

Royal Bank Letter

Reflections on Our Times

Speaking in Public

Public speaking is being practised increasingly as a broader range of people are being called upon to 'say a few words' before an audience. Many speakers are seized with stage fright as they rise to their feet. The way to conquer this is also the way to make good speeches: Be prepared!

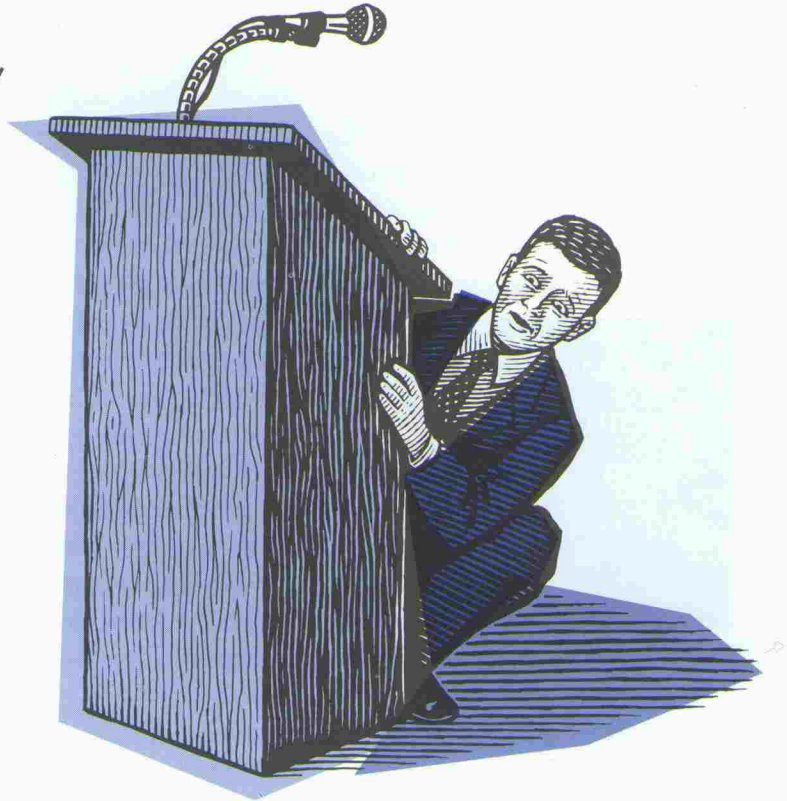
are often expected to say a few words. Whereas at one time only senior managers made presentations or speeches as part of their jobs, almost anyone in today's workplace may be called upon to talk to an employee or client group, or similar gathering.

Executives who once thought they could spend their lives quietly administering affairs are now asked to speak before gatherings of financial analysts, regulators and community leaders to explain corporate policies and promote the interests of their industries. Public speaking has been included in their job descriptions whether they like it or not.

And many people don't like it at all. Often the most insincere line in a speech comes when the

MORE AND MORE PEOPLE these days are finding themselves having to speak in public. In addition to the usual occasions when they may be asked to address a club or other social body, the number of situations in which they may be obliged to face an audience has grown.

For instance, for many, delivering eulogies at funerals is an important custom, and participants in wedding ceremonies



speaker attests to what a pleasure it is to be there, when in fact he or she would sooner be almost anywhere else on earth at that moment. Yet it is an absolute fact that public speaking can be an absolute pleasure for both the speaker and the audience if it is approached with due care.

The first step to making good speeches is to subdue one's fear of appearing in public. This trepidation is as old as the Old Testament, in which Jeremiah protested that he was too young to be a preacher, and Moses was reluctant to assume the leadership of the Israelites because "I am slow of speech, and of slow tongue."

Modern psychologists have a rational explanation for the phenomenon known as "stage fright." What people are really afraid of, they say, is the possibility of humiliation resulting from criticism or failure. Being on guard against such psychological harm provokes an instinctive "fight or flight response."

As our bodies prepare to fight or flee in the face of a threat, our muscles become so taut that we begin to tremble. Our faces grow pale as blood leaves the skin so that we will not bleed so much if wounded; our hearts pound as blood pumps more quickly through our systems to lend us extra strength.

At the same time, our glands shoot adrenalin into our blood to add to our alertness and energy. Our mouths go dry so that we will not choke on our saliva — which explains why public speakers so frequently clear their throats.

All of these conditions are classic signs of stress. As Dr. Hans Seyle and his disciples have declared, stress can be a strong positive force if we know how to capitalize on it. In the context of public speak-

“What too many orators want in depth, they will give you in length.”

