

Reducing Stage Fright: Tips for Powerful Presentations **©copyright by Robert (Bob) W. Lucas**

Stage fright or the jitters is normal when training. I have seen information before which stated that according to research people fear public speaking more than death. Even experienced trainers feel some degree of apprehension when stepping in front of a group for the first time. Such feelings often stem from a desire of wanting to be accepted or liked. You are probably going to have butterflies in your stomach. The key is to get them to fly in formation rather than swarm. Any stress or anxiety symptoms normally go away within the first few minutes when you begin to see people smile and you begin to relax.

Anxiety manifests itself differently for each person. I have heard of people complaining of rapid heart beat, trembling hands, clammy palms, sweaty armpits, dry throat, shaky knees, shortness of breath, rashes, flushed face, quivering voice, and diarrhea. Whatever your symptoms, remember that they are normal and do not focus on them. Also, do not do things to project the fact that you are nervous. Certainly do not apologize for it or draw attention. For example, if you have shaking, do not position yourself so that it becomes obvious (e.g. pointing to items illuminated on the overhead projector with your finger or using a laser pointer with slides so that your participants see magnified shaking on the screen). Just remember that your learners cannot see and are unaware of most of the symptoms and that it is only in your head that they are a problem.

There are ways to reduce your anxiety level before and during a session. Try the following strategies.

Get plenty of rest. Do not stay out late partying the night before a training program. Try to get your normal amount of sleep rather than throw your body into shock by being tired. You want to be in prime condition for your learners.

Gain experience. The more you speak in front of groups, the easier it gets. Take opportunities to speak to school, civic, church and volunteer groups. Get involved with Toastmasters (see Resources for Trainers) where you get the opportunity to practice various types of speeches in a safe environment and receive non-threatening peer feedback.

Prepare adequately. Taking more preparation time will likely add to your confidence level because you will feel ready for most contingencies. As a rule of thumb, I recommend that new trainers who attend my train-the-trainer programs take at least eight hours of to prepare material for every hour they will present. This helps ensure that they will have answers to unplanned questions and will spend little time saying, "I do not know the answer to that, but will get back to you with it later." If this is done too often, a trainer can lose credibility and trust.

Practice, Practice, Practice! This does not mean to try to memorize all of your session content. That will likely end in failure since short term memory can only hold a limited

amount of information. Also, if someone asks a question or gets you off a topic, you may have trouble getting refocused and remember what you were going to say. This is one important reason for ALWAYS using notes or a lesson plan. Rehearsing what you will say in the actual room and with the actual equipment you plan to use can mentally help fix the process in your mind. That way, when you are actually speaking to learners, it will be like a déjà vu experience in which it feels as you have been there in the setting before (because you have). One technique that I find highly useful is what is called a “wall talk.” When I was taught to be a Marine Corps Drill Instructor in the early 1970s we stood before full-length mirrors practicing for hours. This allowed us to hear ourselves and see our gestures simultaneously. However, I encourage use of the wall talk before a blank wall instead. The reason is that you eliminate the distraction of watching yourself or seeing other things and instead concentrate on your voice articulation and quality. The wall reflects your voice, making it a useful tool for hearing what you have said. Adding a tape recorder and listening to the presentation later is also helpful.

Use visioning. As discussed earlier in the book, visualizing an event is a powerful tool for learning. As you are preparing for your training program, go to the actual delivery site and envision what the setup will be. Practice facing different parts of the room at certain points in the program in order to remind yourself to make eye contact during the training. Also, envision what a successful program will look like then, do whatever is necessary to make that happen. After all, much of being successful is your mental attitude.

Think about what you drink. Drink water instead of milk or caffeine products, especially carbonated drinks that produce gas. They can upset your stomach or increase your stress levels.

Do not place undue stress on yourself. You are your own worst critic. Lighten up. Some people strive for perfection, which is a lofty goal. Certainly do what you can to be successful, but acknowledge that some things are out of your control. Do the best you can to plan, organize and prepare, but if something goes wrong, shake it off and go to your backup plan.

Breathe deeply. As you are being introduced or before you step in front of a group, take a few slow deep breaths to replenish the oxygen to the brain.

Take a short walk. I often use the time between checking last minute room details and the arrival of my learners to take care of me. I get a drink of water, use the restroom and walk around the perimeter of the training room or facility. I use the time to do a mental checklist of things and to rehearse my opening remarks one more time for peace of mind.

Do something physical. You read about how activity stimulates the brain and learning. It is also good to help take your mind off any nervousness and to stimulate your muscles, increase your breathing and enrich the brain with oxygen. Try some stretches, cross lateral activities, or some isometric exercises. For example, stand arms length

from a wall, position your feet at shoulder width and place your palms on the wall. Tense your upper body as you push against the wall trying to push it over. Hold this for fifteen to thirty seconds, relax and then repeat a couple more times. Sit in a chair with hands on your knees and feet flat on the floor. Press down with your hands, relax and repeat. Now try it with your feet.

Concentrate on your audience. Rather than focus on the nervousness, concentrate on your learners and how you will address their needs. Think about the activities and potential outcomes. Get caught up in your material to take your mind off yourself.

Plan you opening well. The only portion of your presentation that you may want to memorize is your opening remarks. Once you get off to a good start and your participants start reacting positively to what you are saying your nervousness will likely go away quickly.

Pause before speaking. If you have seen professional speakers after they are introduced, you have possibly noted that once they step onto stage, they pause for dramatic effect. They might glance around the room, smile, gesture openly to the crowd and say something like, "Look at this audience! You are wonderful! Give yourself a hand." All the time, while the audience is applauding, the speaker is mentally preparing opening remarks. You do not need to rush in talking as you enter the room. Take your time, breathe and pause before beginning.

Use creative visual aids. You have read about dozens of ideas for creating visual aids that sparkle. Use them to assist in capturing attention rather than standing alone in front a group of strangers feeling naked. The visual aids you choose can help divert some attention away from you while they reinforce what you say. As people are reading information shown, they are not concentrating all their attention on you.

Use gestures. As you will read later, nonverbal gestures can aid and impact your delivery. Gestures allow you to channel your nervous energy rather than standing frozen not knowing what to do next. Start out with a few simple movements, then get more creative as you loosen up.

Be enthusiastic. My final tip is to be enthusiastic in every presentation. It is contagious. If you look like you are having fun and enjoying the material, chances are that your learners will too.

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