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PUBLIC SPEAKING WITHOUT FEAR

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Public Speakers are Made, Not Born

Surveys on people's fears commonly feature public speaking at the very top of the list. Many people believe that public speaking is either something you are born with or without. This is not true. Public speaking can be learned, just like almost any skill. Critically, what matters is not simply putting in "10,000 hours", as misportrayed by some popular books, but deliberate, intentional, targeted practice. Practice is not rehearsal (simply a run-through) but focused on improving a specific area (e.g. body language).

This talk aims to give some principles to guide such practice. It will use some examples from my TED talk "What to Trust in a Post-Truth World" (WTT) and my TEDx talk "The Social Responsibility of Business" (SRB). This is not because these are the best talks of all time, but because I intentionally tried to incorporate some of these principles into these talks – thus, they are helpful illustrations.¹ There are many other talks that you can learn from – I recommend taking a speaker you admire, watching some of her talks and noting what she does particularly well. In addition to highlighting principles to follow, I also highlight common errors that I see during presentations, even from experienced people.

What's Different About Public Speaking?

An important starting point to guide public speaking is to understand how it is different from other forms of communication. There are very many other ways to get a message across, such as one-on-one conversation, email, or writing an article or a blog post. There are at least three unique features of public speaking:

- You need to command the audience's attention. In a one-on-one conversation, you'll usually have the other person's attention, but when speaking publicly, the audience may be on their smartphones. Now it's true that, if you communicate through email or writing articles, the reader might not be giving his full attention. But that doesn't matter so much, because he can read the sentence again if he's distracted. In a live speech, there's no rewind function, so if the audience isn't paying attention during a critical sentence, you've lost your chance.
- In written communication, you can "signpost" with headings, bold font, italics, underlining etc. You can't do this when speaking. Thus, you need to find other ways to signpost.
- While there are things you can do when writing that you can't with speaking, there are also things you can do when speaking which you can't with writing, e.g. use your hands. However, people often see these as challenges rather than opportunities. (For many people, knowing what to do with your hands is one of the biggest obstacles to speaking).

Signposting

¹ Some of these points were taught to me by Simon Bucknall, former UK & Ireland Public Speaking Champion, who coached me through both my talks.



Audiences like to take notes – if not written notes, they take mental notes. Thus, it's useful to delineate a talk – break it down into the individual points – so that the audience knows where you're going and knows the points that you are making. For example:

- “There are three reasons you should invest in this stock: growth prospects, management quality, and market undervaluation. Let's start with growth prospects ...
- The second reason is management quality ...
- The third and final reason is market undervaluation ...”

Then the audience has these three “headings” in mind and will note down (either in written form or mentally) everything that you're about to say under these three headings. Thus, they will understand how each sentence fits into the overall message. If you didn't list the three reasons about the stock, but just gave a slew of positives, then the audience may come away remembering that you were positive about the stock, but not why. So, if they needed to justify the stock to their portfolio manager, they wouldn't remember the reasons.

Note that you don't always need to preview points before you make them – doing this throughout a talk would make it rigid and mechanical. For example, in WTT I delineate the points without previewing but instead by using a strong structure: “1. A story is not fact. 2. A fact is not data. 3. Data is not evidence”. Moreover, individual points don't need to be numbered, else this may also lead to a mechanical talk. Instead, use pauses to make it clear where one point stops and the next starts. This also differentiates a speech from a stream of consciousness.

Highlighting Key Points

Even the best public speakers can't hold the audience's attention throughout the entire talk. The crux is to ensure that you have their focus during the key points. There are many ways to achieve this:

- Explicit highlighting, e.g. “This is my main point”, or “if there is one thing you should remember from the talk, it is this”
- Repeat a sentence twice
- Following a long sentence with a short one, which summarises the main point in a nutshell. This is particularly valuable if the main point is rather lengthy. For example, in SRB, I said “I found that the 100 Best Companies to Work for in America delivered stock returns that beat their peers by 2-3% - per year over a 26-year period” (long sentence). “Simply put: Companies that treat their workers better, perform better” (short sentence).
- Slow down during the main point. This is particularly effective if you are fast both before and after it. What matters isn't so much pace but change of pace. In SRB, I said “(fast) Perhaps because the market is so short-termist, perhaps because it's so focused on the numbers, perhaps because it incorrectly thinks employee-friendly companies are tree-huggy, (slow) I find that it takes the market 4-5 years (speed up again) before it fully notices the benefits of employee well-being”