CHARLES-LOUIS DE MONTESQUIEU

ing, stress provides an edge of tension which brings out a dynamic performance. Legions of veteran actors and actresses have testified that they could never perform as

well as they did if chronic stage fright had not kept them at a high pitch of intensity.

Perhaps the first thing a prospective speaker should know about stage fright is that almost everybody in a like situation has it. Shy people tend to think that their shyness is “worse” than anyone else’s even as they try to hide it. In fact, many others are just as shy, and are hiding it just as well.

The eloquent Welshman David Lloyd George was known as one of the most able parliamentary debaters of the 20th century, an orator whose charisma on election platforms helped to carry him to the British prime ministership. Yet, he recalled, “The first time I attempted to make a public talk I tell you that I was in state of misery. It is no figure of speech, but literally true, that my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth; and, at first, I could hardly get out a word.”

Experience enabled Lloyd George to overcome his stage fright eventually, but some public figures never do; they simply learn to control it. If you are like the latter, it may be reassuring to remind yourself that the audience is naturally less conscious of your nervousness than you are. The tremor in your voice might sound like a jackham-

mer in your own head, but ask friends in the audience about it afterwards, and they probably didn’t notice it. Even if your nervousness shows, your listeners usually are unlikely to object to it.

Overcoming fear and appearing confident

Once you resign yourself to a certain degree of nervousness, then you can start practising some of the physical techniques for controlling it. Chief among these is deep breathing. The extra oxygen is soothing and the deliberate pacing of your breaths causes your heart-beat to slow down.

The physical actions entailed in loosening up before a public speaking appearance resemble the warm-ups athletes go through before entering a competition: You wiggle your toes and fingers, rotate your head and stretch your neck, move your jaw from one side to the other.

Athletes also “psyche” themselves up before performing. When they charge out aggressively, they are unconsciously putting into practice psychologist William James’ theory that actions can evoke feelings. James wrote that if we deliberately act as if we are brave, “a courage fit will very likely replace the fit of fear.”

The above was quoted with approval by Dale Carnegie in his well-known book, *How to Develop Self-Confidence and Influence People by Public Speaking*. Carnegie’s title was instructive. Many men and women who have suffered agonies of shyness have found the self-assurance they needed to get along in the world by taking public speaking courses.

People accustomed to talking to groups develop an air of poise which can be invaluable in meeting strangers, participating in gatherings, and exercising leadership. Carnegie advised speakers to take a bold stand though they may be quaking inside: “Stride forth bravely, stop, stand still, and act as if you loved it.”

If you remain nervous despite this inspiring stance, try not to show it. You can relieve the tension unobtrusively by doing things like twisting your fingers behind your back, wiggling your toes, or clasping a coin in your fist.

In public speaking more than most other pursuits, appearances are important. This begins with physical appearance. “Had Cicero himself pronounced one of his orations with a blanket about

his shoulders," Joseph Addison observed, "more people would have laughed at his dress than admired his eloquence."

You should dress for a speech in the same way as you would dress for a wedding or any other social occasion. Your clothes should be suited to the occasion. A speaker's dress should never be so incongruous, flashy or glamorous that it distracts attention from what he or she has to say.

People who are inclined to make flamboyant gestures should try to curb them slightly, mindful that they can also take the audience's mind off their basic message. Gestures, of course, are a highly individualistic feature of a personality, and you would look and feel awkward if you tried to suppress them totally. But you should not just let yourself go — instead, you should be aware of your gestures, and try to use them to your best advantage. If truth be told, some of the most apparently passionate orators have their gestures under complete control.

Unless you are a comedian, you are best-off to try to give yourself an air of quiet dignity. The degree of respect you elicit for your personality is bound to affect your audience's respect for what you have to say. So be yourself, but be a little better than your normal self. If you normally tend to slur your words, for instance, take care to pronounce every word precisely and clearly. If you ordinarily talk fast, slow down.

You may be an inveterate slouch in your daily life, but this is the time to hold your chest high, tuck in your stomach, and press the back of your neck against your collar. Apart from enhancing your physical presence, this stance deepens the chest cavity, allowing you to bring your breathing under better control.

People cannot do much about the pitch of their voices, but they can learn to use their voices more expressively. As in singing, breath control helps them to do this by permitting variations in volume and intonation. Nothing turns an audience off more completely than the featureless droning of a voice speaking in monotone.

