



CAN YOU HEAR ME AT THE BACK?

PUBLIC SPEAKING IS A DYNAMIC AND VALUABLE SKILL. **JEFF GROUT** EXPLAINS THE NINE PRINCIPLES THAT WILL TAKE YOU FROM NOVICE TO AFICIONADO

In 2005, when Lord Coe made his final attempt to win over the International Olympic Committee (IOC) on behalf of London's bid to host the 2012 Olympics, he delivered a speech widely recognised as instrumental in reversing the city's fortunes. Paris was the city widely tipped to win the 2012 games. London was regarded as an outlier at best.

Coe's speech to the IOC was persuasive and highly effective. Opening with an account of how deeply the Olympics had inspired him as an impressionable 12-year-old, he briefly, but emotively, pounded out a consistent message about the role of the games in making sport relevant to the young. "My heroes were Olympians," he said. "My children's heroes change by the month." It's a sentiment that still resonates today.

The speeches and presentations that we make as finance professionals and business people won't make international headlines.

But would-be speakers and presenters can still learn from Coe's speech: his use of narrative, the way he personalised the bid by recounting a vivid story from his youth, and the emotional power of that story. His speech is also a model of brevity, barely four minutes long.

Fear factor

There can be little doubt that a certain amount of fear persists around public speaking. People worry about their professional credibility, the risk of looking exposed or foolish, or not being able to address questions from the audience. Perhaps the biggest fear I encounter is around the perceived need to be word-perfect in both content and delivery.

These are real concerns, but worth grappling with. Being good on your feet can only enhance your career. If you can address a room of 200 people effectively, how much more effective are you going to be in a meeting of three or four people?

So, what are the key building blocks to becoming a good speaker?

Be brief

The first point people should take on board is that speech is fundamentally different to the written word. The spoken word is democratic and immediate. We emphasise important words as we speak and we speak in much shorter sentences. When we write, we can easily form a sentence that goes on for two or three lines. When we put together a speech or presentation, we need to break that habit, not least because sentences of 20 or 30 words are very difficult to speak out loud. In my public speaking workshops, I encourage people to break sentences down so they are five to 10 words in length.

The rule of three

In communications, the 'rule of three' is a powerful force – something it's as well to bear in mind when constructing a

speech or presentation. You might have a three-part list; you might use alliteration three times; or have three main points within your presentation. But speakers from Bill Gates to Richard Branson use this tried-and-tested rule in public speaking.

Aristotle said it first

Over two millennia ago, Aristotle set out his three pillars of persuasion in a treatise *On Rhetoric*. He identified three different moods in verbal communication:

- **Logos:** facts and knowledge – an important element in writing and speaking, but only one of the ingredients of a good speech.
- **Ethos:** your character and credibility as a speaker; it's been shown that if a speaker has a degree of gravitas, the audience will respond by taking them seriously.
- **Pathos:** an appeal to the audience through emotion. An element often lacking in business presentations,

pathos is communicated by telling stories.

That often-overlooked element of pathos is very important in public speaking. Your speech should be structured around a certain number of key macro messages, and every macro message needs to be supported by a micro message – a case study or story. The brain, neuroscience tells us, recognises the structure of a story – its beginning, middle and end, its time, place and actors – much more readily than a series of facts.

So, for each of your main points or macro points, you need to ask what is the best example or story. Supporting facts are important, but narratives, anecdotes and cautionary tales are the facets of a speech that will remain in the audience's memory. Constructing a narrative, humanising a message is how the broadcast media works. It's not the facts about climate change that grab us – it's the impact on human or animal life that a reporter and camera shows us that will resonate.

Rehearse

This is a much-overlooked activity within public speaking and yet it is a vital step on the way to delivering a speech or presentation convincingly. Once you have written your speech, you need to hear yourself deliver it out loud. My recommendation: speak it into your mobile phone and play it back. By doing this you will come across the passages that don't fully make sense or the phrases and sentences that are difficult to articulate. You will also get used to hearing yourself delivering the material.

Start strong

The first two minutes are critical. Your audience will make an assessment in those first two minutes and we need them to go well. Nerves are natural – necessary even. We can't do

much without them. Prepare a strong attention-grabbing opening. Start with real impact – no housekeeping, no summary of what you're going to say. Concentrate on delivering your strongest message or narrative first.

Manage your nerves

There are some classic signs. Men often play with coins/keys or walk the stage in a square formation; women sometimes flush from the neck up. Nerves are simply the adrenaline we need to perform. If that's you: remove coins and keys; stand behind a lectern; think about what you're going to wear.

Pause

Pausing is much underused and underestimated in public speaking – and yet it's a highly effective device. Pauses break up the pace of your delivery and give the audience time to reflect on your points. Hurrying through your material will alienate your audience. Pauses give them confidence in you as a speaker.

Emphasise key points

Think about the points you want to emphasise. In my workshops, I encourage participants to break up the sentences and think about the words they want to emphasise. Remember, we naturally tend to speak in short sentences and we stress certain words when we speak, so consciously build that into your speech and your delivery.

Breaking down a speech into these elements and ensuring you have devoted sufficient time to preparation – including rehearsals – will go a long way to helping you to develop credibility as a public speaker. 📌

Jeff Grout is a business speaker, author and public speaking coach



Public speaking myths

Here are some key myths around public speaking that cause people to avoid it or serve to increase their nerves:

Myth 1

The first myth about public speaking is that it is seen as innate talent. That presupposes that you can't teach public speaking, which you most definitely can. I turned down the role of prefect at school, as well as my brother's request to speak as best man at his wedding. And yet now I make a living as a speaker and teach this important skill to others.

Myth 2

The next assumption is that all speakers are extroverts and have to be to hold the audience's attention. That's not true either. Each speaker has their own personal style and many strong speakers are introverts. It's the authenticity of the message and the delivery that counts.

Myth 3

The single most significant misconception around public speaking is the assertion that facts speak for themselves and that a presentation packed with them will do its own communicating. Actually, facts are less important than you might think. An often quoted set of statistics on communication from UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian asserts that 55% of our message is conveyed through appearance and body language; 38% is conveyed via our tone of voice; and only 7% through words. And yet, if asked to speak, we tend only to worry about the words, at the expense of the other elements. Considering these other elements is key to our development as strong public speakers.

Are you a treasurer with a success story to tell? Why not share it at one of our events? It's good for your personal brand as well as the profile of your organisation. For more information about speaking at an ACT event, please email events@treasurers.org