

LOS ANGELES BUSINESS JOURNAL

July 8-14, 2002

Let Logic, Not Panic, Guide Your Public Speaking

By Lawrence M. Kohn and Robert N. Kohn

Some people say they fear public speaking more than they fear death. While you may not fear speaking more than dying, that doesn't mean you're dying to do it. The fact is, most people are remarkably uncomfortable with public speaking. If you're uncomfortable with public speaking, you'll probably avoid it. And, avoiding it can limit your success. If you can't avoid giving a speech, the anticipation can be so physically, emotionally, and mentally debilitating that it reduces both productivity and quality of life for the entire time between the planning and the presentation.

It's been our experience that anyone can overcome their fear of speaking. But, you may feel pessimistic because the proposed remedies you have heard don't seem realistic. We've heard instructors suggest that we imagine the audience will be naked. That sounds more frightening than the speech. Others suggest visualizing yourself as being calm. But, imagining yourself as feeling calm when you're nervous seems as difficult as feeling full when you're hungry. These solutions (and others like them) miss the mark because they focus on the anxiety rather than the root of the problem.

Fear of speaking comes from the anticipation of being embarrassed. It's unnerving to imagine being judged in an unfavorable way. Usually, the reason people worry about being embarrassed is they have all kinds of misconceptions of what their audiences expect from them. They think their audiences want them to be smarter, or more articulate, or attractive, or funny, or charismatic, or dynamic, or inspirational, or motivational. They think their audiences expect them to memorize the material or know all the answers. All of these feelings of inadequacy will surely instill the fear of being embarrassed.

These self-destructive misconceptions are formed as people think about the speakers whom they admire. Cultural icons such as Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King, Jr. set the highest quality standards for public speaking. But because you are impressed by them (and all the other great speakers or entertainers in your memory), you have come to the erroneous conclusion that those stellar standards apply to you.

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth.

While audiences certainly enjoy an exceptional speaker, all they want from

you is some information. Therefore, the key to overcoming your fears is to stop focusing on your **self-destructive feelings of inadequacy** and invest your energy exclusively in meeting the **needs of your audience**.

The first thing you should do is talk in advance with people who will be attending your speech. If you can't do that, talk with people who know your audience. Find out how much your audience knows about your subject. Discuss their needs. Share some of your ideas and find out if they are perceived as valuable. Find out what obstacles might limit their ability to appreciate your message. This way you can feel confident you are providing material that they will value.

As you prepare your speech, keep in mind that all audiences want to know the answers to the following eight questions. Some are simple, others more demanding. But all are important:

1.How long will you be talking? Time is valuable and people want to know when they can move on to other things. Never talk longer than necessary to make your point. And, always finish on time.

2.How many parts does your speech have? People feel better when they can track the status of your talk. Make sure you clearly identify when you finish one part and are transitioning to the next. As they see that you are on track, they will be relaxed and can stay focused on your message.

3.What is your main message? Audiences want to quickly understand what you are trying to say. Review your speech and make absolutely certain that your material accurately communicates your intent. If you can, create a slogan or soundbite that captures your meaning and that is easy to remember. Consider making it rhyme. Or use alliteration. Use a famous quote. Whatever you choose, repeat it several times throughout your speech. Think of your main message as a television advertisement. People like leaving a presentation with an idea they can take with them. Make your message clear and easy to remember.

4.Why should they believe you? Fill your presentation with logical and sensible examples, stories, metaphors, personal experiences, facts and

statistics that support your main point. If your listeners believe you, they will support you.

5.Why is your message important to them? To minimize your fear, remember that your message does not have to be of monumental importance. It just has to be important enough to be helpful. Be as practical as you can. People want to know how your message will realistically help them succeed either in their work or in their personal lives.

6.What risks will they face if they fail to respond to your message? Be accurate - don't inflate the risks. That will position you as an extremist and subsequently untrustworthy. By the same token, don't minimize risks. Responsibly presented, valid risks hold the interest of your audience. Always compare the risks with the rewards and make sure you offer a net gain.

7.What steps should they take? Even if people agree to take action, they'll still want guidance. It's smart to be reasonable and provide small, achievable tips. Overly ambitious suggestions produce pessimism and lack of confidence in the speaker and the message.

8.What resources do they need? Audiences want to know that they have the support they need to succeed. And, they want to know the cost of any resources they need to acquire. Be sure you are accurate in your estimate. Their confidence in you is dependant upon the accuracy of your comments.

By going through the process of answering these eight questions, you'll be prepared to give the audience what it wants - useful information. Then, it won't matter if you mispronounce a few words, or rely on your notes. It won't matter if you're not funny or charismatic. The only thing that will matter is that you will be **informative**. Once you've written your well thought-out speech, you'll feel optimistic about being appreciated. And, as a result, your fear will disappear.

Lawrence M. Kohn and Robert N. Kohn are principals of Kohn Communications, a consulting firm in Los Angeles that provides individual executive coaching via the telephone in marketing, management and public speaking. They can be reached by telephone at 310.652.1442 or on the Web at <www.kohncommunications.com>.