

Confidence – nerves – anxiety

One of the comments I hear most often is related to confidence and nerves. People tell me they get anxious, terrified, or totally panic struck at the thought of giving a presentation. As the moment arrives for them to rise to their feet the symptoms double in strength!

Of course everyone would like to be the best. They would like to hold the audience attention, look and feel confident, deliver an effective presentation and gain the applause and respect of the audience. We all strive for perfection!

That is a goal that is theoretically within everyone's reach, but is also for most people not realistic. As the media concentrates on the Olympic bid, an analogy with athletes will help explain what I mean.

Many Olympic athletes know at the start of their event, that even if they beat their personal best, they will be a long way short of a medal. Importantly, it does not matter. What does matter is that they perform well, do not disgrace themselves and enjoy the event. They do not need to be the best, they need to be the best they can. In achieving this personal goal, they know that every event, every race, will add to their abilities. But they also know something else. They know they have to work at it and of course have to give themselves as much help as possible.

Confidence does not just happen

The airline pilot is not afraid of flying, he is afraid of crashing. Equally I could argue that people are nervous not of speaking in public, but of it going wrong. Continuing that analogy, the pilot therefore takes control of all the aspects of flying and virtually eliminates the crashing option.

Nervous speakers need to do the same. In their case that is taking control of themselves, the material, the audience, and the resources. It is here that there is often incongruence between ideal and reality.

When I ask the nervous speaker what they do 30 minutes before a presentation, the most common replies are: panic, re-write the speech notes, rush around getting things ready, and a whole variety of other answers. Is that taking control? One candidate told me recently that they would most likely be in the taxi to the venue, writing the ending of their speech. Let me compare this with a confident speaker, and what they might do in the same 30 minutes.

Meeting and greeting the audience is one option. Visualising the successful presentation, preparing themselves physically and mentally to speak, breathing and vocal warm up exercises are other options, as well as looking forward to speaking. What they are not doing is still preparing the content or the notes. They are not running around sorting the venue, their notes, any props or technical items or otherwise stressing themselves.

We know confidence is crucial for presenters. The commonest cited attributes for a good speaker are confident and professional. With confidence, everything is under control, you are in charge. Little obstacles remain little and easily overcome.

Confidence – it's a complicated concept!

Confidence is a word that everyone knows, and yet can be hard to define. When giving a presentation, it is the feeling of being prepared and reasonably certain that you will perform well when it counts.

However this confidence can come from knowing you speak and deliver well. It can come from knowing that the material is well prepared and relevant to the audience. It comes from having the grounding of knowledge in the subject that will allow you to cater for the unexpected question.

It is not a 100% confidence though. That could create arrogance, could cause laziness and could lead to a lower standard of preparation and delivery. There needs to be enough adrenalin to create a sense of excitement, to raise the game a little and to enthuse and excite the speaker who in turn will enthuse and excite the audience. Confidence is self-perpetuating up to a point. You know you can present and prepare well. You use good speaking skills and consequently reap the reward of having your confidence increased when things go well.

Lack of confidence is also self-perpetuating as well. The less confident speaker will become aware of every fault that exposes their shortcomings and vulnerabilities. They will note every hesitation, every error in their presentation and allow this to further 'prove' that they were right in the first place to doubt their abilities. These are what hypnotherapists call 'ANTs', something I have written about before - Automatic Negative Thoughts. These are the statements we say and repeat to ourselves such as, "I can't...", "I will never be able to...". "I am not very good at...", and so on. The more we re-enforce our negative beliefs, the more we struggle to combat them. We all have doubts, fears and anxiety. We can all learn to control them and keep them in perspective.

Keeping it positive

Confidence is helped by a number of factors. Your own performance feedback, the feedback from colleagues and the audience, and the response you give to that feedback.

We are all aware of how difficult it can be to gracefully accept praise. This is whether it is self-praise or praise received from others. Are we the sort of person who counters praise with a 'but'?

'You delivered that well', is countered by: 'But the audience was friendly'.

'You handled the awkward questions well'. 'But I knew the answer'.

But, but and more buts

As a trainer I might get a pile of positive evaluation sheets after a course and just one that is critical. Over the next few days the positive pile will be placed on the mental back burner whilst I worry about the one person who did not share the view of all the others. If I am not careful it will nag at me, demand that I consider each aspect of the course and how that failed to meet the attendee's expectations. It is human nature.

Imagine if you accepted positive feedback rather than finding a reason not to. Imagine how much your confidence would increase when you allow your skills to be recognised and rewarded with praise. Imagine the effect of putting all feedback into perspective. Not everything will always go well and there is always room for helpful comments. Even if you have a nightmare of a presentation, you can learn from it and evaluate it in the perspective of it not being the norm, but the exception that warrants some consideration as to why it went wrong to ensure lessons are learnt. This approach is so much more beneficial than deciding that one poor performance wipes out all the positive experiences.

Learning and growing

The successful presenter learns from every presentation and knows that obstacles can be overcome. Alternative skills can be developed and one poor presentation is not the end of the world. Indeed working to overcome the obstacles continues to build the confidence and provide new energy. In order to gain confidence and experience, there has to be the less successful events to provide the learning.

