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Dr. Neelu
Associate Professor,
Department of English, Aditi
Mahavidyalaya (University of
Delhi), New Delhi, India

Effective presentation skills: Managing anxiety in public speaking

Dr. Neelu

Abstract

Mastering one's field of specialization does not guarantee competence in public speaking and giving presentations professionally. Anxiety hampers effective communication and it is important that students overcome the fear of public speaking before they transit from academic world to corporate life. Public speaking skills are crucial not only in educational institutions and for employment purpose but also come into play in our day-to-day public interactions – be it social, cultural, religious, economic or political functions. Honing skills to present yourself emphatically and clearly before others helps us accelerate our career prospects and also makes up productive human beings. Public speaking skills are the skills which are put into operation to speak in public. (Better Public speaking 2020). The interaction may involve communication between two individuals, colleagues, an office presentation or group discussion. In order to speak clearly and fluently one needs high confidence level, an ability to have a connect with the audience, power to ascertain what the audience needs, clear diction, command over language, decent vocabulary, knowledge and the correct paralanguage. It also calls for a lot of planning and practicing because it helps to overcome anxiety, apprehensiveness and feeling of vulnerability. The present paper attempts to study the key strategies that can help individuals overcome their limitations and be good at public speaking.

Keywords: public, speaking, skills, presentation confidence, fear, anxiety

Introduction

We are not born with the innate skill of speaking or at public gatherings or making presentations. However, it is a skill that can be learnt with sustained practice, training and perseverance.

During our lifetime we all encounter situations where we are expected to address an audience and we are the focus of attention. It is natural at such times, to experience a flux of emotions ranging from fear, to anxiety to nausea to sweating. Most of us try to avoid such situations which put in a vulnerable position and cause unnecessary stress and distress. "Many people who converse easily in all kinds of everyday situations become frightened at the idea of standing up before a group to make a speech". (Lucas, 2011, P.9). However, you need to be comforted with the idea that you are not an isolated case and these are emotions and feelings common to almost all public speakers. Since it public speaking is listed as one of the top fears of individuals in the academic and corporate world, it pays to develop skills as a speaker or presenter. At times, it may be mandated at workplace to demonstrate your work, to enlarge your knowledge base or showcase your expertise. If you, do it confidently, it gains you recognition and your skills and proficiency is acknowledged as an expert in your field. On the other hand, no matter how skilled and knowledgeable you are, if you fail to deliver a dynamic and impactful speech or presentation you end up being a poor communicator. It is essential to polish you the skills and techniques that can better your connect with people and improve your presentation style.

Fear of public speaking and strategies to overcome it: Your road to success in academic and corporate life

Public speaking is an important aspect of communication skills which overlaps academic writing. Public speaking and presentation both involve talking, discussing, negotiating, sharing ideas-either at an individual level or at a group level. It is the art of speaking fluently and the ability to put across your thoughts lucidly. It is not a talent one may be born with but

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Neelu
Associate Professor,
Department of English, Aditi
Mahavidyalaya (University of
Delhi), New Delhi, India

it can definitely be cultivated if one is groomed since school life through suitable and appropriate activities in language class which offer opportunities to voice their opinion. Public speaking is regarded as a fundamental skill that can render a significant contribution in enhancing your career prospects. If you are able to hone this skill you can carry out the tasks assigned to you in orderly and well-organized manner and also generate the desired outcomes. Most educational institutions as well as organizations organize special training programs to facilitate the enrichment of speaking proficiently. Appropriate teaching learning methods and materials coupled with suitable instructional strategies are used to make the process fruitful. If a learner is alert and comprehensively understands these learning strategies, he / she can greatly augment public speaking as an art. Public speaking is unavoidable at the personal and professional front and an indispensable component of social existence. One can only delay the process but cannot ignore. While personal interactions do not impact too many people, public interactions and speeches have far reached consequences. We may categorize public speaking into the following: Firstly, there is extemporaneous public speaking skills are those which are well rehearsed and carefully prepared and the speaker may make use of notes or prompts or guides when they are speaking. The speaker delivers the speech with the desired outcome which may be to inform or persuade prompts help to overcome fear and anxiety associated with public speaking. These types of speeches are the most practical method of communication and generally used in real life situations in a formal setting. Secondly, the mode of public speaking may be impromptu where it happens spontaneously without any prior preparation. It is not possible to keep notes as aids. It may be a big stressor initially but with sustained practice success can be achieved. Anxiety can be overcome and confidence can be generated with sustained practice and experience. If there is familiarity with the topic it makes – things easier; if the topic is unfamiliar, even the most seasoned speaker may be at loss of words, and find it difficult to implement operational public speaking skills. Thirdly, we have manuscript public speaking has pre-planned and well-crafted script and while delivering the speech and exact words are used. Individuals may even be permitted to read exactly from the script in hand. Manuscript refers to the reading material the speaker has in hand. They facilitate deliverance of speech in an efficacious manner. If the situation demands and time permits the speaker may even go on to elaborate the explain the concepts to add weight to the speech. What may be termed as disadvantageous, is the fact that the speakers focus on the script in hand. It takes away the eye contact and connect with the audience and they may not be able handle the question-and-answer session effectively. It is usually practiced in organizations and educational institutions. Lastly, we have memorized public speaking skills are situations in which individuals memorized the complete speech without any reliance on prompts. The speaker may fear they will forget so they learn it by heart and try to overcome fear and apprehensiveness. If the topic is familiar and comprehensible learning and delivery is better but if treading an unfamiliar topic, the best of speaker's falter. There are certain factors that must be borne in mind in public speaking. It is important to know your audience and what is the baseline knowledge of the audience so that the speech can be pitched accordingly. The speaker also must

ensure that the audience does not nurture any pre-existing bias. Also, the motivational level of the audience and their reason for listening to you helps you to ensure that the audience understands your message and you can engage with them. Develop a stage presence and polish your speech. It is a good idea to record your speech and examine the shortfalls and improve on your delivery. Taking feedback from your mentor and close friends goes a long way in improving your speaking skills.

