

Successful Supervisor Part 69

Be You

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Supervisors are not often required to make speeches before huge groups, but they do conduct shift meetings and other important communication methods with various audiences. In these situations, the pressure is on the supervisor to be highly professional with delivery. I once saw a supervisor give a presentation for upper managers, and she flubbed it badly. The reason was that she had tried to memorize her exact words. Basically, she over prepared for the event and put too much pressure on herself to deliver a perfect program. That strategy has been the downfall of many speakers.

If you have ever spoken in front of a large audience, you know it can be a terrifying experience. Studies have shown that fear of speaking in public is stronger than the fear of death for most people. It sounds impossible, but it is true. In this article, I will explore why we put so much pressure on ourselves to appear perfect and offer some insight into an alternate path that leads to lower stress in life and better performance. I will use public speaking as an example and then generalize the concept to cover many other areas of our lives.

When we think about why people get nervous in front of a large crowd, it seems pretty obvious. We are afraid we are going to goof up, so we practice our part over and over, attempting to perfect and polish our delivery so we do not look stupid in front of others. The irony is that the more we attempt to perfect our speech, the more likely we are to actually flounder with our delivery.

I witnessed a professional speaker who was giving a presentation to over 1000 other professional speakers. Talk about pressure! She had practiced her speech so many times she was assured that she would not make a mistake. But when she faced the stage lights, all of her preparation and build up actually made her goof up. Reason: when she got flustered and messed up a word or two, then she forgot her place in the memorized text and stumbled badly. Finally, in desperation, she pulled out a typed paper with the words. After reading a few lines, she put the paper away and tried to go back to the memorized material. The same thing happened again; she totally blanked out at the first misstep and had to resort to her printed text again. It happened a third

time as well. I expect that day will live in her mind as the worst day in her life. The audience was uncomfortable as well, although we all supported her and had great empathy for her pain.

Think about the alternative, where she would know her content cold because it came from her heart, not her rote memory of specific words. All she needed were a few key points to recall the topic areas, and she could wax eloquent with no miscues. It was her desire to be perfect that led to her being embarrassingly imperfect. The audience would have gladly forgiven a Freudian Slip or a stumble rather than watch her struggle to try to remember her memorized speech. She would have been even more forgiven if she added a bit of self deprecating humor if she misspoke on a point, because her sincerity and spontaneity would be on display.

Here is a stark contrast to the speaker described above. At that same speaker's conference, Brian Tracy, the great author, speaker, and philosopher, was presented with a lifetime achievement award by the National Speakers Association. The award is the highest honor a speaker can receive, and Brian proceeded to demonstrate why he was worthy of the award. He got up to give a 10 minute acceptance speech: one of the most important speeches of his life, out of thousands of speeches. As he started the speech, he had no idea what was about to happen to him. His lavalier microphone started to die, and the audience could only hear every other word. Horrified, the sound technician rushed on stage with another lavalier mic, and Brian carried right on as if nothing had happened. Two minutes later the replacement mic also died in the same way. Brian just stood there smiling at the audience until the technician came out with a hand held mic, and Brian was able to finish his speech. He did not get flustered, or angry, or sad, he just stood there smiling until the situation had cleared. Doing that in front of 1000 professional speakers took real poise. Brian was even gracious to the bumbling technician, who was undoubtedly dying a thousand deaths over the incident. Brian was sincerely grateful for the honor and was not about to let a cantankerous sound system mess up his moment.

My method of rehearsing a program is to mock up the platform and go over a program from my prepared key points a few times, but I make no attempt to memorize any part of the actual wording except for the very first sentence. Brian Tracy taught me that the first sentence should be memorized verbatim. His reasoning was that "well begun is half done." After the first sentence rings out, then it is as if I am having a natural conversation with the assembled group like I was talking with a friend over the kitchen table. This method allows me to be more authentic and relaxed. If I make a mistake and stumble, it is not the end of the world at all, I just look for ways to make it a funny goof.

Seth Godin had a blog entry I read recently about the same concept. He wrote, "Perfecting your talk, refining your essay, and polishing your service until all elements of you disappear might be obvious tactics, but they remove the thing we were looking for: you." He even implied that some top performers inject some kind of faux imperfection in their routine because it tends to endear them to the audience. Personally, I don't need to inject imperfections in my programs; they have enough of them naturally. I am okay with an occasional goof, because it makes me more human and credible to my audiences, and that is a very positive thing. Somehow having them join me in laughing at myself is a kind of bonding action with the audience.

The same kind of problem exists for all of us in many different areas of our lives. By trying to be perfect (which we are not) we put immense pressure on ourselves. We get uptight as we try to rehearse every possible situation and then lose our train of thought in the complexity of the moment. For example, the other day I was at a very formal dinner, and I was trying to put on my best manners. In my attempt to be perfect and charming, I was paying more attention to the conversation than to what my hands were doing, and I spilled a full gravy boat of salad dressing all over the table. Oops!

When we put too much pressure on ourselves to be perfect, we tend to cause the very thing we are trying to prevent. The antidote is to simply be yourself with all your warts and problems. Relax and do not get flustered so you can roll with the situation naturally, and you will come out ahead most of the time. I do not advocate being unprepared. Rather, I think we should avoid being over-prepared. That may seem to be easier said than done. The trick is to think in the major issues, but not try to work out the fine detail in advance. Let your natural self take care of the fine grain actions.

We need to understand that nobody goes through life without making some embarrassing gaffes. People are going to forgive us, even though we feel totally embarrassed at the time. What makes the difference is how we react when an unexpected snafu occurs. If we are calm and make light of our foible, the incident will pass, and our long term credibility will be intact with the embarrassing moment nothing more than a humorous footnote: like my spilled salad dressing.

Try this big-picture method of preparing yourself for your next important meeting, speech, or social event. If you prepare and then relax to present naturally, you will usually come out ahead. If you are worried about coming up with a funny line after a mistake, then try taking some improvisation classes. They will help you become more spontaneous with humor. Another organization that has great techniques is Toastmasters. Get involved with your local chapter. For any supervisor, the ability to speak clearly and be relaxed at the same time is an important leadership skill.



This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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