

4.2.4: Myths and Realities of Public Speaking

Learning Objectives

1. Describe common myths and realities of public speaking.

Now that you have identified your purpose, chosen your topic and thesis statement, gathered and organized your material, you are almost ready to put your speech into its final form. At this juncture, let's examine some common public speaking myths and outline the guidelines you'll need to consider as you prepare to face your audience. There are a lot of myths associated with public speaking. In many ways these guidelines dispel common perceptions of public speaking and may lead you to be more open with yourself and your audience as you prepare and present your speech.

Speaking in Public is Not Like Killing Lions

From an evolutionary biology perspective, our bodies have developed to respond to stress in advantageous ways. When we needed to run from a bear, hunt a lion, or avoid a snake, our bodies predictably got us prepared with a surge of adrenaline (Burnham, T., and Phelan, J., 2000). Hunters who didn't respond well to stress or failed at hunting were less likely to live long enough to reach maturity and reproduce. So we have the successful hunter to thank for our genes, but people in developed countries today do not need hunting skills to feed their families.

While food is still an issue in many parts of the world, our need to respond to threats and stress has shifted from our evolutionary roots to concern over our job, our relationships, and how we negotiate a modern economy. Communication is a great resource and tool, and we can apply the principles and lessons to ourselves. We can create the perception that the speech is like defeating the lion and really get ourselves worked up. Or we can choose to see it as a natural extension of communication with others.

Speaking in public itself is not inherently stressful, but our response to the stimulus can contribute to or reduce our level of stress. We all will have a stress response to a new, unknown, or unfamiliar stimulus. Nevertheless, the butterflies in our stomach are a response we can choose to control by becoming more familiar with the expectations, preparation, and performance associated with speaking in public.

You Don't Have to Be Perfect

Letting go of perfection can be the hardest guideline to apply to ourselves. It's also in our nature to compare ourselves to others and ourselves. You might forgive a classmate for the occasional "umm" during a speech, but then turn right around and spend a lot of mental effort chastising yourself for making the same error in your presentation. We all have distinct strengths and weaknesses. Knowing yourself and where you need to improve is an important first step. Recognizing that Rome wasn't built in a day, and that you won't become a world-class speaker overnight, may be easier said than done.

It may help to recognize that your listeners don't want to see you fail; on the contrary, they want you to do well, because when you do, they will be able to relax and enjoy your presentation. You might be surprised to know that not everyone counts each time you say "umm." However, if "umm," "ahhh," or "you know what I mean" are phrases that you tend to repeat, they will distract your audience from your message. Eliminating such distracting habits can become a goal for improvement. Improvement is a process, not an end in itself; in fact, many people believe that learning to speak in public is more about the journey than the destination. Each new setting, context, and audience will present new challenges, and your ability to adapt, learned through your journey of experience, will help you successfully meet each new challenge.

Organization Is Key to Success

Have you ever thought of a great comeback to something someone said a while after they said it? Wouldn't it have been nice to be quick and articulate and able to deliver your comeback right then and there? Speaking in public gives you a distinct advantage over "off the cuff" improvisation and stumbling for the right comeback. You get to prepare and be organized. You know you'll be speaking to an audience in order to persuade them to do, think, or consider an idea or action.

What issues might they think of while you are speaking? What comebacks or arguments might they say if it were a debate? You get to anticipate what the audience will want to know, say, or hear. You get to prepare your statements and visual aids to support your speech and create the timing, organization, and presentation of each point. Many times in life we are asked to take a position and

feel unprepared to respond. Speaking in public gives you the distinct opportunity to prepare and organize your ideas or points in order to make an impact and respond effectively.

Speaking in Public Is Like Participating in a Conversation

This may sound odd at first, but consider the idea of an “enlarged conversation” described by Julia T. Wood. She expresses a clear connection between everyday speech and public dialogue. Sometimes we take a speech turn, while at other times we remain silent while others take their turn. We do this all day long and think nothing of it. We are often the focus of attention from friends and colleagues and it hardly ever makes us nervous. When we get on a stage, however, some people perceive that the whole game has changed. It hasn’t. We still take turns, and the speaker will take a longer turn as part of an enlarged conversation. People in the audience will still communicate feedback and the speaker will still negotiate his or her turn just the way they would in an everyday conversation. The difference is all about how we, as the speaker, perceive the context.

Some people feel that the level of expectations, the need for perfection, or the idealistic qualities we perceive in eloquent speakers are required, and then focus on deficiencies, fears, and the possibility of failing to measure up. By letting go of this ideal, we can approach the challenge with a more pragmatic frame of mind. The rules we play comfortably by in conversation every day are the same as we shift to a larger conversation within the context of public speaking. This viewpoint can offer an alternative as you address your apprehensions, and help you let go of unrealistic expectations.

Key Takeaway

Public speaking does not have to be a “fright or flight” experience; it can be like holding a half of a friendly conversation. This will especially be true if you do a good job of preparing and organizing your presentation ahead of time.

Exercises

1. Have you ever done a creative visualization exercise? Try this one and see how it helps you prepare your speech. Choose a quiet place, sit in a comfortable position, and close your eyes. Picture yourself getting up to give your oral presentation. Picture what you want to happen—you will speak confidently, clearly, and engagingly. Your audience will listen attentively and consider the merit of your points. When you are finished, they will applaud and express appreciation for the good job you have done.
2. Write out a series of goal statements, one for each part or point of your presentation. What do you want to accomplish with each section, visual aid, or statement? Share your results with classmates.
3. Consider the elements of a speech to inform and adapt them for a speech to persuade. In what ways would you adjust key points or issues?

References

- Burnham, T., & Phelan, J. (2000). *Mean genes: From sex to money to food: Taming our primal instincts*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus.
- Woods, J. (2001). *Communication mosaics: An introduction to the field of communication* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

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