



scared speechless

BY TOM REID

The **ability** to stand in front of a group of people and **persuasively present** your key points is one of the most **critical skills** for **success** as a contract manager, and indeed, for anyone in business.

WHETHER IT IS A MANAGEMENT REVIEW, negotiation, staff meeting, training, or a proposal verbal presentation, careers can be made or lost on your ability to speak in front of an audience. The ability to stand in front of a group of people and persuasively present your key points is one of the most critical skills for success as a contract manager, and indeed, for anyone in business. Yet many surveys suggest that public speaking is more feared than death itself.

So how do you go about developing your public speaking skills without being scared to death? This article will provide you with four areas of concentration to immediately enhance your presentation abilities. These include (1) learning how to prepare for a presentation, (2) learning to control your presentation context and the audience, (3) some presentation tools and techniques that have been proven to work, and (4) knowing where you want to be at the end. In other words, preparation, power, presenting, and positioning.

Despite the fear that speaking in public usually invokes, the fact is that we give presentations every day in dozens of different contexts. Every time we open our mouths to speak, we are (hopefully!) doing it for a specific purpose. While most of these events are not formal presenta-

tions with charts and diagrams, every time we speak to one or more people, we are attempting to inform them, persuade them, or gain information from them. We might use speech to express a view, to offer alternatives, to train, to educate, or just to sing out. Presentation skills apply whether you are simply talking at a meeting, or standing in front of a large auditorium giving a keynote address. The skills are the same—only the presentation content changes. For the purposes of this article, we will concentrate our discussion on the presentation situation rather than speeches.

About the Author
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Preparation

In developing your public speaking skills you should include both long- and short-term objectives. While some people may be able to simply jump up and give an extemporaneous speech, that is truly the exception. Be thinking about the opportunities that arise where you can take the floor. Is it at a staff meeting? Is it a negotiation? Is it in presenting a business clearance or approval pitch to senior management? And aside from work, is it at your local church or synagogue? Is it with the scouts, the Lions club, or a NCMA meeting? In some cases, you may be pressed into service, such as giving a toast at a wedding, but in most cases, you can select the time, the place, and the topic. Be thinking of where these opportunities arise where you might be most comfortable and then you will be more prepared to give that “extemporaneous” speech.

Build up a “speaker arsenal” of anecdotes, stories, examples, jokes, and entertaining quips and quotes. Put them in a file. When you hear something that appeals to you, or might be relevant to a topic on which you might speak someday, put it aside in a file. Review this file periodically to keep the material fresh. You should also begin developing a personal collection of anecdotes, data points, humor, and examples. One of the best (and most strongly encouraged) ways to prepare for public speaking is to join Toastmasters. Toastmasters is a worldwide organization where people work with each other in developing their presentation skills.

Seek out books on developing your presentation skills and books that will show you what a good speech or story looks like. Aesop’s fables, for example, is excellent at telling a short story with a punchline or moral. Mark Twain has an excellent way of spinning a yarn and telling a story that has a twist at the end to capture his audience’s attention. Reading and absorbing such material will help you prepare. Practice telling tasteful jokes as little mini stories with a beginning, middle, and end—just like a presentation.

You should also make a habit of reading topical material, subject specific material, and material from which

you can borrow examples. Reading such material plants it in your brain for future use. Starting a collection of quotes helps you liven up any presentation by appealing to well-known authorities on the subject. This also builds your credibility with your audience.

When you have finally targeted a speaking opportunity, you have reached the point of doing short-term preparation. The first step is to gather the information that relates to your topic. Categorize it into those points that support your view and those that do not. Do not feel compelled to tell everything you know. Rather, you should assess the audience and determine what they hope to gain from your presentation. Tailor what you say to them based on what they need to hear, not to satisfy your own ego.

Good presentations involve inspiration, skill, and hard work—or what you might call perspiration. What you are trying to do is take the abstract and simplify it through the use of stories, analogies, or other techniques that show the audience what is in it for them. In many business settings that contract managers will encounter, much of the presentation is dictated by internal business policies and practices. For example, when seeking business clearance to proceed with a procurement or a proposal, most agencies and companies have pre-established information that the audience expects to see. While such templates can be useful, they can also be limiting. If you have something the audience needs to hear, make sure you put it in front of them. Not doing so only impacts your credibility. Doing too much, however, diminishes your effectiveness. Strike a balance.

How do you deal with being nervous? Nervousness is just fear of the unknown. When you are presenting, anything can happen, and according to Murphy’s law, probably will. Therefore, try to eliminate as many unknowns as possible. Everything fits into one of three categories—known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns. It is the unknown unknowns that scare us most. In your short-term preparation, try to foresee what can go wrong. Plan for it. Practice for it. Just like the astronauts before going

into space, every reasonable foreseeable scenario is rehearsed. Ever had someone fall asleep during a presentation? Did their snoring drown you out? Ever had the presentation equipment fail? Has the microphone gone out or suddenly started screeching? Ever had a heckler? Ever had a participant talk to their neighbor through your entire presentation? Ever had a cell phone go off while you were speaking? Was it yours? This is just a small sampling of what can go wrong. Be prepared. If you speak often enough, all of this and more will all happen to you. Turn as many unknown unknowns and known unknowns into known knowns as possible. Some you will foresee; others will come only with experience.

