

Delivering an Effective Speech¹

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The primary difference between a poor speech and a good one is in its delivery. The real challenge of public speaking is the actual presentation of the speech. Proper delivery techniques should be used to successfully communicate the substance of the speech to the audience. Nonverbal communication accounts for approximately 93% of the communication process (Beebe & Beebe, 2006). Essentially this means that how the presentation is delivered is more important than what is said. To present a speech effectively, the following skills should be developed: overcoming nerves, developing stage presence, refining vocal qualities, maximizing power of expression, making eye contact, and using presentation aids.

Overcoming Nerves

Overcoming nerves is an important step to help a speaker effectively deliver his or her speech. Being a little nervous is good. It encourages the speaker to practice and focus on the speech. On the other hand, being too nervous will negatively impact the delivery. Having confidence in oneself will help overcome the nervous feeling.

Several factors influence a speaker's level of confidence. Speakers should set themselves up for

success by planning the speech well in advance, practicing multiple times (try to create an environment as close to the actual environment as possible), allowing plenty of time to set up the speech, and getting plenty of rest the night before the presentation. In addition, stress management techniques such as muscle relaxation and proper breathing work well. For first-time speakers, it is often helpful to hold a paper or a note card with key or transitional points on it in one hand. However, the best way to overcome fear of public speaking is to gain as much practice and experience as possible.

Stage Presence

Stage presence refers to the ability of the speaker to acquire and keep the audience's attention through his or her presentation style. When in front of an audience, the speaker's poise, posture, gestures, and movements can significantly add to or take away from the presentation. The goal is to control these aspects of delivery so they reinforce the message rather than distract the audience.

Poise and Posture

The poise and posture of the speaker are one of the first indicators of the speaker's confidence and

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comfort in front of the audience. Even before a speaker begins to speak, the audience forms an impression of the speaker standing in front of them. If the speaker adequately maintains a calm approach and presents a comfortable appearance, the audience will also be comfortable. Speakers' facial expressions can also help them remain comfortable and relax the audience. A sincere smile to the audience will put both the speaker and the audience at comfort.

A speaker's posture also sends a message to the audience about his or her level of confidence. Stand tall and straight, and avoid slouching. Feet should be planted about shoulder-width apart and weight distributed evenly on both feet. Proper posture will not only illustrate confidence to the audience, but also discourage undesirable nervous movements such as pacing and fidgeting.

Gestures and Movement

Gestures and movements, like many other nonverbal communications, can either tremendously reinforce and clarify the speech, or distract the audience from the message. When people get nervous, they tend to use a variety of movements to release their nervous energy. These nervous mannerisms include, but are not limited to: playing with an object, pacing, shifting weight, swaying, leaning, crossing legs, or moving arms unnaturally. However, these tendencies can be eliminated with a little effort.

In order to eliminate nervous habits, the speaker must first identify any tendencies that may be exhibited. The best way to do this is by videotaping a practice delivery and analyzing the tape. It often helps to have someone else assist with the tape analysis since speakers tend to focus more on how they sound than on their mannerisms. After any tendencies have been highlighted, the speaker should study the video footage to affirm those nervous habits and to see how they distract from the presentation. Speakers often do not recognize many of these habits when they present, even if others mention them. Once any nervous habits have been identified, make a plan for eliminating them. For example, if playing with a ring or a watch, simply remove object before speaking.

Another way to eliminate nervous movements is to plan to expel some of the nervous energy in ways that reinforce the speech and add to the effectiveness of its delivery. For example, moving across the stage provides an opportunity to eliminate energy and to capitalize on that energy. However, when moving, move with a purpose.

Movement can also be used to emphasize an important phrase. When the speaker gets to that phrase or idea, moving closer to the audience or using a gesture is an effective way to draw attention to the importance of the idea. Likewise, movement can help make a transition. For example, the speaker may move from center stage to stage right as a transition between the introduction to the first main point, then move again when transitioning to the next point, and so on. This physical movement provides a nonverbal cue to the audience to help them follow the transition. It also provides an easy way for the speaker to remember when to move.

Another benefit of movement is that it helps to engage the audience. They pay more attention, especially if the speaker is moving towards them. As speakers learn to read the audience's feedback, they can use movement to respond. For example, if the speaker notices someone daydreaming or a few people whispering, the speaker can move towards those people to recapture their attention and eliminate the distraction. However, one of the most important factors of movement is that it looks natural. Movement that looks rehearsed takes away from the speech; unnatural movements do not help the speaker feel more at ease. Also, care should be taken to not go overboard. Pacing and overuse of gestures and movements distracts from the presentation.

