

# Speaking in public

## Or ... how to stop being a jangle of nerves ...

There are various scenarios where you find you need to have a voice with confidence and authority:

- External conferences
- External seminars
- Internal conferences
- Internal seminars
- Induction for new employees
- Internal networking
- Client / internal meetings
- Client entertaining
- Guest speaker at an industry event

In our experience, it is the thought of public speaking that can send the most confident person into a dizzy spin of anxiety and worry. It can be the thought of the spotlight on you that can turn otherwise calm, balanced human beings into a jangling wreck of nerves! But – it really is not as daunting as you think. If you prepare yourself physically as well as mentally, it can turn from a terrifying experience into an empowering one.

Firstly, remember if you have to give a public talk, everyone in the audience is on your side. They have given up time to listen to you, so they are willing you to be good, the better you are the better the use of their time and the more they will get out of the experience.

Secondly, be secure in the knowledge that you probably know more about what you are talking about than the people you are talking to. If they ask questions it is because they are interested, not because they are trying to derail you.

When giving a public talk, planning is the key. Some of things you should think about:

- How long are you expected to talk for
- To how many people
- What time of day, so flavour of the talk
- What are you talking about
- What style are they expecting
- What equipment do you need and who is supplying it

All the above will determine how you plan. It is crucial that you are aware of the key points you want to get across, so however long you are speaking for, you know the audience has got the main message.

Don't be intimidated by large numbers, sometimes these can be less scary than small groups. Make sure you include the whole room when you are speaking, regardless of the numbers. To do this ensure your eyes follow the room from back to front regularly so that everyone feels included, that way you are minimising the chances of people getting fidgety and becoming disruptive.

Be careful not to use jargon language, even if you are speaking to an audience in the same sector or industry as you. There may be people in the audience who are new to the sector and currently unaware of the jargon used, they will feel left out and irritated if you use language they don't understand, it's important everyone feels included in your talk.

Think about the style people are expecting. Is it very formal, informal, are you standing or sitting,



is there going to be audience participation and if so, how have the seats been arranged.

If you are using power point, remember that this tool is, ideally, to be used to introduce each topic of your talk, it is not meant to show your whole talk on the screen, from which you read. This is guaranteed to bore the audience as you will not engage with them at all, and people will be reading the screen instead of listening to you. Try and use visual images to introduce topics rather than just words as this engages both sides of the brain of your audience and keeps their interest alive. If you are using equipment, ensure you give yourself enough time to test it before you start so that you feel confident when you begin.

### **Prepare your voice**

You can only speak as well as you breathe. Most people, particularly women, do not breathe correctly. If you sit quietly for a moment and check how your body moves when you breathe, it is likely to be a slight lifting of the chest and shoulders. It should, ideally, be your stomach and rib cage expanding when you breathe, as this will ensure you are taking your breath from the bottom of your lungs rather than the shallow breathing most people do. If you take full breaths your voice will last longer and you will sound more confident and speak with more authority. It will also steady your nerves. So invest in some quiet moments of deep breathing before you start your talk.

Make sure you drink plenty of water. But do this the day before you are due to talk as the voice box needs hydrating in plenty of time.

Include plenty of musicality to your voice. There is nothing more boring than listening to someone speak in a monotone with no inflection or interest in their speech. It makes it very difficult to hear what they are saying. So, think about the pitch, tone, volume and speed of your voice and vary them all during your talk. Use volume and speed to create interest and to emphasise particular points, you can alter the pitch (rise and fall) of your voice to create distinctions between spoken paragraphs so the audience is clear when you are moving onto the next topic / issue.

Use your body correctly. If you move your hands when you speak naturally, don't stop when you speak in public as you will be aware of the difference and this will make you sound less fluid when talking. If you are standing to speak, make sure your feet are firmly placed on the floor about hip width apart, what you want to avoid is crossing your legs over in front of each other. This will create two things: (1) you will feel unbalanced and therefore less confident and (2) you will look nervous to the people watching you.

You can try the pencil technique. However, I recommend you do this in a cubicle in the Ladies Washroom, not in front of your audience! Take a large pencil or pen (if neither are immediately available you can use your finger) and place it in between your teeth making sure you really stretch the muscles of your mouth wide open. Then say the first few sentences of your talk out loud. This will work the muscles of your mouth and when you remove the pencil / pen you will be speaking more clearly. People lip read far more than you think they do, so if the audience cannot see your mouth moving freely and openly when you speak it will make it a lot more difficult for them to hear what you are saying. Your voice will carry a lot further and with a lot more power and authority if you practice this first.

### **Speaking up in meetings**

This can be difficult to some people, especially if you are surrounded by very strong characters who like the sound of their own voice! It is easier if you are running the meeting as you have



to speak, but if you are one of the participants it can sometimes feel easier to simply let the dominant characters take over. However, the chances are you will leave the meeting feeling as though you have let yourself down by not speaking, and feeling internal resentment at those who dominate.

It is important you speak as quickly as possible. It actually doesn't matter what you say, simply opening your mouth and sound coming out is all that is important. It can be as simple as asking someone to pass the water! All you want to do is establish your presence in the room. Once you have made sound it will be much easier to continue. If you do not automatically have the opportunity to speak, then try sending a question in advance of the meeting to the person running the meeting, asking that they come to you at the appropriate point. That way you are ensuring you have a voice during the proceedings, even if that is the only thing you say.

Before the meeting starts, try and get there before everyone else and greet them as they enter the room, you are making sure you speak up front and everyone is aware you are there.

Comment on other people's views and points as they are speaking, simply saying, "Yes, I agree", or "Good point". These are simple things, but again you are getting your voice box working and making your presence felt. You are also gaining the support of others in the room as we all like to feel we are making a positive impact on others.

If you are running the meeting and you have someone in the room who is being disruptive, this can be very difficult to manage. The important thing is not to rise to the bait. Remain calm and in control at all times. To match their behaviour will ensure you lose the respect of others in the room. Remember, the disruptive person is telling everyone what they feel about themselves, not what they feel about you. People are only disruptive if they are feeling fearful and inadequate, they cover up these feelings with aggressive behaviour. Knowing this, doesn't necessarily make being on the receiving end of this behaviour any easier to cope with of course, but may help you to stay centred in your own assertive inner calm.

Ultimately, it is all about making your mark quickly, the longer you leave it the harder it is to find your voice.

Experiment with the above, see what works for you, what doesn't, find your own ways and remember:

**You have a voice, a strong voice,  
a voice that deserves to be heard**