Body Language

As mentioned earlier, one of the biggest challenges of public speaking is to maintain everyone's attention. It's thus critical to face the audience. While “face the audience” might seem obvious advice, many speakers I see don't follow it. Some might stand to the left of the room and look over their right shoulder to the slides. As a result, their back is turned to the left of the room most of the time. (Or, they stand on the right and look over their left shoulder).

Of course, you might have to glance at the slides from time to time to remember what your next point is. Thus, ensure your “default” position is to look at the audience, and only glance at the slides when you have to, in order to remember your next point. Then, having remembered it, look back at the audience to deliver it. Some speakers default to looking at the slides, and only glance at the audience from time to time. A default of looking at the



audience has two advantages. First, and most obviously, you look at the audience much more. Second, your body is parallel to the audience and so, whenever you when you are not looking at the slides, you are facing the whole audience. If your default position is to face the slides, when you turn back to look at the audience, your body is still facing the slides, your back is still turned to the left of the room, and you only face the right side of the audience.

Not only must you face the audience, but you must face all of the audience, to address everyone. Again, this may seem obvious advice, but many presenters either don't follow it (only looking to one part of the room), or don't follow it effectively. Sometimes, presenters do look at all of the audience, but do so by “scanning” the whole room – i.e. moving their eyes and/or head to ensure they look at everyone when saying a particular sentence. This can be distracting. Instead, give a couple of sentences facing the left of the room, then a couple facing the right side of the room, etc. You don't need to look at all of the audience for every single sentence.

A third element to body language is to have a strong stance. Some speakers pace on the spot while speaking, or constantly shift weight (e.g. have the weight on the left foot with the right leg bent, then shift weight to the right foot with the left leg bent, leading to the body swaying. While it's good to be dynamic rather than totally stationary, be still for one point, then walk to another part of the room and deliver the next point. This is analogous to the previous comment about looking at part of the room for one point, and then another for the next point, rather than scanning the whole audience for each point. It leads to more command and control.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of body language is using your hands. When I was a summer intern at an investment bank, we needed to give a presentation at the end of the internship, which played a major role in whether we would get a full time offer. They hired in a professional public speaking coach who gave the advice to have your hands in your pocket or hold an item (such as notes) in your hands, to remove the need to have to use them. I think this is terrible advice, as it is only a short-term sticking plaster. As I'll stress in my sixth lecture, The Growth Mindset and the Abundance Mentality, the key to learning is to push yourself outside your comfort zone and tackle the uncomfortable challenges head on. Ensuring your hands are free forces you to practice using them. This mistake is not just made by summer interns; I saw a finance professor at a major conference give a talk holding a coffee cup in one hand throughout. In addition to preventing him use his hands, it also conveyed that he was more interested in his coffee than speaking to us, as he couldn't put his coffee down even for the talk.

Your hands should portray an open body language. Some speakers either have their arms folded either in front of or behind their back; others have one hand in their pocket. Closed body language engages the audience less and gives a sense of nervousness. Others over-gesticulate. The key to effective usage of hands is similar to the key to effective changes of pace, and the key to previewing points before giving them – to use them sparingly, and only to accentuate the main points. If you use them all the time, it will be grating on the audience and they will lose their effectiveness. Most of the time your hands should be doing little. Their default position should be elbow or waist height, with open hands rather than fists or clasping them together). Then, you can use them to accentuate certain points. For example, if you are describing an upward trend, you can raise your hands from low to high. Remember that the audience sees the mirror image of you – if you'd like the audience to see your hands go up from the left to the right, start with them low on the right and raise them to the left.

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This summary only covers a subset of the topics in the talk, to ensure it remains concise. Please see the talk for other topics such as my own public speaking journey (I started being terrible at public speaking), engaging the audience, handling Q&A sessions, overcoming nerves, and how to practice public speaking when you have limited opportunities (e.g. your boss typically gives the presentations).