

PERCEPTION

A very ambitious executive was determined to master the art of public speaking. His desire to improve was intense, and if you have ever joined a public speaking organization, you probably understand his desire. He was a charismatic guy who was blessed with wit and the ability to crack jokes and be lighthearted among his friends. He was the life of the party. So, when he contacted me for public speaking help, I figured this was going to be an easy task.

When he stood in front of the room and started to speak, however, he suddenly changed into a completely different person. The best analogy I can give is that he turned into a robot and started to use this strange voice. I stopped him and said, "Hang on one second here. What are you doing? Where did *you* go?"

He looked at me suspiciously and said, "What do you mean? I'm giving a speech."

I said to him, "Yes, but you're using this different voice and suddenly your whole personality just went away. Where did it go?"

He paused for a few moments, stared me down, and said to me, "But I'm trying to sound like a great public speaker."

Now, I don't know about you, but I would rather not hear from someone who gets up and tries to sound like a robot. To me, that does not make someone a good public speaker. What does? We'll get to that.

If you believe in your heart that you can, in fact, become a great public speaker, then you have the right frame of mind to begin our training. However, if you're like most people and the very thought of giving a speech causes you a lot of anxiety, I need you first to come to understand what public speaking is and what public speaking isn't.

Before we really delve into this book, let's pause for a brief exercise. Please answer a basic but important question for me: What is public speaking?

What is your definition of public speaking?

This first question might seem simple, but it is an important one, and like all the questions in this book, it is vital to your success that you take the time to answer. Maybe you wrote that public speaking is standing behind a

podium giving a speech. Perhaps you wrote that public speaking involves large crowds or important topics, or maybe you wrote that public speaking occurs any time you get on your feet in front of a few people. As I said, none of the answers is wrong. Now, look at your answer, and let me ask you a few more questions.

Do public speakers actually need to be standing to give a speech?

Does there have to be a large crowd?

Do there have to be important topics at hand?

There is no right or wrong answer, but I'd like you to take a moment and write down the first thoughts that come to your mind.

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt spoke about incredibly important topics as he struggled to pull the nation out of the Great Depression, but when he gave his fireside chats, he did it from his wheelchair, and he was only speaking into a microphone. So, the question is, "Was he publicly speaking or not?"

As you will soon discover, so much of public speaking is a mental game, and far beyond skill, conquering your thoughts about public speaking is very much the first step on your journey toward becoming a truly effective communicator. So let's put it in everyday terms. Have you gone out to eat at a

restaurant lately with a group of some of your friends? What if I told you that when you ordered your dinner you were, in fact, publicly speaking?

Understanding what public speaking truly is, then, is the key to overcoming your fears and becoming an effective communicator. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines public speaking as “the act or process of making speeches in public; the art of effective oral communication with an audience.” Well, what did you do when you went out to dinner with some of your friends or made conversation over Thanksgiving dinner? Chances are you laughed, had some great conversation, and had a good time.

You might be surprised to realize this, but at Thanksgiving dinner, you were, in fact, having oral communication with an audience. Sure, the audience consisted of your great-aunt and maybe a few cousins whom you secretly hoped would forget to make the trip, but it was still an audience. I’ve met some of the most entertaining dinner guests in my life who can make everyone at the table feel relaxed and enjoy the evening, but for whatever reason, when they get onstage in front of the very same people or stand up to give a speech in the company boardroom, they freeze and are overcome with anxiety. What changed? Is it the fact that they stood up, or is it the fact that they suddenly realized they were now “publicly speaking”?

The Fundamental Question

If public speaking is the art of effective oral communication with an audience, isn’t that what these individuals at the dinner were doing in the first place? Nowhere does the

definition of public speaking say that you have to be standing or that you have to be delivering a speech on topics of sweeping world change. All it says is that you have to have effective oral communication with an audience (and notice there isn’t even a size requirement).

Please allow me to give you the official definition of public speaking according to the 7 Principles of Public Speaking: *Public speaking occurs any time you talk to anyone and someone else is present to hear you—intentionally or not.*

This means that when you and your wife were discussing the college fund this morning at the local diner, and a few people were in earshot of your conversation, you were actually engaging in public speaking.

Before we get too deep into this point, however, let’s understand what public speaking does *not* have to be. It doesn’t have to be marked by fiery rhetoric or passionate pleas for change. It doesn’t have to be funny. It doesn’t have to be long. It doesn’t have to be profound. So, what does it have to be?

You know the answer to this already, because you’ve had to listen to speeches in your life. The best speakers are the ones who do nothing more than have a conversation with their audience. Isn’t that really what made FDR so effective in those fireside chats—his ability to talk to the nation over a radio and reassure millions of people that we would survive the Great Depression? In reality, it was a simple conversation that made a great president connect with people in their living rooms. And when we think of successful speakers whom we’ve heard in life, is it possible that we really like them because they seemed, well, like someone we’d like to have at our dinner table sharing conversation with us?

