

First, bring your ideas to life

NERVES ARE NORMAL WHEN WE ARE PUT IN THE SPOTLIGHT OF PUBLIC SPEAKING. FOCUSING ON YOUR IDEAS AND MESSAGES IS THE KEY TO OVERCOMING THEM. CAM BARBER EXPLAINS

The cause of public-speaking anxiety is uncertainty. In fact, the cause of all anxiety can be traced back to feelings of uncertainty.

This simple principle helps us master public speaking because it breaks us out of vague thoughts about 'feeling uncomfortable' and helps us focus on specific actions: "What am I uncertain about, and what can I do about it?"

It's perfectly natural to be nervous in the face of a public-speaking assignment. Knowing how to process our nervous symptoms is the key to thinking clearly under pressure of the spotlight.

So what should we focus on first to reduce uncertainty?

The curator of TED Talks, Chris Anderson, recently spoke about what he's learned from watching thousands of great TED Talks. He said there is no single formula, but there is a common cause – a desire to "transfer into your listeners' minds a gift, a strange and beautiful object, that we call an idea".

That's the basic focus I've been teaching would-be public speakers for more

than 15 years. The route to success in public speaking is message transfer. Distil your idea into a key message and embed it into the mind of your audience.

There are many ways to achieve this and it can be done using an unlimited number of unique styles. Regrettably, most public-speaking training has been complicated, with a focus on a narrow set of performance skills – acting, body language, gestures, eye-contact techniques, PowerPoint slides and so on.

This kind of public-speaking training advocates that you prioritise performance skills over bringing ideas to life, so natural style gets crushed. People bounce out of public-speaking courses with a robotic, mechanical delivery that hinders their ability to relax and connect with the audience. And when our mind is cluttered with rules, tips and techniques, we find it harder to think clearly and explain our ideas effectively.

So, let's dissolve the myths that arise...



Myth 1: Your body language is more important than your words

This is the biggest myth and it underpins the acting and performance approach to public speaking. But it's not true. The only time your body language is more important than your words is when it contradicts your words.

When you are clear on your message and comfortable in your own style, there's little chance you'll have contradictory body language. It will flow naturally as you speak. Sure, public-speaking anxiety can make it more difficult to focus than normal, but when you know how to redirect your attention, even this will dissolve.

Myth 2: You must eliminate nerves to be a great speaker

No, you don't. Many people have a niggling thought:

"If I was a good speaker, I wouldn't get nervous. But I do get nervous, so I'm not good enough."

The reality is, it's normal to feel speaking anxiety, no matter how experienced you are.

Entrepreneur Richard Branson admits he gets nervous in public-speaking situations and has done since he was a teenager. Watch him speak. He looks a little awkward, but so what? The nerves haven't held him back; he's one of the most sought-after speakers on the planet. People want to hear his ideas.

Myth 3: Bad first impressions can't be overcome

Of course they can! Have you heard that audiences form their lasting impression in the first 30 seconds? Or even that they do so the first

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eight seconds? This is very misleading. It implies that the lasting impression of your presentation won't be your wisdom, the clarity of your message or the relevance of your information, but that it all rests on your performance in the first few seconds.

What pressure! The fact is that public speaking is not as hard as all that, or as mysterious. No matter what happened in the first 30 seconds, engage your audience with subsequent impressions and they will be left with a positive overall impression.

Here are some key principles to master public speaking and dissolve speaking anxiety.

1. Craft a vivid message

Great leaders talk in messages. Steve Jobs, the late Apple CEO, was a great speaker and a master at messaging. For example, the message for the iPod was 'A thousand songs in your pocket'. It's simple and memorable.

When people listened to a Steve Jobs presentation, they all came away with the same key message. This is no accident. He always started with the message – and built his presentation from there.

So, here are three steps to crafting a vivid message:

- Clear your mind of the details and look into the mind of your audience.

- Write down what you want them to think or do as a result of your talk (for example, 'This project will succeed', or 'Use this procedure every time you do X').
- Write down why your audience would do or think what you have suggested (for example, '...because of X, Y and Z', or 'because it will improve productivity and reduce mistakes').

Now combine steps two and three, and you have a draft of your vivid message. For instance: 'This project will succeed because of X, Y and Z.'

'Use this procedure every time you do X, because it will improve productivity and reduce mistakes.'

Of course, you still have to explain the details of your idea; but the only way your listeners will remember the details a day later is through the doorway of your vivid message.

2. Structure your ideas

The best way to structure your ideas is to break them down into two, three or four chunks. The human mind can't remember more than five things without a memory device.

Structuring your ideas is the way to keep people engaged and progressively bring your idea to life.

The most-watched speech in history is Steve Jobs' 'Stanford Commencement speech'. It's divided into three stories and a wrap-up. You can look at the breakdown of his structure at www.vividmethod.com/speech-outline-for-steve-jobs-stanford-commencement-address

Structure your knowledge into a series of presentations. Create presentations that simplify your knowledge and deliver them in the workplace. For example, what are the three steps to getting something done or the four stages to achieving a goal? Packaging your knowledge helps other people recognise it, and use it. The better you are at doing this, the more value you offer the world and the more success you will have.

3. Redirect your attention when under pressure

The stress response is designed to help us – to prime our body to deal with an important event. However, the adrenaline that is released to give you energy to deal with your speaking event can create physical symptoms, such as shaking, blushing, sweating and so on.

But these symptoms aren't the problem. The way we react to them is the key to dissolving them. Redirect your attention to something that helps you focus, such as breathing comfortably.

And when you understand that message transfer is the key measure of your success when speaking in public, you see that people will accept you with your imperfections. Direct your attention to bringing your message to life and speak in a style that is comfortable – your natural style.

So, keep your eye on the public-speaking prize – focus on compelling messages and natural style – and you'll have twice the impact with half the effort. ♥

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