

## **Presentation coming up? How to engage your audience and elevate your moment in the spotlight.**

Today's Helpsheet is all about building your confidence by reframing a challenge into something that excites you and harnesses your energy to beat those doubts and thoughts that are holding you back. Especially when you need to perform and deliver a presentation, speech or a musical performance.

I was recently running a workshop on the subject of managing performance nerves to a group of amateur pianists at a summer school. A great community of musicians bound together by a mutual love of music and playing the piano. As many of them do not perform in public so regularly, they can find it daunting to get up there and perform, so we were working on different ways to boost confidence and beat the demons that can get in our way. Nearly all of these are in our minds of course, rather than out there in reality.

Now in case you're reading this thinking, "I'm not a pianist or musician so what's this got to do with me?" please stick with me. You're absolutely included if you chair and facilitate meetings or give conference presentations, as you may well go through similar moments of nerves and distraction beforehand and during the presentation.

So let's break this down into what we can do beforehand to prepare as best we can. I'm sure we've all come across a version of the old adage "failing to prepare is preparing to fail" so we can't skip that preparation part and expect to deliver well on stage.

What does preparation look like? Preparation of the material e.g. writing our words and visuals if it's a conference presentation; learning our musical notes if it's a musical performance, needs both a detailed dive into the subject and also we need to keep in mind our higher level perspective. Before drowning in detailed preparation, I find it helpful to keep the basic questions uppermost about why I'm speaking to them on this topic in the first place, e.g.

- What does this audience need to know, in how much detail?
- Why's the topic important for them?
- What do I want them to go away with from my presentation that's going to be valuable for them?
- How can I engage them actively, rather than talking at them for 20 minutes or however long? Interactive questions, word clouds, opening up the discussion with questions can make it so much more involving for them than just hearing my voice.

Anyway, let's assume we've put together our best killer script, visuals and worked out how we plan to engage our audience. Is that all the preparation we need to do? Hell, no! This is when the rubber hits the road – we need to practise delivering it and speaking the words we've written. Hearing what we sound like is a critical preparation piece, whether as a speaker or a musical performer.

### **What's the benefit of doing this?**

Speaking the presentation to yourself in private is like trying on a new set of clothes and experiencing yourself actually wearing them. Besides just seeing and reading the words on the page, you start to hear your voice speak them, familiarise yourself with the sound of them. Noticing not just the words, but how you sound, your tone, what energy you bring to your opening sentence, even your greeting, helps you build conviction and communication to your words.

You won't be taken by surprise by saving speaking the words until the big day. Which would be daft to risk, wouldn't it? Imagine if a colleague said to you, they'd prepared their presentation on paper and were happy with that, but they had no idea if it would go well on the day, it's not within their control, so they decided to forget about it until then and probably it would all be fine. You'd probably have something to say to them, if not to laugh at how silly that passive approach sounds.

It is within our control – if we create some occasions to practice speaking the presentation we are taking initiative and finding out how it makes us feel. So take that initiative and see what you discover. Which are the sentences we feel less convinced by as we say them? What can help us – a tweak of the sentence, or actually being bold enough to say that brave statement because deep down we find it resonates and we want to share it with the audience? You are rapidly uplevelling the power of your presentation here with just a few simple steps.

By practising running the script through – making whatever slips we do but keeping going until the end – we also build our sense of the journey. If it's a 20 minute speech, it's useful to know what we feel like 15 minutes in, what our energy is like, how we can maintain it etc. We cannot know that if we just fast forward to that part without ever practising everything that comes before it.

Familiarity grows as we practice, which is really helpful when we do go out there on the big day and speak at the conference, because then we have a lot of the material already in our memory and can focus on other important things during that dynamic time on stage. Things like...feeling nervous or distracted, that sudden realisation that our bodies feel different when we're up there speaking in public compared to how they feel most of the time. We all know this, but often we do nothing to get into the dynamic role of being in the spotlight. Daring to do so, to practise by ourselves, to practise with some close trusted friends or colleagues in the weeks and days beforehand, is a vital confidence booster. We are less surprised by how we feel, we

have a chance to practice looking at people as we speak, pausing on certain words because we've really got into the meaning of them and are no longer just reading what's on the page. And it's thrilling to sense that the audience is with us and following us when we speak this way.

We'll never know the value of this kind of preparation until we do it and perform the presentation – because the physical sensations we experience like tightening of breath before we go on stage, a flurry of different thoughts, our focus moving rapidly from one thing to another, all of that is normal and happens on the day whether we've prepared deeply or not.

However scary those physical sensations feel, know that they're a sign your body is alive and working as it should. We don't need to resist those sensations, but to allow them to be present without resisting them. Accepting ourselves and our feelings takes courage, so take deeper breaths and stretch your arms out to stabilise yourself if you feel tense.

Once we're up there speaking, things click and we'll realise the value of all those times spent practising our words, sensing our energy, deciding what messages we really want to project...in the moment it really hits us how much all of that preparation made a tremendous difference to us as we stand here now and deliver it. Thanks to being well prepared enough, we can focus on the audience more than we usually do, making eye contact, having the mental space to put our attention over there with them without it costing us our focus and sense of control.

One last thing, as I told the pianists. Practise how you walk on stage to play, try out that first 10 seconds as you make an entrance and the audience sees you. Why? Because you can set the tone you want to have as a performer. Your performance begins the moment you appear in the sight of the audience, not when you get to the piano and start playing. If you walk in confidently, you can play more confidently, so enjoy the moment. It's yours and you are the one playing (or presenting), so you get to create your entry.

You can enter as if you're going to make the most of the next 20 minutes and live the moment to the full, even if you have no idea how to do that! You have more choices available than just to give in to that pesky voice in your head that's urging you to close down and just try to survive and long for it to be over. The interesting fact from a neurological point of view is that your brain cannot distinguish between your real or imagined situation, so if you imagine being alive and excited as you walk on, that can carry you through and you will become alive and excited. Whether your excitement is loud and lively or quiet and intense is up to you: make it your moment in whatever way gives you energy – and your energy will transfer and give confidence to those watching you.



I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something resonates in what I've outlined here and you would like to check out what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.