In any presentation you have to assess your audience to make sure that you are telling them things that interest them and have relevance to them. You sometimes have to tailor your presentation depending on whether you are talking to the buyer, the seller, the technical user, or senior management. While the theme may be the same, the preparation may be different. Above all, you *must* practice, practice, practice until you are completely comfortable with the subject and the relevant facts. Use a mock audience and take advantage of opportunities to speak. Just doing it can help ease the fears. Also, give your presentation to yourself several times in front of a mirror and, if possible, record it so you can see for yourself those things that you are doing well and those things that you believe need improvement.

Volunteer for presentations. Conduct a training class. Speak on behalf of government procurement and earn points toward the NCMA Fellow award. Volunteer for toasts at a wedding or farewell. Share your knowledge of contracting at a chamber meeting or other business or social group, such as Lions Club or Kiwanis. Each presentation that you give or prepare for enhances your skills and helps to fight the butterflies. As one pundit has said, all presenters have butterflies; the trick is to get them to fly in formation. Always remember that winners have the will to prepare—to do whatever it takes to develop their speaking skills.

Power

The next area is that of control. You cannot control everything in every speech you give, but you can control a lot, and you should try to control as much as possible without being overbearing or boorish. Presentations do not occur in isolation, they occur within a context. It is that context that you want to control. Own the surroundings, learn to read body language, use planned spontaneity, know the sound system, be aware of the lighting, arrange the room with the best table and chair alignment, if you can, and make sure that if you are introduced, it is done by someone with authority who endorses you strongly in the introduction. In this way you already have what is known as referent authority—you are borrowing the authority of the person making the introduction. This gives you greater control over the situation.

Pay attention to your appearance: your clothes, your hair style, your cologne (never use too much), your breath—these things count. Create a positive and welcoming atmosphere right from the beginning. Be the first to arrive. Check the room set-up. Check out the equipment. You can control the impressions people gain of you by appearing efficient despite your butterflies.

You also have to understand that people have different preferred ways to communicate and be communicated to. This is another reason to know your audience. Stephen Covey has suggested that people have five listening levels: (1) ignoring, (2) pretending, (3) selective listening, (4) attentive listening, and (5) empathetic listening. Ideally, you want to take your audience to the fifth level. One way you can do that is to be like a reporter and cover all of the key points, namely who, what, why, when, where, how, and how much. Relate to what they want to hear. Ascertain their expectations and try to meet them. Once you know how the presentation will probably progress, your fear will subside.

What about handouts? Use them very carefully. If you give them out too early, people will be reading ahead and not listening. If you give them out too late, they will not have the chance to make notes.

There is no hard rule here, just be aware that once you give them out, their eyes are not on you. If so many people staring at you makes you nervous, then maybe giving them out early will help you. Depending on the presentation and the audience expectations, however, a handout is usually a good idea.

Presenting

You are fully prepared. You have assessed your audience and asserted control over those things you can control. You are standing in front of the room and ready to open your mouth. Now what? Stand erect. Smile. Welcome them and state clearly the reason for this presentation and what you expect will happen (or a selection of choices they will have to make) when you are done. Then, launch into your presentation. Whatever you do, however, do not read your charts. Speak as if you are talking to the person in the very last row so everyone can hear you. Use eye contact—from person to person around the room—split-second contact, don’t stare. Enunciate; avoid words you have a problem saying or sentences that can become tongue twisters.

As you do more presentations you will learn other techniques. Vary your tone, walk around if you can, and use gestures that are natural for you. This is an area where practice helps tremendously. Use notes if you must, but work toward having such a command of your subject that you can speak in a way that sounds extemporaneous. The more precise you are, the more successful your presentation will be. Try to wean yourself away from holding onto the lectern with white knuckles (something all new speakers do) and use your arsenal of jokes, humor, anecdotes, stories, and examples when appropriate. In a straight informational presentation, such colorful accents may not be appropriate. Always stay away from anything that might be considered tasteless or off-color humor, and try to stay away from “loaded language”—words or phrases that because of a particular use carries more in its meaning than you might intend. For example, if you make reference to certain

hot issues like abortion, politics, war, or global warming, most people already have an opinion on such issues and will alienate to their biases. Even using words like Congress and religion can spark reactions that you cannot control, so you should stay away from using them unless that is specifically the topic you are addressing.

Sometimes it can be effective to use props, but only if you have practiced with them. Very often a model of the item being procured can be helpful. As you gain experience in making presentations, you will discover what feels most natural to you. Periodically go back to the idea of taping a presentation to review how you appear to your audience. You will be both shocked and amazed at what you will learn by doing this.

Positioning

Where do you want to be when you are done talking? Are you seeking approval of a contract action? Are you going to have to answer questions? Are you seeking the award of a contract? Be conscious of what position you want to be in when you are finished speaking. Review any action items and assign responsibility and due dates. If a signature is required, get it now or have a specific plan for obtaining it later. Always thank your audience and, if possible, express personal gratitude and make eye contact with as many people as you can when the meeting adjourns.

In conclusion, make sure you prepare as best you can, control those aspects of the presentation that you can control, practice and develop good techniques, and have an effective follow-through. Read some good books on the subject and never stop practicing. One author who is particularly helpful is Tony Jeary, who said, “A good presentation leverages our most likeable personality traits with our polished skills to invigorate the content of our message.” Capitalize on what you do best, discover your comfort zones and work to enhance them, and always have a good message to deliver. Using these techniques and this four-phase process will enhance your presentation skills and, in all probability, your career. **CM**