



This month:

PREACH WHAT YOU PRACTICE



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Chances are, at one point or another in your career, you have had to make a presentation, lead a group discussion or host a meeting. This may or may not be a regular part of your job, but it is an important one, and one that can cause no end to your internal suffering. Why do most humans fear public speaking above all else? Well, it could be what Rami Belson said, "It's better to keep your mouth shut and give the impression that you're stupid than to open it and remove all doubt." This month we look at how preparation is the key to reducing your anxiety over speaking in public, making presentations or having those difficult one-on-one conversations...

"Spectacular achievement is always preceded by unspectacular preparation."

- Robert H. Schuller

do you ever feel "not quite yourself" when you have to speak in public?

you know you're working in the new millennium when:

12. You think a "half-day" means leaving at 5:00pm.
11. You think Einstein would have been more effective had he put his ideas into a matrix.
10. You lecture the neighborhood kids selling lemonade on ways to improve their process.
9. You get all excited when it is Saturday so you can wear sweats to work.
8. You refer to the tomatoes grown in your garden as deliverables.
7. You know the people at the airport hotels better than your next door neighbors.
6. You ask your friends to "think out of the box" when making Friday night plans.
5. You refer to your dining room table as the flat filing cabinet.
4. Your reason for not staying in touch with family is that they don't have email addresses.
3. Keeping up with sports entails adding ESPN's homepage to your bookmarks.
2. You have a "to-do" list that includes entries for lunch and bathroom breaks.

And the number one sign you're working in the new millennium...

1. You consider 2nd day air delivery and inner-office mail painfully slow.

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"The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public."

- Author Unknown

Recently, over a beer, one of my business partners told me about a conversation that she had with one of our clients. The client's problem was that he needed help getting his frontline workers to be more confident in speaking to their customers. Sound familiar?

As we spoke, I was reminded of my own fears in speaking to people, whether face to face with an individual or in front of groups. This is a challenge that most of us are faced with. Very few people are totally confident to the point that they never feel at least a little bit uncomfortable before they talk to individuals or groups.

My business partner that I mentioned, for example, has no problem in talking to groups up to about thirty-five in number, but she faces significant butterflies with groups larger than that. I, on the other hand, suffer the same amount of apprehension regardless of the group size. In fact, as I look over my career, the original reason that I got involved in the training world in the first place was to help me get over this fear.

I'll never forget the first time that I stood up before a group in a training room. All I had to do was read the 'Housekeeping' instructions: where the washrooms were, what time lunch was being served, etc. Well the piece of paper that I was reading from was shaking so much that I think people at the front of the room were feeling a draft. But, for me, it was the beginning of the cure.

I know statistics can be a little misleading but some surveys that I have seen indicate that 'Death' is the fourth most fearful thing that people face. Public speaking comes in at number one.

So what causes this fear? Many things, probably, but one of the biggest issues is fear of failure. It is a constant challenge for all of us to get out of our 'comfort zone' and take chances. As I think of our client that called my partner, each of those frontline workers he talked about is faced with a choice. "Do I approach the decision maker and engage him or her in conversation at the risk of making mistakes or irritating the customer?" Or, "Do I do what I've always done, and quietly get on with things without taking any risks?"

We've all faced similar situations in our business and personal lives, haven't we? I remember confiding to a colleague some years ago that I couldn't deliver a session to a new client group of highly academic professionals. Simply put, I had convinced myself that I was going to fail and all I wanted to do was run away. My colleague was very supportive and, in the end, the session was extremely successful.

What can we do about these fears? The trite answer is to just get on your feet and do it! And there is some truth in that. There definitely is no substitute for practicing in the real world. But there are a few things that can help you.

BE PREPARED - If you don't know your stuff and don't practice what you are going to say, whether it be one on one with a client or in front of a group, then you are definitely increasing your chances of failing. But remember this, if you are prepared then you will know far more than your audience about what you are talking about.

GET SUPPORT - Seek support if you are afraid. Practice in front of friends or colleagues and ask them to provide you with meaningful, specific feedback. Without the help of the colleague that I mentioned earlier, I might well have failed miserably and lost a client.

If you are a supporter, a coach, or a leader, be empathetic. After all, you know what the person is going through. Through your empathy, encourage the person to express his or her fears. Also, poke at the person's comfort level with their knowledge of their subject. And don't be afraid to provide effective feedback beginning with the things the person does well, followed by suggestions for improvement.

As you think about your next customer interaction or your next presentation in front of a group, remember that it is all right to have a few butterflies. But prepare properly and seek support, and those butterflies will disappear once you start talking.

Disappear, that is, until the next time.