Vocal Qualities

A speaker's voice itself can communicate much to the audience. The proper use of volume, enunciation, and tone can ensure that the audience can hear, understand, and internalize what the speaker is saying. In addition, these aspects of delivery can contribute to the enjoyment of the audience. The speaker should ensure that vocal variety is used when giving a speech. The volume and tone should be fluctuated to reinforce what is said or to emphasize important information.

Volume

The first voice quality concern should be to ensure that the speaker is loud enough for the whole audience to hear clearly. However, the speaker should not appear to be shouting at the audience in order to accomplish this. If speaking too loud, the audience becomes uncomfortable and loses their attention to the ideas the speaker is trying to express. Instead, the speaker should focus on projecting his or her voice so the people in the back can hear, but audience members in the front will not feel like they are being yelled at. However, if the room is too large for the speaker's voice to project so that everyone can hear, there is little the speaker can do to compensate. Sometimes a microphone and sound system are needed to ensure proper volume. In this case, the speaker should make sure that the system has been checked to ensure that the system works properly and is not a distraction. The speaker should still be able to change the volume of his/her voice for emphasis when using a microphone. For example, the volume may be raised to express enthusiasm or importance, or lowered to convey seriousness or sadness.

Enunciation

Proper enunciation is important. The speaker should articulate words clearly so the audience can clearly understand what is being said. If unsure of the correct pronunciation, the speaker should look at the pronunciation key in the dictionary. Mispronouncing words lowers one's perceived credibility as a speaker. The speaker should also enunciate in such a way as to say the whole word. Sometimes people tend to drop the "g" off of words ending in "-ing." (i.e., "drinkin'," instead of drinking). Dialects can distract listeners from the content of the speech and affect their perception of credibility. It is important for speakers to know the audience, and to be aware of their own dialects. Speakers can train themselves to speak in a different dialect.

Tone

The voice tone of the speaker makes the presentation enjoyable for the audience to listen. When speaking in a monotone voice, listeners often become bored and stop paying attention. Using inflection in tone makes the speech more interesting.

It is also helpful in sharing emotions to reinforce ideas. When using a conversational tone with the audience, speakers tend to engage them and put them at ease. This technique also makes the speaker more approachable and will encourage questions or discussion on the topic at the conclusion of the presentation.

Power of Expression

When delivering a presentation, it is the speaker's job to convey the message clearly and powerfully. Many speaking aspects contribute to the ability to express ideas. Stage presence and voice qualities will contribute to the expression of the message, but the speaker also needs to consider the flow, filler words, enthusiasm, and facial expressions.

Flow

Speakers want their speeches to flow smoothly. If a speaker loses his/her train of thought or jumps from one idea to another and back again, the audience will struggle to follow the speech and the message will be lost in the confusion. A well prepared speech will help avoid this problem.

Pace can also affect flow. If the speaker is speaking too slowly, the audience will lose interest. On the other hand, if the speaker goes too fast, the audience will not be able to follow the thought process. The speaker should choose an appropriate pace for the speech. The pace may change slightly throughout the speech to make a point (i.e., slowing down to emphasize a phrase that the audience should remember), but caution should be exercised to avoid changing the tempo too much.

Filler Words

Filler words and/or phrases can become distracting and disrupt the flow of a presentation. Common filler words and phrases include: um, ah, like, and, so, you know, or any phrase that is overused to fill space. These words are often used unintentionally or as a nervous habit. When trying to eliminate these words from a speech, the speaker should follow the same basics as for eliminating nervous habits. Generally, filler words are used when

finishing a sentence, trying to think what to say next, or when getting an extra jolt from the nerves. The following guidelines will help eliminate the use of filler words:

1. At the end of a sentence, immediately start another. Normally speakers wait 2-3 seconds to begin another sentence. Until the filler word problem is solved, the speaker should violate this pattern and go from sentence to sentence with as little of a pause as practical. Do not string sentences together with words like "um" or "and."
2. It is permissible to pause for a few seconds as you gather your thoughts. Speakers should not feel as though they have to actually speak all of the time. Pauses, although they may seem like an eternity to the speaker, are seldom noticed as being out of the ordinary by the audience.
3. Be aware of filler word use. Some speakers audio tape their presentations or ask others to listen to the speech – especially if there is a delivery problem such as using filler words.
4. Eliminate fillers from your everyday conversation. Notice the use of filler words in everyday use. Speakers who learn to converse without them have little problem with their use in a speech.
5. Practice! The more familiar the speaker is with the speech, the less he/she will need to rely on filler words.

Enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is one of the most important vocal qualities a speaker can possess. The enthusiastic presenter easily gets the audience's attention. Expressing enthusiasm throughout the speech will help maintain the audience's attention. In addition it will show the speaker's feelings towards the subject. However, sometimes the topic is somber or serious and a show of enthusiasm might be inappropriate. If this is the case, the speaker should attempt to express a conviction or passion for the subject throughout the delivery, but tone down the level of enthusiasm.

Facial Expressions

Facial expressions can help set the mood of the speech. Smiling relaxes both the speaker and the audience. Facial expressions should also reinforce the speech. If inappropriate facial expressions are used, they may cause confusion and distraction for the audience. In addition, when the speaker indicates a mistake in the planned speech by a facial expression, the audience will notice the mistake, and the speaker's credibility may be compromised. However, if the speaker maintains a calm facial expression, the audience may not even realize a mistake was made. Using appropriate facial expressions will assist the speaker in conveying his/her message to the audience.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is an important aspect of speaking. However, it is also one of the aspects that beginning speakers struggle with the most. The first goal of delivering a speech should be to avoid reading the speech. Secondly, the speaker should look at the audience, not at the floor, walls, ceiling, and so forth. Often when visuals are used, speakers tend to turn their backs to the audience and become more involved in the technology than with the people to whom they are trying to convey a message. Visuals are merely a tool that helps the speaker present...the audience is the focal point of the speech.

The final goal of delivering a speech should be to maintain meaningful eye contact with audience members throughout the whole speech. To accomplish this goal, start by finding one person in the room and maintaining eye contact with that individual for three to five seconds. Then find another person in another part of the room and do the same thing. It may be easier to start with people the speaker knows and then move to members who are not known. If the audience is small to medium sized, try to make meaningful eye contact with every member of the audience. If the audience is large, it will be difficult to make eye contact with everyone, but the speaker should strive to reach as many people in as many areas of the room as possible. Speakers should avoid scanning (looking back and forth across the audience without really seeing anyone) the audience.

Poor eye contact can disrupt audience attention and show the nervousness of the speaker.

Presentation Aids

Presentation aids should be utilized to reinforce the message of the speech. These aids can be any tangible audio or visual aid that helps to communicate the message to the audience. Table 1 lists a variety of possible presentation aids; their benefits are summarized in Table 2. The speaker should spend time identifying and creating quality presentation aids which add to the presentation and are visually appealing. When using presentation aids, follow these guidelines to ensure that you do not distract the audience:

1. Keep the visual hidden until the appropriate time.
2. Do not turn your back to the audience when using the presentation aid.
3. Ensure that all audience members can clearly hear or see the presentation aid.
4. Use the aid as an aid and not as a substitute to your presentation.

Table 1. Commonly used presentation aids. (Beebe & Beebe, 2006; Fraleigh & Tuman, 2009)

Visual Aids	Audio Aids	Interactive Aids
Props or objects	Sound effects	People
Movie/DVD/Video	Audio Clips	Computer Software
Maps	Music	Demonstrations
Illustrations/ Graphics/ Diagrams/ Charts/Graphs	People	Web Site
Photographs	Comedy	Visual aids
Overhead transparencies		Audio Aids
Computer slideshow		
Outline		
Chalkboards or whiteboards		
Models		

Table 2. Benefits of Presentation Aids. (Beebe & Beebe, 2006; Fraleigh & Tuman, 2009)

For the Speaker	For the Audience
Provides cues to speaker	Illustrates a sequence of events or procedures
Helps gain and maintain attention	Helps listeners organize ideas
Enhances memory	Enhances understanding and memory
Reinforces subject matter	Simplifies complex topics
Adds interest	Adds interest

Conclusion

Delivering an effective speech is the last challenge to conquer in effective presenting. The speaker needs to first overcome nerves. Secondly, the speaker should apply and practice effective delivery techniques in the areas of stage presence, voice qualities, power of expression, and eye contact. Finally the speaker should prepare presentation aids to assist in delivering a memorable message. The more practice and experience gained in delivering speeches, the more natural these techniques will become.

References

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