

Nobody knows you're nervous

How to conquer those public speaking jitters

No matter what your job title, sooner or later you are going to have to address an important group—it might be your stockholders, board of directors, or a class of school children. Just thinking of doing this may make your palms sweaty, your pulse race or, in some cases, hyperventilate. You are not alone in feeling this way—public speaking is one of the most common of all fears.

Searching for a way to overcome this fear is the leading reason why students sign up for my course in Effective Presentation Techniques, which I have taught the past six years at the Graduate School of Banking at Madison, Wis.

"It's something I *have* to take"

Prior to every August session, I contact the students signed up for the class. I am always curious—why are they there? The conversation starts with a question, "Tell me about yourself? What are you looking for in this class?" Most share their secret fear of public speaking, while others say they just want to pick up a few pointers. On occasion I get responses similar to this one: "Your class isn't the easiest elective on the list, but it's something I *have* to take. I must overcome my fear of public speaking." That came in an e-mail message from Jamie, a senior vice-president of an Iowa bank.

I tell these bankers that I have only one objective: "My goal is to take something away from you: What you *thought* a speech was."

Fear no more

Jamie's e-mail revealed someone terrified of public speaking as far back as he could remember. Now, professional

advancement required a competence he lacked.

"I *have* to be able to do this. If not, I will never get far in banking. Personally, I'll be ashamed of myself," he wrote. After reading his e-mail, I felt a deep sense of obligation to help.

The days that I spend with Jamie and the other students are much more than lectures—I become their coach. Together, we work on physical movement in the room, eye contact, and other critical but easily learned skills. Time permitting, every student will deliver a brief presentation.

When it was Jamie's turn, this big guy—over six feet tall—who was so afraid of public speaking, shared his great love of family, of being present when his first child was born. He captivated the room. By the time he had finished, silence ruled; we were all close to tears. Everyone was starving to hear more from this warm, honest, *Public Speaker*.

As I do with all students, I asked him, "Tell me, on a ten point scale, with ten being horribly nervous, where were you?"

He replied, "About 10,000! When you called on me, my stomach sank. I was ready to run out of the building. When I started my speech. I could feel the sweat pouring down my forehead. Then, I thought about all the tools you gave us. In an instant, it seemed, I was done. I stood there, ready for criticism on how bad my speech was. But the class applauded. They did not see that I was at all nervous. Your comments were that I was a *natural speaker*."

Jamie had learned the most valuable skill of all; the only person who knows that you are nervous is you. "I'm no longer afraid," Jamie confessed. *BJ*



How to mask telltale signs of anxiety

- ☞ Be the first person at the venue, if possible, and introduce yourself to those who arrive—it creates a feeling of inclusion for the audience.
- ☞ Consider opening your talk with a series of *answerable* questions related to the subject. Make it clear with hand gestures that you really do want to have a dialogue.
- ☞ Even if you are not terribly hungry eat something (but not alcohol) to keep your energy up. Good public speaking is high energy and requires fuel.
- ☞ Keep it conversational to help the audience to retain more of what you say.

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