The opening of your speech is the hook that captures your audience's attention, so have an impactful start. You may tell a story, state a fact or add humour. Keep the audience interested by connecting with them through eye contact. The calibre of your presentation or speech determines how well the audience receives your message. Voice quality, tone and pitch is crucial. It should be loud and clear.

Improving public speaking skills calls for overcoming apprehensiveness and vulnerability. This may seem in even if one is experienced in age and one possesses sufficient knowledge. With practice and perseverance we can gradually move to a stage when fear and anxiety levels can be lowered. Confidence, assurance and self-reliance along with mastery over the subject makes you an efficient public speaker. Preparing well is the key that opens the doors to success. Augment your understanding of core concepts and make generous use of technology. Constantly innovate and strive to improve your skills. Developing good communication skills also help in improving public speaking and presentation skills. Using polite words, having a rich word bank, being true to the information you are sharing and keeping your body language in sync with your speech facilitate good speaking skills.

Identifying what type of a speaker you are helps you to prepare better. There are different types of speakers – an avoider is one who will do everything possible to escape facing the audience – a resister is one who does speak, but is ready to withdraw at the slightest opportunity. An acceptor is one who is open to making presentations but will never go out of the way to grab the opportunity. A seeker is one who is always on the lookout for opportunities to speak and is always enthusiastic at the prospect of making a presentation before a large audience. It is advisable to structure your presentation. Begin with building a rapport with the audience and set the agenda, objective and expected outcome right at the beginning. Clearly state your bio-your note, designation, role and function. Be logical and structured and make your speech interesting by using interesting examples and anecdotes. Establish credibility by using resources that are authentic. Keep reiterating the key takeaways at regular intervals when concluding your speech or presentation, restate the main objectives and key supporting details. Also prefer active verbs over passive and avoid slang and jargon. Avoid technical language that audience cannot connect with. Try to use your own words and phrases so that familiarity is greater and faltering is less. Keep changing pitch or inflection of your voice to suit the speech. To handle anxiety and fear be organized and be absolutely sure of what you are going to speak. Visualize yourself from start to finish and everything from the script to your stage coverage.

At the workplace, we are constantly expected to interact with colleagues and make frequent presentations. It is not a trait we are born with but developed with sustained practice. We must regularly spend time in reviewing the content,

practicing it and even going in for specialized coaching or training to master this art. If you think you can read book after book on communication skills to acquire this skill you will be able to solve the problem, it is a myth. Books can only provide knowledge but to apply and absorb this knowledge only comes with practice in real life situations. Before you start your presentation there should be absolute clarity on what you have to tell the audience, you should tell them the information lucidly or clearly and take some time to review what you have told them to summarize the content. On an average you must spend about 10% of the content on introducing the subject about 80% time on building the subject matter and elaborating it with supporting details and finally concluding section should constitute 10% of the time and substance. Introduction is vital because for the audience seeing is believing and it immediately gets the audience interested to know what will follow. As important, if not less is the credibility of the content so don't fudge with numbers and data because if you play around with facts and figures your work and presentation will lose authenticity. You should also be open to the idea of customizing your presentations as per the audience's need, knowledge and level of interest. It is important to pitch your presentation to suit the audience.

In order to make your presentation effective there are certain simple yet effective techniques. Always keep variety in your content and try to fragment your presentation into parts. To enhance audience interaction, take questions from them and have a brain storming session towards the end. It is very important to engage the people you are interacting with. This can happen by keeping your presentation interactive and allowing space for audience participation. Your presentation should work like a stimulant not sedative. It is equally crucial to have intelligent question answers sessions because the kind of questions asked are reflective of the impact of your presentation on the audience and how well you have appealed to their senses. Master the topic you are going to speak on and research widely, review deeply and explore all possible material associated with the content. In short, be a master of your topic. It is important that you are updated and your knowledge is not outdated and irrelevant. Practice, practice and practice is the mantra to avoid slips and jitters. Keep your material such that your presentation is personalized and memorable. It also helps you to overcome nervousness and fear. You should also learn the tactics of handling difficult audience who are present only to bully you. Timing is equally important because don't allow faulty timing to spoil your meeting. Supplement your presentation with the right body language and carefully chosen vocabulary. In presentations, use multimedia with care and caution, too much animation should not melt down your presentation.

Conclusion

Public speaking and the art of making presentation calls for efficient communication skills. Nothing in life is more important than the ability to interact with others. It pervades all aspects of business environment. It is needed for job interviews, conference, meetings, workshops and all public events. Yet employees tend to neglect and overlook and create obstructions in their career advancements. It cannot be denied that no matter how knowledgeable and experienced you are it is all a waste if you are unable to disseminate your knowledge to others positively. Good

public speaking enhances professional growth and accelerates your business to the next level. It works wonders to inspire, persuade and motivate people you are dealing with. It helps you to acquire positions of authority and keeps you active in a competitive market. It enhances productivity and sales. It can be concluded that our ability to communicate sets you apart from others. It is debatable whether these language conventions make us superior to others but it is certainly a skill which is "neighbour's every owner's pride."

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