

Stepping into the limelight and presenting with confidence

In delivering coaching sessions and team trainings I often get asked things like:

- “How can I gain more confidence to communicate in meetings?”
- “What do I need to do to present without feeling overwhelmed by nerves?”
- “Why can’t I switch off those distractions and focus better when I’m leading meetings?”

This brings into focus two things: preparation and performance. These are two distinct domains, related but different. It’s one thing to master the material we want to communicate. Yet it can feel like another world altogether when we’re sitting at the board table facilitating a heated discussion, or standing at the lectern relaying our well-honed (or over-worked) messages.

Let’s be clear about something, however obvious it may sound. When we’re working up our presentation quietly at our desk, getting creative and thinking outside the box about what to include, what will excite and interest the audience, we’re quite rightly in preparation mode. Like being in the practice room sitting at the piano learning (or re-learning) a piece ready for a recital. We can take the piece to pieces, pare it down to the individual notes, play hands separately, hands together, work first on this difficult passage, now that, etc.

Failing to prepare is preparing to fail, as the saying goes. Mapping out our messages, working them up into a coherent presentation to cover the bases of the conference brief, is certainly one key part of the overall preparation we need to do. So is the practice room work, if you’re a musician!

Yet, by itself this kind of preparation work behind the scenes, however important, will neither support confident presenting nor confident playing. To develop confidence in delivery, we need to practise something else as well. You guessed it: DELIVERY! Performance is all about delivery, not just preparation.

How do we get better at delivery?

Simple answer: we practise it! Practising delivery means getting to hear and become familiar with our voice when we speak as a presenter. In the same way a musician spends time listening carefully to how they sound on their instrument, imagining how their sound will project in the bigger acoustic of the recital hall compared to their practice room, working on making their actual sound nearer to the ideal sound they desire.

How many presenters actually practise speaking their presentation out loud to themselves? Not enough! This really is a missed opportunity to discover and experience in a safe environment what it's like to deliver your presentation. There may not be an audience, you may still be in a small office space, yet you get to experience some critically important things without the pressure of the big day, namely:

- How energetic do I feel as I stand here speaking?
- How is my posture and breathing?
- How well am I projecting my voice?
- Do I like how I sound?
- Do I like the words I am saying?
- Am I saying the words with conviction? If not, what's getting in my way?
- How do I feel after speaking for 20 minutes without a break? Do I still have the energy in my voice that I want to have?

Overall, the benefit here is that you are using a safe environment and practising to make friends with a situation you may fear, i.e. the big hall with lots of people there listening to you. In the safe environment of practising speaking out loud to yourself, you can discover how your body feels, how your voice sounds, whether you are convinced by the words you have chosen, what feelings and emotions you are experiencing. Importantly, you are practising pacing yourself, in other words, managing the whole presentation from start to finish without stopping, just like you will be doing on the day itself.

This run-through practice is a regular part of the musician's performance preparation. Performers set aside a specific time to run through each piece in order, without stopping, no matter what slips may occur. This is important, because it is not a regular practice session where we correct mistakes. It's a performance run-through session, where we aim to imitate performance conditions. Make a slip and the audience may not notice and, if they do, they'll forgive you. But if you would stop during a performance and repeat a passage you just messed up, the audience will not forgive you – they'll switch off and you've lost your connection with them. So, in performance, always keep going no matter what.

Use the delivery practice approach more than one time to familiarise yourself with giving your presentation. Consider a run-through with trusted colleagues or friends present as an audience if you want to experience that additional dynamic and learn to master it. Having them sitting there means you can practise walking in and greeting them, making eye contact and establishing a connection and the beginning and maintaining it throughout. It's a great way to observe when you lost the connection somewhere and to reflect on how you can regain their engagement. Maybe you lost and regained their connection during your practice run-through and have gained some insights as to what happened. This is all great feedback at an intuitive and practical level and you also have a safe audience who you can invite to give feedback.

Your delivery practice takes a lot of the mystery on the day away and reduces the amount of things you have to worry about, leaving you free to focus on what the hall and stage are like, how it feels to stand there and look out at the audience, the vibe, get your measure of the equipment and screens in the room etc.

You have more headspace available and you can accept and forgive yourself when you get those unpleasant nervous feelings on the day, knowing that this is normal: you are stepping into the spotlight, a modern form of danger situation which triggers part of our brains in the same way as a physically dangerous situation would, as in the past when wild animals appeared from nowhere and threatened our survival.

Those warning signals of our nerves are helping us - showing we are functioning normally in this performing situation, so it's really valuable to consider and accept that tightness in the body and shortness of breath as part of the territory. When we accept feelings of fear, they can transform, whereas when we try to suppress them, what we resist persists and they come back to bite us.

One more thing that will get you off to a confident start:

It's all in the walk

Remember this when you walk on stage. Your short walk from the wings and onto the stage and how you walk sets the tone for everything that is to follow. Make the most of that few seconds and it will pay dividends. In that few seconds your energy in your walk and your facial expression, how readily you make eye contact or not, sends out a whole load of signals that set the scene decisively for how the audience is listening and will respond to you.

A confident energy in how you walk on stage puts the audience at ease and engages their interest and support. Whereas by walking in timidly and looking down or away from where you are going transmits your isolation and sense of struggle to the audience. The audience sense your struggle and they then become frozen, immobilised and worried too, while also feeling deeply sorry for you. The audience will also experience frustration and embarrassment, because they know they cannot help the speaker in this situation.

So, the good news is that as a presenter or performer, we have far more ability to influence how things go than we may assume. We can start things off in a way that energises us by how we walk on and we can energise the audience also. While we may not feel excited inside, we can help ourselves by accepting this unpleasant feeling and not resisting it. That way, we are free to step out with purpose and confidence despite our feelings, because we've accepted them. The paradox is – if we walk in generating confidence and purpose, we will quickly really feel confident - we don't need to wait to feel confident first before we take our first step.



This reflects the old saying, “fake it to make it”. By accepting our feelings and – despite them - walking confidently and courageously on to the stage and greeting the audience is what moves us beyond our present limits. We can shift our sense of ourselves and feel more confident simply by trying an optimistic walk, a warm smile as we walk on, looking and connecting with the people in the audience as we bow. That sets the scene powerfully for what we are about to deliver.

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.