We also learn and get motivated by others. I speak in competition regularly and have had some success. However when I don't win, the initial disappointment is quickly changed to motivation to improve. I am not alone in this and certainly in my area the standard of competition has continually grown as every time the bar is lifted higher and higher. Confident people aren't threatened by constructive criticism, but unconfident people are. Consequently, confident people are more likely to focus on what they can improve rather than dwell on what went wrong.

A presenter can get caught in a confidence draining cycle. Beware allowing yourself to feel stressed as that in turn causes anxiety, the anxiety causes panic, the panic leads to mistakes, mistakes allow self-doubt to creep in, escalating the panic, causing the presenter to forget things. Pretty soon, the focus goes from delivering a great presentation to just wanting to get off the stage alive, and dreading the next speaking opportunity.

I also recognise what I learn and from whom I learn it. I was delighted to win the National Championship in 2004. I was equally delighted to recognise publicly just how much I had learnt from other top speakers. From one I learnt powerful pause and pace techniques. From another I learnt to enhance my vocal range in a way that was particularly effective. We all learn at all levels. Never stop allowing yourself to learn and grow.

Make it happen

Another comment I often hear is that people go to great lengths to avoid speaking in public unless they have to. Think back to when you learnt to drive. You had lessons and you then practised. You were determined to master the skills; you took every opportunity to drive. Of course the result was that your driving got better and your confidence grew. You never attempted to avoid driving. You worked hard at it, studied, took lessons and found that things that were immensely difficult just suddenly became easier. Great speakers do not just happen. They work hard at perfecting their skills, learning new techniques, getting real life experience and begin to enjoy the whole process.

Believe in yourself

Experience, practice, skill development are all important but so is self-belief or self-esteem. Set goals for yourself, acknowledge your successes however small and regard them as building blocks as you develop the faith in yourself. As your confidence grows, allow your faith in yourself to grow. Each situation you handle, each presentation you deliver is another positive learning step and another indicator that whatever happens you will be able to manage and conquer – not just because of your faith in yourself but because this is enshrined in the hard work, dedication and determination to succeed.

If you believe you will deliver an effective presentation, it increases the chances that you will.

Relax and let the inner self flow

True confidence is much more than mere attitude, it's an embedded way of thinking and being that is based on the hard work and effort combined with the skills and a measure of self-esteem. It is knowing that you have hidden resources that will rise to the occasion as required. Not blocked by undue anxiety or fear, the creative mind can be allowed to work positively in the most demanding of situations. Like an athlete who says they are in the 'zone'. The speaker who remains calm will find words, phrases and techniques will rise into the conscious mind without effort. It is as if the energy that is required when worrying, fretting and feeling anxious is released and can be used instead positively. The mind and body will almost go into automatic. Allow your powerful mind to impress you sometimes. If you don't block it, believe me it will.

Confidence is moves and complacency is static

Confidence, self belief, expertise and experience are all great to have. There is a danger that the learning and growing stops. No new challenges are offered or accepted and an easy status quo develops. I have met a number of speakers who used to be dynamic, used to be good, used to be inspiring. However they stopped moving somewhere in the glare of the spotlight of success. They became complacent, arrogant or just plain lazy. Speech preparation is reduced as their 'skill' will carry them. They get jaded, their delivery gets stale and somehow they become less effective and something of a disappointment to their audiences. Never stop working, challenging yourself and learning. It was the hard work that developed your skills and confidence in the first place. Always work for that special 'buzz' that comes from concluding a presentation and knowing that you really did your best. If you coast along, the audience might not realise but you will; the door will open to the complacency that leads you astray.

Don't give up – start now

Let me conclude by returning to the newer speaker. Complacency is not an issue as you are still developing your confidence. Recognise that each step is a small one. I often tell my course attendees that there is not one thing that I will teach them that will improve their skills dramatically. It is the many many little things that will add up to making a substantial improvement. Allow each small step to increase your skills, and your confidence. Just like any other achievement, it will be a bit at a time. Of course training and learning skills will help give you the tools. You can practice using your new skills in a variety of different ways and each time you will find yourself more adept. Don't block success or mask it with negatives, but enjoy the process. As an adult you can actually enjoy the process. You did not really think about the process of learning to read, it just happened. With presenting you can enjoy giving the presentation and enjoy the process of your own learning and development. How satisfying that is!

Accept that the ups and downs of your presentation are all learning points. Accept that by making the conscious effort even to read this article you are already ahead of many people who just give up emotionally and decide that they can't speak. You know you have a more positive attitude so let that flow. Accept you are not infallible, but that with determination, a positive attitude, some skill development and learning, your abilities and your confidence in those abilities will grow. Let it happen!

About the author

Ian Price left Local Government work after 26 years and set up Business Training Direct - a company that specialises in presentation skills training. Providing a range of courses to suit all levels of knowledge and experience, Ian's training will ensure a high standard of competence is obtained in a short period of time. There are options for public courses, in-house courses and one2one coaching. Ian is also a trained hypnotherapist and can offer addition work when nerves and anxiety threaten to get out of control.

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