

Stand and deliver



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by Cheryl Donnison

As a teacher, you are used to ‘presenting’ practically every day of your working life. However, as professional coach Cheryl Donnison explains, many of us are still scared to death of doing formal presentations



Presentations can be scary things. Really scary things. Did you realise that we, the British, fear doing presentations only slightly less than we fear spiders? But only slightly. Meanwhile, in North America, the latest statistics from the Book of Lists say people are more frightened of doing presentations than they are of death.

However, giving a presentation – and the nerves that come with it – is something virtually every professional, including teachers, has to handle at various points in their careers. But why do formal presentations seem to put the fear of God into many people? What is it about the ‘podium’ that turns many of us into jibbering wrecks?

It seems that even teachers who sail calmly through their professional lives in the classroom, spending most of their days talking (at length), can often experience ‘podium panic’ when asked to move out of their comfort zone and address new and different groups of people.

This ‘out of the comfort zone experience’ can include on-the-job activities like one’s first attempt at addressing the entire school in an assembly, or being asked to talk to a group of governors. From a professional advancement perspective, it might also include convincing a senior management team at your ‘target’ school that you are the right person for the job.

If presentations of all kinds can make you nervous then do not worry, there are two lots of good news for you. First is that you are not alone, and secondly, you really can do something about it.

We have all, at some time, experienced stage fright, speech anxiety, or what psychologists sometimes call ‘talking terror’. Two of the world’s greatest actors, Peter O’Toole and Laurence Olivier, experienced serious ‘performance anxiety’ while others have suffered so acutely that it has threatened to ruin their careers. And yet they go on.

Those teachers who do not learn how to ‘go on’ and control this kind of ‘talking terror’ risk becoming boring, ineffective presenters. Worse still, they can badly damage their teaching careers by avoiding positions or promotions in schools that require them to speak in public, however infrequently. Those who do find ways to improve their presentation skills tend to see career options broaden and job satisfaction soar.

It all comes down to, at first, recognising, then living with, and eventually 'conquering' the very fear that causes podium panic.

Psychologists believe that our minds have a powerful way of convincing us that threats – even imaginary ones – are real. And the truth about the fear of presenting, and the reason it is many people's number one fear, is that it embodies so many of our most formidable and pervasive fears. These include our fear of:

- Failure.
- Embarrassment.
- Losing control.
- Being judged.
- Not being perfect.
- Disappointing our superiors.
- Showing our weaknesses.
- Exposing our ignorance.
- Looking like idiots.
- Being laughed at.
- Going blank.

What differs from individual to individual is the source of the anxiety and the degree to which it impedes their performance. Some people cannot stand the thought that people are judging them while they talk. Others are fine with that, but cannot handle the thought of standing up in front of a group of strangers. Still others do not mind talking to strangers, but put them in front of a group of co-workers – people they see every day – and they lose it.

“With the fear of public speaking, it's the perception of the situation that does us in, not the situation itself,” says Scott Sindelar, president of the Arizona Speakers Association. Mr Sindelar, a psychologist who advises professionals with public-speaking anxiety problems adds: “Most people can learn to cope with the pressures of public speaking by practising a variety of stress-management techniques.”

The following lists techniques people use for coping with 'podium panic':

- Your audience understands your nervousness; they know what you are feeling and will forgive it. Similarly they will forgive honest mistakes (but do not make a point over apologising).

- Nervousness can be invisible; most will not notice the small changes in your voice or occasional mistakes (most speakers who describe themselves as nervous actually appear confident and calm to the audience).
- Be yourself; let the real you come through; relax, practice some deep breathing techniques.
- Begin in your comfort zone; practice with friends; share your fears with friends.
- Check out the room first; check out the space, the equipment, the lights.
- Concentrate on the message.
- Begin with a slow but strong, well-prepared introduction.
- Have a confident and clear conclusion.
- Most important of all, be prepared and practice (but do not overdo it).

When you are planning the presentation itself, think visually. Pictures can really help to hold people's attention. If you have got what you think is a good metaphor to explain your point, then do not be afraid to use it. "The web is like a school of fish," you might say. Go to images.google.com and type in 'sardines' or 'school of fish' or whatever you think is appropriate and make a slide. Then say the web is like that. Putting together words with appropriate and memorable pictures helps make your presentation much more powerful.

A significant part of your preparation should be knowing your audience expectations. You will not be able to present effectively without first understanding your audience's perspective. You should have some idea how your audience will be likely to respond based on their educational and cultural background and knowledge of the subject.

When you are analysing your audience, think about both their professional and personal profiles. Your audience will pay attention to some things because they are members of a specific group. But also, they will react to other things because of their likes, dislikes and uncertainties. You have to keep both profiles in mind.

Your analysis will suggest what you should say, what you should not say, and the tone you should use. In a phrase – be prepared. Some people opt for coaching help in overcoming 'podium panic'. I have helped a number of professional people – from senior teachers to sales managers – come to terms with their fear of public speaking. Others opt for a more self-help type approach. Whatever route you choose, keep returning to the basic aims and objectives of your presentation and ask yourself the following questions:

- How much does my audience know about the subject?
- How much do they know about me?

- What do they expect from me?
- How interested will they be in what I have to say?
- What is their attitude toward me?
- What is their attitude toward the subject?
- What kinds of cultural biases are they likely to have toward me and my topic?

These questions can be crucial. To be an effective speaker, you must know your audience, establish a relationship by being sincere and knowledgeable about the subject, then meet their expectations about the subject matter. If you can exceed their expectations then you have really succeeded and you will already be looking forward to the next time you stand and deliver.

A good beginning and a good ending will stick in the minds of your audience. Start strong – many presenters forget this. Just get going, and say something like: “Hi, I’m Sue. It’s good to be here today. Thanks for coming to my session. Today, we’re going to talk about...” Make sure those are the absolute first words you say out loud. There is no need for a funny joke at the outset. Just start strong and confident and you will move on at a good pace.

You need not talk continually from start to finish. Throughout the entire presentation, do make sure that when you say something important, leave a little gap, a small pause. Let it hang there for a few seconds. You can try this when talking to friends. “You know what I think?” (pause ... two ... three ... four ...) “I think Tony Blair’s higher educational policy will create havoc in this country over the next 20 years.” (pause ... two ... three ... four ...) “And here’s why ...”

Remember that your audience will gauge much from your body language. Just looking confident is half the battle. Do not stand behind the lectern. Move away from the podium and out from behind the ‘presenters’ table’. Keep your hands out of your pockets. Take off your conference badge (the lights will catch it and be distracting). Pace a little bit around the stage, timed with key points, saying one thing over here, and another over there. But do not leap around like a person possessed: you will put some people off with overly theatrical ‘tricks’.

End strongly. For example: “So that’s why I believe celebrating achievement at all levels in school is absolutely essential (pause). I appreciate your attention today. Thanks very much.” Then stand there and wait. Everyone will clap, because you just told them you were done. When they have finished clapping, ask them if they have any questions. If nobody asks anything, break the uncomfortable silence with a light comment like: “Well, I must have told you everything you need to know, then! I’ll be around afterwards if you think of anything. Thanks again.” Then start packing away your stuff.

Look ... you survived!

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