

# Being a good public speaker takes practice

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## **The ability to change public perception through a persuasive presentation is considered one of the keys to success in any job.**

Public speaking is a skill that is innate to some and the result of training and acquired knowledge for most. Improvement is always possible, regardless of the activity undertaken. As Virgil used to say, "We rarely know what we are capable of until we begin to try."

The key? Preparation and practice, according to IESE's [Brian O'Connor Leggett](#) and Ricardo Velilla in their book, [\*Persuasión: La clave del éxito en la comunicación para los negocios\*](#) (*Persuasion: The Key to Success in Business Communication*).

Good communication habits and employing certain techniques are necessary, they say. But above all, the secret is to practice, practice and practice. In the words of Epictetus, "Every habit and faculty is preserved and increased by correspondent actions."

The book quotes several classic speeches, such as Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," and includes anecdotes, such as one illustrating the power of words in a particular situation involving John F. Kennedy in 1963. To show his solidarity with the people of Berlin, the then-president of the United States attempted to say, "I am a Berliner, too." But by saying "*Ich bin ein Berliner*," pundits argue that what he actually said was "I am a doughnut," since "*ein Berliner*" in German is a local jam-filled confection. Despite his supposed grammatical gaffe, Kennedy's inspirational speech was understood in context and managed to give the citizens both strength and hope.

## Persuasion not manipulation

Oral persuasion is a technique that was widespread among Greek philosophers and writers. It was Aristotle who came up with the Rhetorical Triangle, which consists of the following: *ethos* or the credibility of the orator; *pathos*, the ability to create the appropriate emotional appeal; and *logos*, the skill of argumentation. To this day, this triangle constitutes the basis for oral communication training.

Depending on the audience or the situation in which the speech is given, the speaker needs to prioritize one given component over another, without neglecting the remaining two.

A speech that finds its main basis in *ethos* is best suited when intending to steer the audience in a particular direction - when an executive needs to tell his employees of future plans, for instance.

Speeches that focus on *pathos* tend to be used in situations of crisis where fear, uncertainty or feelings of insecurity are used as a means of persuading the audience.

Lastly, numerous business presentations tend to be rooted in *logos*, that is, contrasting facts and data.

The authors stress that "persuasion doesn't always harvest the desired or expected results." This is an interactive process through which the needs of two or more of the groups involved are met. Its purpose is to shape, reinforce or simply change the attitude of the public by means of a presentation, idea or speech, taking into consideration that "every person is free to think differently and decide accordingly." Failing to respect this freedom would constitute an attempt to manipulate.

## Preparing the speech

As Winston Churchill found, "If I have to give a two-hour speech, I'll spend 10 minutes preparing it. If the speech is 10 minutes long, then it takes me two hours to prepare." The key to a successful presentation lies in its preparation. The authors advise, "If you need to speak in public, start preparing as early as possible." They suggest following the SOAM formula.

*Situation:* Take into consideration when and where the speech will be given. Do not forget that non-verbal communication plays an important part. According to experts, 93 percent of the communication process consists of aspects that reach beyond words, such as intonation,

facial expressions, gestures and eye contact.

*Objective:* Be as specific as possible with regard to what you hope to achieve with your speech. When preparing the draft, take into account that all presentations comprise three parts: the introduction, the body and the conclusion. The introduction and the conclusion shouldn't exceed 10-15 percent of the presentation, i.e., for a 15-minute speech, they shouldn't be longer than two minutes each.

*Audience:* Be very aware of the public you will be addressing. The members of the audience are the speech's target and the defining reason for its shape and content. They are the client who needs to be looked after.

*Method:* Select the one that is likely to be the most useful in terms of achieving your objective. If you wish to use audiovisual aids, try to avoid writing everything down and remember to have a backup plan: technology can let you down.

## **Handling audience question time**

After the presentation, it is common to allow some space for questions, and this can be the most intimidating time for the speaker. The book explains that answers can, and must, also be prepared. By taking the audience into consideration, you can usually anticipate the likely questions. And for the unpredictable ones? "Be realistic and admit that you are not a walking encyclopedia or an infinite database," say the authors.

In order to be well prepared, you should think about the questions you would ask yourself; those you would expect to be asked as well as the ones you wouldn't; those you would hope to be asked; those you couldn't answer; and those whose answers might be delicate.

By following these 10 tips, success may not be guaranteed, but almost.

1. *Don't Rush Answers.* Make sure that you understand the question. Wait 10 seconds before you begin to answer.
2. *Be Attentive.* Pay as much attention to the conceptual content as to the non-verbal component of the question.
3. *Address the Whole Audience.* Do not just direct your answer to the person who has asked the question.
4. *Make Answers Direct, Clear and Concise.*
5. *Deflect Misconceived Questions.* You could tactfully say, for example, "I would consider the

question from a different angle."

6. *Have Accurate Data.* If necessary, go armed with statistics and information to support the information you provide.

7. *Practice the Technique of "Bringing Water to the Mill."* When faced with a tricky question, construct your answer in a manner that serves your own interests and for your own benefit.

8. *Convert a Negative Question into a Positive Answer.* Do not reiterate the negative aspect in your reply.

9. *Always Try to Keep the Situation Under Control.* You have the right not to answer certain questions, provided that you decline with tact and courtesy.

10. *Be Honest.* If you do not know the facts and data regarding what you're asked, say so.

## **Keeping your cool**

The anxiety generated by public speaking is a fairly natural fear, which is known as "stage fright" in show business. Some of the techniques described in the book can help to diminish this fear: preparing the speech plenty of time in advance, writing a draft, rehearsing your presentation and so on. The book also provides a series of relaxation exercises to help reduce stress.

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