



The Art of Public Speaking

A View from Impact Factory

Robin Chandler and Jo Ellen Grzyb

Impact Factory Copyright ©2023

The art of public speaking

This document covers hints and tips on public speaking and presentation skill, dealing with public speaking nerves and anxiety, public speaking skills and public speaking techniques, public speaking training.

Fear of public speaking

- Why do we get public speaking anxiety?
- How to overcome fear of public speaking
- Building confidence in public speaking
- Public speaking training
- Hints and tips for effective public speaking

Common fears of public speaking

What happens when you have to speak in public?

Did you know that public speaking tops the list of phobias for most people? Not spiders or heights – public speaking - speech in public!

Well, if you didn't know that, we bet your body does. It will do all kinds of unpleasant things to you when you have to stand up and face a sea of faces with the hope of getting your message across in a compelling and interesting way.

Your hands may sweat and your mouth goes dry. Your knees may shake and a quaver affects your voice. Your heart may race and those well known butterflies invade your stomach.

When all that happens most people don't think of getting their message across in a compelling and interesting way; they just think of getting off the 'stage' as quickly as possible!

Have we frightened you sufficiently yet?

It's normal

We don't really mean to frighten you, just remind you that your body reacts 'in extremis' when put under pressure, and for most people, public speaking is just about the worst pressure they can be put under.

It's normal to be nervous and have a lot of anxiety when speaking in public. In a way, it's less normal not to have nerves or anxiety; in fact, to feel you have a phobia about public speaking.

Why do we get public speaking anxiety?

Fight or flight

Our bodies are geared to fight or flight from ancient time – fight that mastodon or get the hell out of the way. We don't have too many mastodons around these days, but the body still reacts as though we do. So, if we have to get up and speak in public, all that adrenalin and noradrenalin goes coursing through our bodies - way more than we need.

We can't run away (well, we could, but we'd be out of job pretty quick if we did it too often), so our only option is to fight. But in terms of speaking in public, it can be hard to define just what we're fighting.

Read on.

Why does public speaking do this to us?

Good question. You'd think that for most people, being given the opportunity to impress their audience would be a fantastic one. There you are in front of a group of people, the spotlight is on you and for the length of time you've been give, the world is yours.

Or is it?

The very fact that the spotlight is you is enough to trigger every fear, anxiety and phobia you've ever had about public speaking.

Here's why

You may be judged by all those people, and judged badly

You may feel like a fool

You might make mistakes and loose your way

You'll be completely humiliated

You'll never be as good as _____ (fill in the blank)

'They' won't like you

'They' won't 'get' what you're trying to say

How to overcome fear of public speaking

What good are Nerves

Public speaking may not be comfortable, but take our word for it, nerves are good. Being 'centre stage' is not a good place to feel too comfortable.

Nerves will keep you awake and ensure you don't get too complacent. Hard to feel complacent when your heart is beating so hard you're sure everyone watching you can hear it.

If channelled well, nerves can make the difference between giving a humdrum presentation and giving one that keeps people listening.

Get your attention off yourself

It's very tempting to keep focused on how you're feeling, especially if you're feeling really uncomfortable. You'll start to notice every bead of sweat.

To make your nerves work for you, you need to focus on just about anything other than yourself. You can distract yourself by paying attention to the environment in which you're speaking and seeing how you can make it work for you.

Once you're actually in front of your audience, pay attention to them. If you can, notice how people are dressed, who's wearing glasses, who has on bright colours. There will be dozens and dozens of things you can pay attention to help you trick your mind into not noticing what's going on with you.

Anything will do and you will find that the less you concentrate on how you are feeling and the more you concentrate on other things, the more confident you will feel.

How to build confidence in public speaking

Your audience can be your friend

Unless you know you're absolutely facing a hostile group of people, human nature is such that your audience wants you succeed. They're on your side!

Therefore, rather than assuming they don't like you, give them the benefit of the doubt that they do.

They aren't an anonymous sea of faces, but real people. So, to help you gain more confidence when speaking in public, think of ways to engage your audience. Remember, even if they aren't speaking, you can still have a two-way conversation.

When you make an important point pay attention to the people who are nodding in agreement and the ones who are frowning in disagreement. As long as you are creating a reaction in your audience you are in charge.

Keep them awake

The one thing you don't want is for them to fall asleep! But make no mistake public speaking arenas are designed to do just that: dim lights, cushy chairs, not having to open their mouths - a perfect invitation to catch up on those zzzzs.

Ways to keep them away include

Ask rhetorical questions

Maintain eye contact for a second or two with as many people as possible

Be provocative

Be challenging

Change the pace of your delivery

Change the volume of your voice

Public speaking training

Get a coach.

Whatever the presentation public speaking is tough, so get help.

Since there are about a zillion companies out there already to offer you public speaking training and courses, here are some things to look for when deciding the training that's right for you.

Focus on positives, not negatives.

Any training you do to become more effective at public speaking should always focus on the positive aspects of what you already do well.

Nothing can undermine confidence more than telling someone what they aren't doing well.

You already do lots of things well good public speaking training should develop those instead of telling you what you shouldn't do.

Turn your back on too many rules.

If you find a public speaking course that looks as though it's going to give you lots of dos and don'ts, walk away! Your brain is going to be so full of whatever it is you're going to be talking about that to try to cram it full of a whole bunch of rules will just be counterproductive.

As far as we're concerned, aside from physical violence or inappropriately taking off your clothes, there are no hard and fast rules about public speaking.

You are an individual not a clone.

Most importantly, good public speaking training should treat you as a unique individual, with your own quirks and idiosyncrasies. You aren't like anybody else and your training course should help you bring out your individuality, not try to turn you into someone you're not.

Hints and tips for effective public speaking

Here are just a few hints, public speaking tips and techniques to help you develop your skills and become far more effective as a public speaker.

Mistakes

Mistakes are all right.

Recovering from mistakes make you appear more human.
Good recovery puts your audience at ease – they identify with you more.

Humour

Tell jokes if you're good at telling jokes.
If you aren't good, best to leave the jokes behind.

There's nothing worse than a punch line that has no punch.
Gentle humour is good in place of jokes.
Self-deprecation is good, but try not to lay it on too thick.

Tell stories

Stories make you a real person not just a deliverer of information.
Use personal experiences to bring your material to life.
No matter how dry your material is, you can always find a way to humanise it.

How to use the public speaking environment

Try not to get stuck in one place.
Use all the space that's available to you.
Move around.
One way to do this is to leave your notes in one place and move to another.
If your space is confined (say a meeting room or even presenting at a table) use stronger body language to convey your message.

Technology

Speak to your audience not your slides.
Your slides are there to support you not the other way around.
Ideally, slides should be graphics and not words (people read faster than they hear and will be impatient for you to get to the next point).
If all the technology on offer fails, it's still you they've come to hear.

You can learn to enjoy public speaking and become far more effective at standing in front of a group of people and delivering a potent message.

When it comes to improving your public speaking skills we have three words:

Practise, practise, practise!

If you are interested in talking to us further about our work on The Art of Public Speaking, please phone: 020 7226 1877 or e-mail: enquiries@impactfactory.com