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Presentation Tips for Public Speakers

How the best speakers do it

Successful speakers share certain practices and techniques. Among other things, they make it a point to entertain and inform, just as good teachers do. They also deepen and expand their audiences through openness, sensitivity, and humor.

Based on observations of successful and unsuccessful speakers, the good ones:

- Thoroughly prepare themselves and are comfortable with their material. They outline their main points on a blackboard, slide, or easel. They also make sure that all audiovisual equipment functions smoothly.
- Involve their audiences by soliciting answers and information. Example: One speaker, addressing "Downsizing in the '90's," had all the participants stand, then sit down in stages if they or someone they knew had been affected by firings, layoffs, takeovers, etc. Eventually the entire group was seated.
- Enhance their presentations by creative use of newspaper clippings, cartoons, music, appropriate quotes or relevant experiences.
- Often use self-deprecating humor to get the point across. This allows for the audiences to identify with the speakers foibles.
- Move around the room rather than remain fixed behind a lectern, a technique that makes them seem accessible. Many greet people individually as they enter the room.
- Avoid boring audiences with material that is common knowledge.

Source: Communications Briefings, Volume XIV, No. 111

Overcoming Fear of Speaking

Public speaking continues to be the greatest fear of most people – even greater than the fear of heights. A large part of the anxiety stems from the concern that someone in the audience will ask a hostile question or make a critical remark. Here are some ways to cope with this problem:

- Never argue with the person or try to defend yourself.
- Stroke the person by offering a genuine compliment. Example: "That's a very important question. Thanks for asking it." Why this works: Aggressive, critical people are often insecure and seeking recognition. Stroking them will flatter them and make you look cooperative and friendly.
- Disarm the person by finding a grain of truth in what he or she says. For example: A person tells you your ideas about the economy are a lot of bunk. He or she claims we need higher taxes and a lower defense budget. How to handle it: Start by stroking the person with a remark, such as "Those are important issues, for sure." Then disarm the person with "If we can lower the federal deficit, it will mean a stronger economy and less inflation. This is important and deserves consideration."

Source: Burns, David. The Feeling Good Handbook. Penguin Books USA Inc