As far as public speaking is concerned, timing is everything. Pauses at psychological moments, speed-ups and slow-downs, abrupt changes of pace — these can make the difference between stimulation and stupification.



Brevity and solid preparation are key

As a general rule, the quality of speeches is in inverse proportion to their length. Oratory is like a plough which, to do its job properly, must keep freshly turning over the audience's interest as it moves along. There always comes a point when it has gone on so long that people begin to lose that interest. Professional speech writers maintain that anything longer than 20 minutes stretches an audience's attention span. More often than not, a long, shallow speech is inadequately prepared.

"In composing, think much more of your matter than your manner," wrote the eminent American lawyer William Wirt. Writers find that the more material they have to work with, the easier it is to make something out of it. In doing research, they will always opt for too much rather than risk having too little. They know that "overkill" makes their task easier in the long run. If they are dealing with ideas as opposed to hard facts, the rule is that the more they read and think about an idea, the more effectively they will be able to write about it. The only disadvantage to a speech packed with solid facts and ideas is that it might be too heavy. One way to lighten it up is to put your thoughts into colloquial language, as you would if you were explaining something to a family member or friend. Wherever appropriate, you might add a humorous touch, although amateurs should be warned to leave stand-up comedy to the professionals. Since nothing fails so miserably as a botched joke, it is advisable to aim for warm smiles rather than belly laughs.

In writing a speech as in writing anything else, one should strive to make one's points absolutely

clear by using language that matches the vocabulary of the audience — the plainer, the better. Professional jargon should be avoided unless it is certain that everyone present will understand every word of what is being said.

There is at least one marked difference between writing for a speaker's platform and writing for print. In the latter, authors take great pains to avoid repeating themselves. Because of the ephemeral nature of the spoken word, this does not apply to a speech.

The ending of a speech is vital because the final few sentences are the ones the listeners are most

likely to retain as they walk away. A good conclusion, then is a summary of the main points you want to make wrapped up in a rhetorical crescendo designed to leave your message ringing in the listeners' ears.

There is no set formula for preparing an ending to a speech, but it always pays to labour over it until you are satisfied that it

delivers your message with maximum impact. The last paragraph or so should be then committed to memory, so that you can look the audience in the eye at that critical psychological point.

To read or not to read?

Ideally, every single line of every speech should be memorized and the speaker's performance thoroughly rehearsed with the help of a tape or video recorder. "How-to" manuals on the subject advise that, if a speaker has not been able to memorize a speech entirely, he or she should deliver it extemporaneously, using brief notes to jog the memory and keep the speech moving in an orderly manner, point by point.

These manuals are prone to deplore the practice of reading a speech. The truth is, however, that ordinary mortals do not have the time, training or talent to memorize long stretches of prose. Nor do they have the quick-wittedness to ad lib without humming and hawing, resorting to trite language, repeating themselves, and straying from the sub-

ject. On the whole, they will do a far better job of speaking if they write out and read their words.

As a practical matter, any speech which contains a lot of detail or explains a carefully thought-out policy should be put on paper for the sake of accuracy. The reading of a speech need not detract from its impact. No less powerful an orator than Winston Churchill wrote out his complete text on small pieces of paper.

Churchill used what is known as the "power shovel method" of delivering a speech. A power shovel scoops up earth in large batches and dumps it into a waiting truck. In the same way, a person reading a speech can memorize a few phrases at a time from a written page and deliver them while looking in a natural manner at the audience. It takes practice, but speakers can learn to deliver whole paragraphs without looking as if they were reading them.

But just because a speech is designed to be read doesn't mean that it does not require careful preparation. It should be thought out, backed up with facts, and written with as much rigour as an academic paper. And it should be thoroughly rehearsed — aloud, and not only in one's head — to make it sound right. The written and spoken word are two different things, and revisions are usually needed before a text can be read aloud to its best effect.

The greatest cause of failure among speeches is not stage fright or delivery technique or the appearance of the speaker. If a speech fails, it is usually because it was written at the last minute and delivered without ever being rehearsed.

The speaker most likely to succeed is the one who has put many long hours into preparation. The public platform should hold no terrors for the person who knows the subject and knows what he or she wants to say.

Self-confidence is half the battle in the public arena, and it cannot be gained without hard work and forethought. But it makes the effort all the more worthwhile when you realize that the confidence gained in making successful speeches can extend into every aspect of your life.

"A speech is like a love affair. Any fool can start it, but to end it requires considerable skill."

LORD MONCROFT



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