, the goalposts have changed as no one now has the luxury of time. "Now is the age of immediacy. You need to grab the audience up front, and maintain their attention for the time that you've got them. Formal presentations rarely go longer than 30 minutes," he reports. "We get in, we deliver the message, we make a decision, and then we move on."

POWERPOINT

SHOULD I USE POWERPOINT

One of the first questions you need to ask yourself when you are asked to make a presentation is whether you need a PowerPoint presentation.

- What type of presentation? If it is more of a group discussion rather than you delivering information to an audience. A PowerPoint presentation may inhibit group discussion.
- What am I presenting in my slides that could not be conveyed with the spoken word? – Don't just put up exactly what you are saying, otherwise you may as well not be there.
- How is PowerPoint aiding my presentation? Use PowerPoint as a visual aid to what you are saying.

PROS AND CONS OF USING POWERPOINT

Strengths

- Providing information both verbally and visually, use of multiple channels will increase retention of messages
- Pictures can aid by making a visual connection to an abstract idea
- Good for graphs and instructional diagrams
- Can provide a framework for your presentation.
- Can make it easier on the presenter (however remember to think of your audience)

Weaknesses

- The physical environment required to present PowerPoint slides can work against the presenter. If the room is dim, people can't always make out your face, people may start feeling sleepy. If bright hard to see screen
- You are basically tethered to a podium or laptop. You can't walk around and express yourself as you might.
- The slides may distract from you, the speaker.

STRUCTURE OF PRESENTATION

OUTLINE/INTRODUCTION

An outline will give your audience a good idea of the structure of your presentation and an idea of when you are nearing the end of your presentation.

It's a good idea to use the same outline headings in your presentation as this will deliver milestones throughout the presentation.

BODY

The body of the presentation should be arranged in sections, up to three main ideas and each point should be a logical progression leading to the conclusion.

Any data incorporated

CONCLUSION

Use an effective and strong closing and slide - audience is likely to remember your last words

A good conclusion should sum up your presentation by making the main point as clear as possible.

It should give the audience stimulus to activity, either to further thought on the subject or to some definite action.

STRUCTURE OF SLIDES

Not too many words per slide. The less is more policy works well. What you are trying to do is put important words on the slide so that your message will stay with the audience and reinforce your spoken words.

The 6/6 rule is a good one to follow. No more than 6 dot points and no more than six words per dot point. You won't always be able to stick to this but it's a good base point.

- Use point form, not complete sentences
- Maximum of six points per slide
- Avoid wordiness: key words only – don't generally want people to be reading instead of listening
- Use different size to show hierarchy; e.g.
 - the title font 36-point
 - the main point font 28-point
- Use a standard font like Arial
 - Use at least an 18-point font and Bold
 - If you use a small font, your audience won't be able to read it
- Research into readability of fonts, especially for people with reading or vision difficulties; show that sans serif fonts such as Arial are preferable.
- Don't use a *complicated* font
- Use a font colour that contrasts sharply with the background
- Use colour to reinforce the logic of your structure
- Use a simple background
- Use backgrounds that contrast with text/imagery
- Use the same background consistently throughout your presentation
- Use graphs rather than just charts and words
 - Data in graphs is easier to comprehend and retain than raw data
 - Trends are easier to visualise in graph form
- Avoid sound effects in PowerPoint
- When you are moving from one slide to the next, think simplicity.

IMAGES

- Refrain from trite clip art - can look very dated
- Don't use images for decoration. The image should help to tell your story
- Ensure the images that you use are good quality (clear) images. Poor quality/grainy looks very amateur.
- Make sure you can legally use the image

PROOF YOUR SLIDES AND PRESENTATION

- spelling mistakes
 - the use of repeated words
 - grammatical errors you might have made
 - Have someone check your presentation
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PREPARING TO PRESENT

- Get there early to iron out any last minute issues
- Handouts – do you do them (allows a backup if technology fails, but audience may read them instead of listening to you)
- Does everything work? Computer work, same version of software, do you need a password, internet connection, how will you change slides?
- Are the systems compatible – does the presentation look okay
- Can your audience read the slides? (From the back of the room as well!!!) Check light levels as well
- Can your audience hear you (From the back of the room as well!!!) – do you need a mike
- Keep an eye on the time
- Don't read directly from the slides, avoid looking at the screen, avoid reading directly from your notes, try to make as much eye contact as possible
- Be prepared to give the presentation without PowerPoint – have a backup plan

SUMMARY

- Structure your presentation – ensure your presentation tells a story and is structured logically
- Keep it simple (background, font, colour) – simplicity is the best option. It makes the slide immediately accessible
- Minimal content on slides 6/6 principal – less is more. Content will be easily scanned and significant messages will be understood
- Avoid pointless animations – avoid animations that have no purpose – they distract
- Only use pictures if they assist – don't simply use them for decoration
- Ensure accuracy with content and equipment – make sure everything works and that there are no errors in your final slides

Based on

PowerPoint presentations. Shane Taylor. Publishing Consultant. Effective PowerPoint ... Saylor, Thomas, 2003, Creating an **effective PowerPoint presentation**. www.health.vic.gov.au/healthpromotion/downloads/pres_skills.ppt