Please answer a few more questions for me. Think of a speech that you heard that you particularly enjoyed. It could be a speech anywhere. It could have been in your company boardroom. It could be at an arena. It could have been something you heard on television. It really doesn't matter. The point is, I want you to write down a time when someone got up in front of you and talked and it was memorable to you.

Think about what made it memorable.

Who was the speaker?

What struck you about him or her, and how did you feel during the speech?

How did you feel when it was over?

Focus on the human qualities of that speaker.

What did you like about him or her?

How did you feel when you were listening to the speech?

I'm willing to bet that in this exercise, regardless of the speaker you chose, you wrote down things like: "The speaker was personable." "The speaker was relaxed." "The speaker made me feel relaxed." "The speaker made me think that the speech was not going to go on forever." "The speaker made me feel like I knew this person." "The speaker made me feel comfortable." "The speaker had a point." "The speaker gave a clear message." "The speaker made me understand my stake in the process."

Reactions like that are exactly what we want to evoke from our audience.

The best public speakers are those who seem to genuinely enjoy giving a speech. Because they're relaxed, we're relaxed. Great speakers speak *to* us, not *at* us, and the most effective public speaking is a relaxed and comfortable conversation between a speaker and his or her audience.

Stop for a moment and reread this last statement. Isn't this what you do every single day in regular conversation with your friends, family, and co-workers? You talk comfortably, and you speak *with* them, as opposed to *at* them.

It is important to understand and to truly believe in your heart that to master the art of public speaking, all you have to do is be yourself.

That's right.

Learn to Speak Like Yourself

People want to listen to someone who is interesting, relaxed, and comfortable. So, in order to become an effective public speaker, you must accept that the secret lies in letting go of the "public" part and focusing on the speaking

part. Begin by having a conversation. If you can carry on a relaxed conversation with one or two people, you can give a great speech. Get over the word “public” and realize that whether your audience consists of two people or two thousand, whether there is a podium not, whether you’re talking about the latest medical breakthrough or what you did today at work, it’s not about turning into someone you’re not in an effort to try to become a great public speaker. It’s all about talking to people and making a connection by being yourself.

Focus on this as you learn the rest of the seven principles, and you will be on your way to becoming a truly effective communicator. Trust me; I’ve learned this from experience.

Many years ago, my younger brother was becoming an Eagle Scout, the highest honor you can receive in scouting. His honor earned him a large, lavish ceremony, and he asked me if I would speak at the ceremony. I was honored. It was one of the best moments of my life. I wrote a speech, and I was really excited because this was a big day for my brother. The day of the ceremony came, and I got up in front of the room and I gave my speech. I was fiery, and I was passionate about how great it is to serve your country. But I wasn’t myself. As I look back on that time, I realize that I let a great opportunity pass because I tried to be someone that I’m not.

Now, ten years later, I realize how simple it could have been to make a change before I got up to that podium. If I just would have realized that to be a great speaker I didn’t have to change my voice, change my personality, or change who I was, I would have really connected with the audience that

day and made a great impact. I believe that, in life, we learn as much from our failures as we do from our successes—maybe even more—and that’s why I’m sharing this deeply personal story with you.

As we begin to build together on the seven principles in this book, I want you to understand that you already have within you everything you need to become a truly effective communicator. Don’t try to be anything other than who you are.

From Theory to Practice: Making It Work

How do we truly learn to be ourselves when we are giving a presentation? The first concept to understand is that to be an effective speaker, you have to be prepared. Preparation is key and will ensure that you are ready even if you have to give an impromptu presentation—and there is a very good chance that at some point in your life you will have to get up on your feet and speak “off the cuff.” But don’t worry. We will deal with that challenge as well.

The Speaker Challenge

Understanding Our Reality at the Podium Or, as I Call It, “You are on the Moon; The Audience is at Mission Control”

When you get up in front of an audience of any size to speak, remember this important principle: the relationship between how you feel when you stand up in front of a group and how that group feels about you as the speaker is truly the

equivalent of the relationship between the moon and mission control—with you on the moon and the audience watching you back at mission control.

First, you must understand that time feels different for a speaker at the podium (on the moon) than it does for the audience back at mission control. On the moon, a pause feels like an eternity. But back at mission control, it feels just like what it is: a pause that lasted a few seconds. No big deal. And it forces audience members to pay attention to you if their minds have been drifting off.

On the moon, our temptation is to fill the empty space with lots of words, and a long speech feels like we are telling all the relevant points. But back at mission control, a long speech feels like just that: a long speech.

When you make a mistake on the moon, you feel as if everyone else notices and as if your mistake has severely affected the mission. At mission control, they don't even notice, and the mission is still going full speed ahead.

