

“The Ambassador” is a monthly communiqué designed to provide tips on best practices in effective communications. Look for articles in upcoming months on *Tailoring Your Talk* and *Effective Use of Humor*.

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Quell the Butterflies: Speaking with Confidence

Nervous About Presenting? You're not alone. The *Book of Lists* by David Wallechinsky & Amy Wallace conducted a survey of 2,000 executives asking about their greatest fear. The results showed overwhelmingly that the number one fear of most people is speaking in public to a peer group. To put that in perspective, number *four* was fear of dying. Jerry Seinfeld got hold of this data and opened one of his shows by saying that if you follow this logic and you are at a funeral, most people would rather be in the casket than delivering the eulogy!

It is comforting to know that most people are uncomfortable speaking publicly. Rarely is one born with confidence in standing up and addressing a crowd. Yet, leaders in any field – including the CPA profession – have recognized the career importance of public speaking. So, how can you keep anxiety low? What impedes confidence? How can you gain *more* confidence?

Let's start with defining the culprit: What is performance anxiety anyway? There are many definitions and reams of scientific data analysis. But, essentially it is directed energy. Your knowledge, fear of failure and anticipation of your performance creates nervousness and your body reacts. It's important to know that the solution lies not in trying to eliminate this anxiety completely, but in re-directing it to more constructive uses.

Check Your Body Language: Non-verbal communication enhances the impact of your talk, but you also need to build confidence. How you carry yourself physically during a presentation determines how that nervous energy might be re-directed. Do NOT attempt to stifle this energy, it will just *increase* anxiety. If there is a podium, do NOT stand behind it and clutch the edges. Do NOT clasp your hands behind your back or fold your arms in front of you. These are “locked” positions that prevent anxiety from being released and may even send your stress level soaring. So, what do you do with your hands? Leave them at the end of your arms! Make gestures as if you were telling a story to a friend. The more you break away from these locked positions and gesture to make a point, the more relaxed you will feel and your confidence will increase.

Find a Friendly Face or Two: Another important non-verbal communication to help build confidence is eye contact. Find a colleague in the room whom you can trust and look to him or her for nodding assurance that you're doing well. If it is a large audience, find a friendly face or two throughout the crowd and play a game of “mental catch.” This not only helps you pace your talk, but keeps you poised and on the right track.

Eschew Bad Advice: We've heard them all. “Imagine people in the audience in their underwear” or “Pick a central spot in the back of the room to concentrate your focus... that'll ‘anchor’ you.” Nonsense. Disengaging yourself from your audience only makes things worse. Remember that even in educational presentations, you must interact with your audience to gain assurances and remain confident.

Avoid Avoidance: Technical difficulties? Acknowledge and move on. Expect something to go wrong and be grateful when it's minor... and it's almost always minor. Most of what generates anxiety is the fear that something might go wrong. It will, so don't worry about it! These days, with PowerPoint, animation, streaming video, remote communications, hook-ups and microphones, a technical glitch is bound to happen. What do you do when your slides stop advancing with the remote control? Acknowledge the problem and ask for help. The audience will understand. Too many presenters make the mistake of trying to hide the glitch, pretending it's not happening, or trying to remedy it themselves. This doesn't always work and it always creates or increases anxiety.

Don't Reveal Your "Tell?" Audiences cannot know you are nervous unless you "tell" them. What is your nervous tick? Fiddling with a pen or pointer? Jangling change in your pants pocket? Perhaps it's twirling your hair or rubbing your hands together. Maybe it is just pacing or looking down at the floor. An audience does not have x-ray vision. They cannot see what you are feeling inside. So don't tell them. Videotape your rehearsal. It will reveal your ticks and you will likely be surprised at how few there are. Concentrate on re-directing that energy. Does using a laser pointer showcase the shakes? Practice making those points verbally or use the laptop's cursor. Do you find yourself fiddling with a magic marker? Find a "home base" for it while you're not using it and practice keeping it out of your hands.

Rehearse. Rehearse. Rehearse. The best way to answer that anxiety producing question: "Can I really do this?!" is to prepare, practice and rehearse. Rehearsing is the best way to reduce anxiety and build confidence. Preparation is insufficient without practice and final rehearsal. Do not just *decide* to avoid talking too fast... put yourself on camera and time your delivery. Do it again, this time slower. Do it again. Then do it one more time. Mock-up the situation. Rehearse in a similar setting if not *the* actual room. Make it a full "dress" rehearsal with A/V, and flip charts. Invite colleagues to watch and critique. Familiarizing yourself with the environment removes stage shock that may create anxiety and derail you from your focus.

So, remember that everyone has anxiety about presenting and the key to quelling the butterflies is re-channeling nervous energy and you do so through preparation, practice and repeated rehearsals.

Have a suggestion on a topic? E-mail Carmen Encarnacion at cencarnacion@aicpa.org

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