How To Improve Your Speaking Skills

by Nido R. Qubein

Do you long to be able to speak to an audience without being frightened half to death? Do you want to be able to speak so interestingly that your audience wants to hear you again?

It's not as hard as you might think. Many people could do it better if they would follow these simple suggestions:

PREPARE WELL

Preparation begins with the selection of a topic that you can handle well—one with which you are familiar enough to speak on with some authority. If you are assigned a topic that you know nothing about, you have two options. Either study up on the subject until you know at least as much about it as most of the people in your prospective audience, or decline the invitation. To decline the invitation may be hard on the ego, or may seem ungracious, but it is a lot less embarrassing than making a dull or poor speech.

Once you have gathered the material you need to present, the next step is to organize carefully everything you wish to say. Someone once described a speech he had heard as follows: "He announced his topic, departed from it, and rambled all evening."

Organize your material around three major parts. A good talk begins with an introduction, has an identifiable body, and ends with a strong conclusion.

Next, prepare yourself by practicing. Many well-known musicians practice six or eight hours a day—even after they are recognized as professionals. Practicing in front of a mirror and with a tape recorder will enable you to see yourself as you will come across to the audience. It is better to correct flaws before a talk than to have the audience criticize them later.

I once heard a story that illustrates quite well many of the mistakes amateurs make.

There was a young minister who had been invited to give his first sermon in his own church. After the sermon, he approached his grandmother.

"How did I do?" he asked hopefully.

"Well," she drawled slowly, "I only saw three things wrong with it."

"Only three things wrong with my first sermon," he replied proudly. "What were they?"

"First, you read it. Secondly, you read it poorly," she said. "And, thirdly, it wasn't worth reading anyhow."

GAIN AND HOLD ATTENTION

Professional speakers know that they must do something to get it back. The following are suggestions for gaining and holding the attention of your audience:

1. Be natural, be yourself, be real.
2. Set an atmosphere that is conducive to listening.
3. Look your best.
4. Establish your authority early.
5. Speak to the needs of the audience.
6. Involve your audience.
7. Keep your voice lively and loud enough to be heard.

Use humor.

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

Evangelist Billy Graham was once scheduled to speak at a college in Dallas. There was a dense fog over the city which delayed the landing of his airplane long after the talk was to begin. He said later, "I thought while I was circling up there and the audience was sitting in the auditorium, waiting, that that was like much of your preaching. While the audience is waiting to hear from us, we are up there circling around in the fog."

To communicate effectively, enunciate very clearly and distinctly. Words must be heard to be understood.

Also, use terms with which your audience is familiar. There is nothing smart about "snowing" your audience with terms they don't understand.

Use illustrations often and well. One effective speaker said, "Illustrations are like windows—they let in the light. Never waste the time of an audience. Use only those illustrations or stories that help let in the light."

USE YOUR BODY TO ADVANTAGE

Some people use their hands, their eyes, their feet—everything—in private conversation. Yet, when they are called on to speak, their hands hang limply at their sides, their eyes reflect only terror, and their feet shuffle nervously.

The greatest advantage a speaker has over a tape recording is his physical presence. Get excited and you'll excite others. I haven't seen some speakers who were pleasant to watch. Everybody enjoys seeing someone have a good time. Be enable them to have a good time.

One caution—avoid distracting movements. I once watched a speaker who waved around his glasses as if they were a piece of string. By the end of the talk, I was exhausted from following his every move to see if he was going to drop the glasses and break them. I didn't hear a word he said.

RESPECT TIME LIMITATIONS

Someone has said, "Stand up to be seen, speak up to be heard, and shut up to be appreciated." That's pretty good advice.

When you have prepared well, practiced thoroughly, and gotten excited about your talk, sometimes it is hard to quit. If your audience finishes before you do, you are in big trouble.

Perhaps the most common mistake made by beginning speakers is that they try to cover too much ground.

"The brain can only absorb what the seat can endure," is a wise old saying.

One Frenchman from the eighteenth century, who was famous for his beautiful letters, said at the end of one of his longest, "Please pardon the length of this letter—I didn't have the time to make it shorter."

It takes practice and self-discipline to cover all of the material you should within the allotted time—and to quit when you are finished.

CONCLUSION

You can be an effective speaker, if you are willing to put the time. It has been my joy to speak to audiences all over the United States, and I can tell you that there is nothing like having an audience to applaud with appreciation and the host to invite you to come back again, and again. So, here are my suggestions:

1. Prepare well—both your talk and yourself.
2. Gain and hold the attention of your audience.
3. Communicate clearly.
4. Use your body to advantage.
5. Respect time limitations.

If you are looking for something that will give personal satisfaction, gain recognition, and be thoroughly rewarding, learn to give a good talk. You'll love it!