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STAGE FRIGHT

“On the stage he was natural, simple, affecting.

‘Twas only that, when he was off, he was acting,” a quote from Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774). This does not apply to most of us when we are called upon to speak publicly. Even seasoned public speakers get stage fright and muzzle their lines.

One of the best and most eloquent public speakers I’ve ever heard was a friend and a statistics graduate student at Trinity College in Dublin. He was a keynote speaker one evening at a TCD Literary and Historical Society (Debating Society) meeting. Suffice it to say his topic had nothing to do with statistics. The college had a small podium upon which speakers laid their presentations. It also had a microphone. My friend had twenty minutes to deliver his presentation. He proceeded to the podium without notes and, and without using the microphone; he spoke from the stage whilst easily walking back and forth.

About half way through his presentation he neared the podium and placed his elbow on it in a relaxed gesture. The podium collapsed with a clatter around his feet – all whilst my friend was in mid-sentence. My friend moved away slightly from the fallen, and broken podium, and proceeded to speak from whence in the sentence he momentarily left off.

It would not have surprised anyone to learn that some smart aleck, from the opposing team, took time out in advance of the debate to saw through the podium pole to within a nanosecond of its life. This is viewed as student frivolity in such debating situations, and rarely, if ever happens in other public speaking meetings.

Some of us, however, may remember the big Microsoft launch of Windows 98 when Bill Gates was speaking and using PowerPoint to show us all the wonders of his new program. In the middle of Gates’s presentation the computer crashed and he was forced to await the skills of his technology people to get the computer up and running again. No back-up computer was available. Aside from being horribly unfortunate, this incident also contained an overwhelming lack of planning.

One of the prerequisites of public speaking is planning. Irrespective of how well you know your subject, you will never fully gauge your audience until you are up there and speaking.

Adequate planning ensures that you perform to the maximum of your potential, and also that you reach, and influence, a maximum of your audience. Your confidence level will depend on the amount of your research and planning, and your impact and success will depend on your knowledge, passion and delivery. Whatever the objectives of your presentation, mostly business communications, your overall goal should be to retain your audience’s attention for the full duration of your homily.

You can have the most innovative, financially rewarding, and enterprising product or service to sell, but if your presentation lacks the confidence of your public, then you might as well return to the drawing board via the nearest exit.

The ability to comprehensively communicate gives you an extra edge, a powerful business advantage over your competitors, and enhances your ability to get and keep business. Successful public speaking comes from understanding the principles of spoken communication, understanding the importance of identifying your audience's perceived needs, and a well-planned, well-structured presentation geared towards whatever outcome you wish. In all this, structuring your presentation to best suit your own personal style of speaking increases your confidence. Listen to your own voice, over a period of time, and learn what suits you best. Sometimes using the services of a trained speech coach may help enormously.

Knowing your own strengths and weaknesses will allow you to manage your limitations and body language. You can always measure the body language of your audience by never choosing to speak whilst looking twelve to fourteen inches above their heads, as some speech coaches, wrongfully I believe, often recommend. Keep good consistent eye contact with your entire audience – they like to see the whites of your eyes. Your influence will diminish considerably if you are perceived as talking over their heads.

Your imaginative use of modern technology to effectively support and enhance your message should cover the visual, hearing, and feeling elements. One component of visual aids – less is always more.

If you are giving a presentation to overseas customers, or potential customers, ensure that you understand as fully as possible the culture of the market you are entering. If you do not speak the language of the country where you are making a presentation, it is helpful, and prudent, to say so up front and to make a short apology in that language from the outset. Any of the language websites, Commerce or State Department contacts, or often high schools in your area, will give you the few words you will need to achieve this goal.

You should ensure, well in advance, that your audience fully understands that your presentation will be given in the English language, if such is the case, however, a light-hearted apology early on in your formal speech is usually an effective tool to gain support and a wry smile.

Finally, when you think you are fully prepared, do a Jessie Owens on it, and practice, practice, and practice again until you just love the sound of your own voice. The human voice is the most thrilling and persuasive instrument we have at our disposal. Using it wisely is important. You may still get stage fright, but with a thorough knowledge of and passion for your subject, you should be able to overcome the causes of this actor's malady. Like an actor, your livelihood may very well depend on overcoming stage fright.

The stage fright demons in us all, before a presentation, are always willing to make themselves heard, particularly in the battering sound of our own heart beat. Through your own preparation and knowledge base, and perhaps a little coaching, you have the potential to beat your opposition, even if the podium should shatter around your feet – and your product or service is of high quality.