

08-11-23 | HOW TO BE A SUCCESS AT EVERYTHING

10 smart tips to help beat your fear of public speaking

Most people have some degree of glossophobia, or fear of talking to a large group of people. This lawyer and public speaking pro offers her advice for tamping down the panic with confidence.



[Photo: [Matthew Jungling/Unsplash](#)]



BY DEBBIE EPSTEIN HENRY 5 MINUTE READ

When my middle son Spencer was 10 years old and the holidays were approaching, he thought it'd be helpful to make some gift suggestions to my husband, Gordon, and me. Spence prepared a pitch deck showcasing various ideas of what he and his two brothers might want. The boys had been unsuccessfully lobbying for several years to get an Xbox. So, the signature slide included a catalog picture of boys lounging on a couch, playing Xbox, and in the corner was a picture of Gordon and I toasting each other with glasses of wine. When we got to this slide, Spence narrated: "If you get us the Xbox, you and dad will get some peace and quiet and time alone." I looked at Gordon and simply said, "Done!"

While we'd dismissed Spence and his brothers' prior pleas to get video games to improve their hand-eye coordination and ensure our house would continue to be the magnet for their friends to convene, when Spence instead framed the request to meet our needs rather than theirs, we relented.

I often think of this story when I consider what is most important in learning how to speak in public with confidence. Fear of public speaking is the number one fear that people have and it impacts more than 75% of the population. In fact, studies show that people would rather die than speak in public. Whether it's in a professional, volunteer, or social setting, if you're afraid to speak in public, it's interfering with your ability to command a room, participate in or run a meeting, win someone's trust, or simply make a meaningful contribution. A lack of confidence in public speaking is also impeding your ability to communicate effectively—whether to an audience of one or thousands, or any number in between.

Here are my 10 tips for how to speak in public, with confidence.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

This is the essence of the Spence story. When Spence was able to understand what was most important to his audience and redirect his and his brothers' needs to Gordon's and my needs, he was successful. Knowing your audience requires you to observe, research, and ask questions so that you can learn what your audience cares about and what problem you can solve for them. The more you adapt and tailor your message to your audience, the more effective you'll be in reaching them.

TELL STORIES

Stories stick and they're a way to engage your audience. If you know your audience and carefully select a story to share, it will enable your audience to apply the lessons in their own lives. Stories are also a streamlined way to get into the topic at hand and establish an immediate connection with your audience.

GET PERSONAL

People are often reticent to share personal stories, yet doing so makes you and your message memorable, relatable, and accessible. Also, as a speaker, by sharing a piece of yourself, you have modeled a communication style that will, in turn, invite your audience to do the same.

BE THEMATIC

Know what success looks like at the end of your communication and stick to no more than three main points, or use numbers/lists to organize your messaging. Avoid platitudes, corporate speak, and generalities, and skip formulaic transitions. Instead, provide examples and stay with your key topics and repeat and reinforce. Ideally, set your remarks aside and revisit them after a reasonable break. Cut content you don't need and see if it makes sense to reorder your remarks.

PRACTICE

Know your material cold so ideally, when you speak, you are solely focused on your delivery and persuasiveness. Practice out loud and preferably in the venue where you'll be speaking. Record yourself and play it back, watching for substance, style, pacing, and eye contact. Start in safer venues with a more forgiving audience, if possible. Eliminate any stresses that can be controlled in advance like arriving early and testing the technology.

COMBINE SPONTANEITY WITH PREPAREDNESS

While you need to be prepared, you don't want to be scripted. I recommend my "back pocket" approach where I anticipate various jokes, stories, and topics that may come up and I have them in mind to raise or address. Be ready to switch direction if the circumstances warrant it while still honoring the original intent and topic. Use humor and don't take yourself too seriously. Expect that mistakes and changes in plans may happen and understand that part of your effectiveness will be your flexibility and agility.

KNOW THAT FORMAT IS NOT FLUFF

Being able to adhere to time and format constraints can often drive the success of your message. It may be helpful to state your plan at the outset and your preferences so your audience can set their expectations and hopefully meet yours. Keeping a timed agenda—whether shared or not—can be helpful to move the discussion along and know when it's stale. Ensure that your format is conducive to the topic, venue, and audience size. Be brief: A good speaker leaves the audience wanting more.

UNDERSTAND THAT APPEARANCE MATTERS

While in-person or video appearance is not what many of us want to be judged for in our communications, it's part of our message. Know the dress code and range of variations as well as the host and culture where you'll be speaking. You can be authentic and make a statement in your appearance but you don't want to distract from your message. When in doubt, skip it. On video, your choice to keep your video on is part of your appearance as is your background, posture, distance from the screen, and eye contact into the camera.

INVITE FEEDBACK

This is a way for your audience to embed your recommendations into their lives. Ideally, you want to incorporate questions and feedback contemporaneous with the topics raised. Answer questions directly and anticipate detractors. Recognize any criticism, address concerns, and clarify any confusion. You'll also want to respond to or introduce content that is an unrepresented view that still needs to be considered.

END WITH A PARTING MESSAGE

If prior commentary was negative or meandering, a concluding message is your opportunity to resume control of the discussion, and clarify, underscore, or add any final points to your message. You may want to link back to your theme or an original message or story so your remarks feel cohesive, making your audience feel like they're finishing a good book. You also may want to consider a parting story or exercise to reinforce any learning.

While all 10 of these tips may not resonate or apply to you, I hope you try what does and tailor them to suit you. These tips are applicable to speaking in public generally but there are further refinements to learn based on the specific speaking scenarios you may have. These include: presenting to business leaders; running a meeting; moderating a panel discussion; participating as a panelist; conducting a fireside chat; serving as a master of ceremonies; introducing someone; communicating one-on-one; making a toast; or facilitating a gathering.

As you hone your public speaking and build your confidence, I hope you'll consider one more suggestion—that both your audience and your message should evolve over time.

My son Spence and his brothers are now in their 20s and no longer playing video games. Yet they're still wanting various things from Gordon and me and, when they do, you can be sure that they've reframed their message to ensure a resounding yes.

Debbie Epstein Henry is a lawyer turned entrepreneur, author, and public speaker with expertise in careers, workplace dynamics, women, and law.