

Stage fright: less obvious than you might think

This past August, at the Graduate School of Banking at Madison, Wisconsin, Karen, a CFO at a midwest bank enrolled in my Effective Presentations class, came up to me right before the first session, seeking advice, not for herself, but for her CEO.

“Mr. Beaver, our CEO is a wonderful guy, really competent and has done so much for the bank, behind the scenes. But when he is asked to speak in public—even before people with whom he’s worked and known for years—he finds one reason after another to decline.”

I mustered as much courage as I could, and asked him why he avoids public speaking. His answer was that ever since he was a kid in school, when asked to make a presentation to his class, he always felt embarrassed, ridiculed, made fun of, and suffered real fear. He’s got a horrible case of stage fright to this day.

Have you got any advice for him?”

Karen didn’t know it then, but over the next few days, the 70 students in the two sections of this class would learn something about stage-fright few could have guessed.

Speech anxiety affects most people

A week before class convenes, I phone every student, finding out why they are in the class, and how I can help them become better speakers. By far, “overcoming nervousness” is the most common reason given. Of course, a certain amount of nervousness is a good thing. It wakes you up, helps you to focus, and provides energy. But too much of a good thing is damaging.

Stage-fright—also called speech anxiety—is one of the most studied subjects in the entire area of Speech Communications. It affects 75% of populations, worldwide, and really amounts to a form of panic. Your heart races, you’re out of breath, hands may tremble, sweaty or cold, nausea strikes some, knees feel shaky, mouth is dry, you lose track of what it was you wanted to say, or even where you are!

Often, the origins are often less difficult to find than you might think, Karen's CEO being a good example of a well known explanation: deeply negative early experiences.

When I ask students to think back to when they first experienced stage-fright symptoms, a large number can trace it right back to school, where the child felt mocked or ignored by immature classmates, and left feeling embarrassed.

But it goes well beyond the classroom. In families where children are "to be seen and not heard," a more sinister message can be received: "We don't care about what you have to say. It isn't important. Be quiet!"

Those profoundly hurtful memories become hard-wired into that child's brain, later stealing from the adult one of life's greatest joys: speaking to an audience interested in hearing what they have to say.

The precise opposite is true as well: the handful of students who state that they enjoy speaking in public generally comment that their home life encouraged all the children to become involved in discussions, leading to a sense of comfort with oral communication.

F.E.A.R

There is a type of "evidence" no court in the land would place before a jury. It is flawed, and yet powerful. I call it F.E.A.R. False Evidence Appearing Real. In its simplest definition, it is the belief in a false reality. Here are a few common examples as they apply to public speaking:

They aren't listening to me, don't like me or want to hear what I have to say. I can see it in their faces and reactions.

The reality is that an audience is composed of individuals who have different listening behaviors. We all know someone who is an active listener - with great facial expressions, nodding, showing agreement, involved, visibly interested, sending terrific feedback to the speaker. Others are passive listeners, who just don't appear to react at all.

Does it mean they aren't listening, or not paying attention? Research shows that audiences are generally supportive of speakers, often admire someone who can do what they have trouble with. It is the rare audience who wants to attack or embarrass a speaker—just the opposite!

I have found that when I get a smile, nod, some positive reaction from a quiet audience member, I know that I'm doing fine. While the typical American speaker expects good eye contact from an audience, the rules change dramatically in many other countries. In our diverse society, we need to realize that just because "they" aren't looking at you does not mean they aren't paying attention or disagree with what you are saying. It is often a sign of respect, a desire to not stare at the speaker.

I feel awful up here. They know I don't want to be delivering this speech. Things are going badly.

The fallacy here is known in psychology as projection: projecting our feelings on someone else, either blaming them, or crediting them for thoughts or fears that we have.

Judging our performance as a speaker by the way we feel is rarely accurate. Do we know how the audience really feels? The odds are, they are interested, and with you. How on earth can they "know" that you don't want to make this presentation? How many got up and walked out on you? Chances are, none.

I'm from the rural South and have a strong accent. I know the audience thinks I'm a poorly educated hick!

I hear this every summer from my banking students, and it is so sad. There is something truly delightful about different accents. When students state these feelings, it's no surprise that their colleagues in the class tell them how interesting they sound, what a pleasure it is to listen to them and, often, their regional expressions.

What upsets an audience isn't accent, but language skills: poor grammar, unacceptable or incomprehensible pronunciation. If we do not respect our own language we should not expect the audience to respect us.

Does the audience know you're nervous?

So, how obvious is a speaker's nervousness to an audience? If you have red cheeks, a growling stomach, sweaty hands, knocking knees, rapid pulse, hypertension, and a headache, can an audience easily conclude that you have a bad case of stage fright?

When I ask that question of my students at GSB Madison, most say, "Yes."

But, is it that easy?

No. In reality, unless you do the wrong things—which are easy to prevent—in general, audiences haven't got a clue to how you feel. There is an enormous negative correlation between how the speaker feels (horribly nervous) and what the audience sees.

If an audience is going to perceive stage fright, then it will depend upon the speaker's behavior. There are two basic types of behavior which can communicate all those things we want to avoid.

They are referred to as inhibitory and rigidity behaviors, and their meanings are fairly self-evident. Examples include: grabbing the podium and holding on for dear life, never moving an inch, staring down at your notes, giving the audience no eye contact, mumbling, speaking in a whisper.

The good news is that when a nervous speaker avoids doing those things, then the major signs of nervousness won't be communicated. It is something like the psychiatrist's patient who complains, "When I bang my head into the wall, I get a bad headache." "You've got the cure," replies the psychiatrist. "Stop banging your head on the wall!"

At Madison, we demonstrate just how difficult it is for an audience to spot nervousness. My GSB students prove it to themselves, and here's how:

When we discuss this issue, and class members describe how badly they feel when speaking in public, I immediately bring one of them to the front of the classroom. "Could you please tell us about those feelings?" I say to a student who had no idea this would happen.

For the next several minutes, we typically get descriptions of wet hands, upset stomach, hot face, racing heart, shaky knees. I also get them to tell us about themselves, their job, families, town, you name it—anything to get them actually delivering an impromptu presentation.

At some time, I calmly ask, "On a ten point scale, with ten being extremely nervous, and zero not nervous, where are you?" The usual response is something like, "I'm a 15!! I'm really nervous!" Then I turn towards the class and ask, "Where is she on my scale?"

In virtually every instance, the reply is "Zero, maybe a 1 or 2, but we don't really see nervousness. In fact, she seems fine, confident, and is interesting to listen to."

Those first few speakers don't believe what they hear, thinking, "Oh, they're just being kind." After a dozen or so examples of the same reactions, the point goes home: You appear far less nervous and much better poised to the audience, than you think.

I have taught this class at GSB Madison for over eleven years and often hear from my former students. Jay A. Budde, assistant vice-president, e-commerce, Farmers & Merchants State Bank in Archbold, Ohio phoned the other day with this comment:

"I'm still a little bit nervous, but I realize that no one else knows. That understanding—seeing it with my own eyes and living through that experience in class—had an enormous effect on my life. Now, I look forward to that wonderful chemistry of speaker and audience."

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