
Have to give a speech? Read this first (September 2, 2010)

Humor helps address people's #1 fear

Posted on September 2, 2010

Confessions of a Public Speaker, by Scott Berkun, 240 pp., O'Reilly Media, October 2009

Reviewed by Lisa Bruessler Rabinsky, vice-president and commercial relationship manager, CNLBank, \$1.6 billion-
assets, Orlando, Fla. If you'd like to review books for our online book column, please e-mail scocheo@sbpub.com

A sense of humor makes for a good speaker, and a sense of humor also makes for a good book about public speaking. Scott Berkun's Confessions of a Public Speaker makes an appealing read.

And it's on a frequently unappealing subject: Getting up in front of other people and talking. Public speaking was rated #1 on a list entitled "The Worst Human Fears," compiled by David Wallechinsky, and cited by Berkun early on.

Books on scary subjects are normally not my cup of tea. But I, like many other bankers, from time to time have had to speak in front of business groups and other gatherings, so I found it worthwhile to venture in.

There's value here whether you are a banker who has to speak, or a banker who has to arrange for, and assist, others who must speak, at bank, community, or industry events.

Chill out— even if you flop, you'll learn something

Berkun provides plenty of reasoning to help overcome the fear of speaking and funny examples of no matter how bad you are, whether you even know it or not, plenty of people have done much worse and survived and were often made better because of it. That's encouraging.

Learning from experience, even painful experience, is critical for instance.

Berkun, a professional speaker and essayist, shares stories of his own misfires. One concerns speaking at Microsoft's Tech Ed conference in a room for 2,000, but to only, as it turned out, to a handful of people.

Berkun recounts that it was as miserable an experience as one would think that was. However, he learned from it. The lesson was the importance of the venue and how to properly arrange a small crowd.

It is unlikely that many of us bankers will ever have to face speaking to a group in wet boxers, under threat of a rubber glove search or shooting, or being interrupted by a SWAT team. (If so, I'm sure the author would love to hear your story.) But those strange situations are examples you can read about that will help put you at ease when speaking to your co-workers, the bank's board, or potential clients. However bad it is, it could be worse.

I'm not making those up, by the way. These and other examples in that section of the book come not from Birkun's own experience, but disasters and challenges shared by others. (Makes some of our challenges seem a bit easier, no?)

The first chapter debunks the most popular of all public speaking myths, which is the speaker imagining the audience naked. Birkun says that's bad advice, though common, and he stresses in the book that the secret is simple: practice, practice, practice.

The book moves from the basics to explaining the hard-wiring in our brains and there being little biological difference between fear of failure and anticipation of success. Birkun helpfully points out that even the greatest speakers get nervous.

Where can be critical for the speech to work

Subsequent chapters are devoted to pointers for speakers. A helpful example of these pointers is Birkun's emphasis on the important of place.

If you are planning a speaking event, he advises, pay attention to the type of room, as there are "friendly" rooms and "unfriendly" rooms. Birkun stresses that "place" matters to the speaker because it matters for the audience.

As a case in point, the author challenges the reader to imagine a famous speech. (Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech; John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you…" and Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" are among such landmark speeches.)

Think place doesn't matter? Then imagine the same speech given in a venue such as a subway station. Or a rest-stop bathroom.

The same great speech quickly loses its allure.

Sometimes bankers aren't going to be the speaker themselves, but must arrange for a speaker and get them set up. The main challenge for organizers is to manage the three unavoidable criteria for picking speakers. They are:

- The speaker must be famous or credible for a relevant topic.

- The speaker must be good at speaking.

• The speaker must be available.

Two out of three is often the best someone can do, Birkun counsels. So if you can nail all three, you're doing well.

Importance—and elusiveness—of feedback

A helpful section is Chapter 8, which focuses on feedback and how difficult getting good feedback can be. Birkun shares a funny prospective situation to illustrate:

"Imagine you're at a lecture about the future of the human race by Professor Moxley. Dr. Moxley turns out to be awful. He's a total bore. He's full of himself, doesn't make eye contact, speaks with endless 'umms' and 'ahhs,' and reads exclusively off his very boring slides.

"He's wearing a leopard-print bathrobe that hasn't been washed in weeks and he even goes so far as to talk about his pet poodle Poochie's medical issues for five long minutes.

"It's perhaps the worst lecture you have attended in your life.

"The lecture ends and with notable speed, you head for the door. Suddenly, you realize you left your jacket on the chair, so you turn around to go back. When you turn, the dreaded Dr. Moxley is right behind you.

"With a big smile, he puts his hand on your shoulder and asks 'So, what did you think?'

"You know exactly what you want to say. Do you say it?

"If you're like most people, you would not be honest."

Solutions you can use right away

Chapter 9 focuses on teaching and would be a good read for anyone who has that responsibility. And many bankers do, whether they realize it or not. If you have to present a recap of a recent conference to your department, or make a presentation about a new system, or summarize a regulation, you are teaching, in a sense.

There were many good points from Birkun that could be utilized in such a banking environment.

I shudder to think how many meetings I have sat through and wished I had toothpicks to keep my eyes open. I now wish whomever was speaking had read this book and taken a few pointers, even if it was only the caffeine and sugar trick that television studios utilize to keep their guests awake!

How many meetings do you go to and the sight of hot coffee and fresh muffins means the meeting is a success before anyone even opens their mouth? Or how about a training session where the trainer has the sense to provide candy as rewards for answering questions? The training just became much more engaged.

I loved Birkun's suggestion to give away free stuff during a presentation, as a way to liven things up. He notes that even "the toughest, scariest people seem harmless when they are chasing after free things. It's also a great trick to get a sleepy crowd to wake-up.

Practical advice beyond Public Speaking 101

The appendix section should not be missed. Birkun continues his humorous mode while digging into real-world challenges, such as: "What to do if your talk sucks" and "What to do if things go wrong."

There's a great deal of practical advice that Birkun presents, based on his experience. He also discusses technological issues, such as his preferences for remote control devices for projector.

And he covers troublesome points that anyone who has ever stood at a podium "gets." One such "aha" point is his advice that, if you are the speaker, you don't need to wear a troublesome name badge.

After all, they know who you are.

Like this? You can also read other ABA BJ book reviews here.

If you'd like to review or recommend recent books for our online book column, please e-mail scocheo@sbpub.com

[This article was posted on September 2, 2010, on the website of ABA Banking Journal, www.ababj.com, and is copyright 2010 by the American Bankers Association.]