We get nervous when we are about to do a moonwalk because it is unfamiliar territory to us, but once we get going, we tend to relax and feel more comfortable. Back at mission control, they really can't tell we are nervous, and most of the time, they only know it because we tell them after the mission, "I was so nervous!" In other words, mission control only knows what we let them know.

On the moon, we tend to be very focused on facts and want people to know every little detail. Meanwhile, at mission control, they are dreamers and want to hear the exciting stories you have to tell. After all, they are looking up to you.

On the moon, we tend to feel like we are being judged. After all, it's kind of lonely up there. But at mission control, the audience is actually rooting for us. They want to see us succeed because they know that, in reality, we are representing their success today—and their ability to succeed tomorrow. They will have to walk on the moon one day and want people rooting for them when the time comes. If we can do something, so can they.

The Time/Space Difference on the Moon

We have all been taught the theory of relativity. To paraphrase Albert Einstein, "Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a woman you care about for an hour, and it seems like a minute. *That's* relativity."

This kind of relativity is something we experience as a speaker every time we give a presentation.

The first rule we must accept is that time feels different for us when we are on the moon than it does back at mission control. I often encourage my clients to use periodic dramatic pauses in their talks to pull the audience back into consciousness. But most people react by saying that their pause, which should only last a few seconds, feels like an eternity to them. Too often, people are asked a question, and they feel they have to immediately blurt out an answer as if they were being graded on how quickly they answer as opposed to how thoughtful the answer is. Watch carefully when accomplished communicators are handed a question. You will see them take a few seconds to organize their thoughts before giving a carefully constructed answer.

For most of us, however, the idea of taking a few seconds while we are on stage and all eyes are upon us is terrifying. That is because when we are speaking, we experience time very differently than the audience does. The feeling of having everyone look up at us and wait for our every word causes us to feel this way.

The solution: Change your thinking about how time is perceived as a speaker versus as a member of the audience. A pause to you may feel like an eternity, but to the audience, it feels like a mere pause. Take your time. There is no need to rush through your remarks. If you have to rush to fit in your remarks in an allotted time, it is because you didn't follow Principle 7 and the law of anticipation. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Knowing Your Audience

The reason we find it so much easier to be ourselves when we are having a conversation with our friends over dinner than we do when we are having a conversation with an audience during a speech is that we know our friends very well. Therefore, your challenge as a speaker is to know your audience almost as well as you know your friends. And you must do this before you have to give your speech. This may sound monumental, but you will be happy to know it is easier than you think.

Audience Research

In most cases, performing a basic search on the Web will tell you a lot about an organization. This is a great tool to use if you are unfamiliar with a group. You should always view the

company's Web site, ask the company to send you its marketing materials, and read the bios of key company personnel. Knowledge is power, and knowing everything you can about an organization will help make your time on the moon that much more comfortable. Plus, the folks at mission control will truly appreciate that you have taken the time to learn about them and relate to them during your speech.

There really is no reason that anyone should ever walk into a presentation without fully understanding his or her audience; yet, I am constantly surprised by the number of people who do just this. They walk into a room cold. They may have spent hours writing a great speech; they may have practiced that speech; they may have even attended training on how to properly deliver that speech, but they didn't take the time to do the necessary research to know their audience.

We all appreciate it when someone takes the time to truly understand our unique needs, wants, and desires. The best salespeople do this on a regular basis, and by doing so, they make their customers feel like friends and family. These sales professionals take the time to know birthdays, anniversaries, and career milestones. The best salespeople send thank-you notes, follow-up notes, and even no-reason-in-particular notes.

The best speakers do the same with their audience.

This doesn't mean that you should send everyone in your audience a personal note, though this is a wonderful idea and I highly recommend it. What it does mean, however, is that you should take the time to know as much as possible about your audience before you ever walk into the room.

Audiences are not usually made up of a random assemblage of people. In most cases, the audience members have a tre-

mendous amount in common with each other. People tend to associate with like-minded people. That is true in social as well as in business settings. And this gives you as a speaker a tremendous advantage because you can custom-tailor your message for your audience.

Audience analysis checklist:

Where do the majority of the audience members live?

Are they mostly from rural, urban, or suburban areas?

What do the majority of people in the audience do professionally? Are they entrepreneurs? Small business owners? CPAs? CFAs? Avon reps?

Do most of the members of this audience belong to a certain group, such as a chamber of commerce, business association, or nonprofit organization? If so, what do you know about the characteristics of this organization? What is its mission? Has it experienced growth, or is it in a decline?

What traits do I have in common with this audience?

What is the message I am going to convey to this audience?

What are the main points I need to stress to support this message?

What do I want the audience to say about my speech when it is over?

What do I want the audience to feel about my speech after it concludes?

What do I hope to accomplish with this speech?

These questions are fundamental to ensuring that you have clearly identified your goals and know your audience.