

Communication Anxiety

There is a lot of research on reducing communication anxiety. Indeed, there is more published work on quelling nerves than any other area of communication studies. Then why is it that you haven't yet figured out how to stay calm? Let's think about how you can be more confident in your very next presentation . . .

As a preliminary point, let me say that calming your nerves is simply not intuitive. Several studies have suggested that speakers typically misdiagnose the causes of their own anxiety, in particular grossly overestimating the power of speech events themselves to trigger their nerves: "It was that tough question that threw me off" or "I was fine until I made eye-contact with my scowling boss." In actuality, your anxiety will have far less to do with things that happen during your speech than everything that leads up to it.

Nervous speakers tend to be most nervous right at the start of their presentations, reporting that their anxiety rates, say, a 10 out of 10 as they start speaking. More surprising, however, is that these same speakers report that they are almost that nervous at different points during their preparation for the speech – perhaps 9.5 out of 10.

The anxiety of nervous speakers leads them to prepare very differently for presentations than more confident speakers. Not that they prepare less; nervous speakers typically spend more hours all together getting ready. Nervous speakers, though, focus on different elements of their talk. For example, relative to more confident speakers, they spend a far greater amount of time on the notes they will use. (Of course, this far too often means the speaker simply reads his or her PowerPoint slides. But, I digress! The important topic of improving how you use technology will have to be our subject later today. . . .)

Notably, nervous speakers spend relatively far less time conducting audience analysis, organizing their talk and rehearsing with their visual aids. As a result of inadequate preparation in these important areas, their presentations are unsatisfactory, which, in turn, makes the speaker even more nervous next time. It is easy to see how this cycle breeds worse and worse results – and escalating anxiety!

By the way, it is not uncommon for someone to say to me about their presentation-giving, "I'm a lot better when I just wing it." It is true that I have coached some speakers who are so generally skilled that they can deliver well without much specific preparation for any given speech. However, I have yet to meet a speaker who is actually better when they do not prepare than when they do. Surely, it is easier to not prepare and surely some speakers — especially nervous ones — prepare incorrectly. This, though, does not mean that they are better off doing nothing.

To recap: the real problem for nervous speakers is that anxiety plagues preparation which, in turn, sabotages the actual performance of the

speech. So what is a nervous speaker to do? The best thing you can do to reduce your anxiety is to prepare, and prepare strategically. Let me suggest four things you can do in your preparation that will help you be less nervous the day of your talk:

First, develop a consistent organizational framework that you will use every time you give a speech, one that has consistent elements in the introduction, conclusion, etc. You can find these sorts of speech templates in many presentation books and websites, or the communications professionals at your workplace may be able to help you. Making the framework of your speech familiar will both reduce what is unknown about the speech event and simultaneously organize your talk – building your confidence in two different ways.

In addition to organizing your talk with a consistent format that you will use from speech to speech, second, reduce the number of other unknown elements in your speech. For example, visit the conference room where you will speak, test the equipment, and meet some of the members of your audience ahead of time. The more things you know about the presentation before you give it, the more confident you will be.

Third, learn some basic presentation skills through a speech course, book or working with the communications professionals at your workplace. Many speakers are nervous because they believe that there are specific rules about how to give a presentation well, but they don't know what those rules are. Learning good guidelines for preparation, organization, note-taking, visuals and delivery will not only help make sure you give a better presentation, but that you are more comfortable giving it.

Fourth, create opportunities to interact with your audience early in your presentation. Too often speakers do not get any feedback from their audience until the end of their presentations during a tagged-on "Q&A" session. Getting earlier input from your audience will help reduce your anxiety several ways: it reminds you that your presentation is is less a performance than a communication event, that you are not expected to be an opera star but simply one side of a conversation. Moreover, asking questions that your audience can answer, or creating other opportunities for them to signal that you are doing well will calm anxiety you have about the speech itself. As you are likely to be the most nervous in the first few minutes of your speech, create opportunities for interactions as early as possible in your speech.

In conclusion, despite the shelves full of research on communication anxiety, it is not surprising that you still feel nervous. What is more surprising is that quelling your nerves is more a matter of preparation than the speech itself. Most surprising is that four strategic steps can go a long way to making you feel better on your very next talk.

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