

Just Don't Say "Um"

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(05-27) 04:00 PDT 05/27/07 -- There aren't many people who naturally take to giving speeches and making presentations. Just the thought of having to stand up in front of a crowd is enough to make most people nervous. But despite recent technological innovations such as PowerPoint and WebEx that have made it easier to present to a group, the reality is that employees need to master the art of public speaking to move up the employment food chain. Even the most introverted among us have hope, however, thanks to the abundant opportunities for people to improve their presentation skills.

The place to start is probably the best-known — **Toastmasters**, the worldwide oratorical organization. Founded by Ralph C. Smedley in 1924, **Toastmasters** is a group devoted to helping its members overcome stage fright and performance anxiety. "Many people don't just have a fear of giving speeches, but also of speaking up in groups or speaking to their boss," said Craig Harrison, a member of the group since 1992 and former district governor of the East Bay chapter. "A **Toastmasters** meeting focuses on both scripted speeches and what we call 'table topics.' Each week a member brings several discussion topics, and a person is chosen to talk about them for a minute or two without any preparation."

The nature of a **Toastmasters** event is social and has the added benefit of being a venue to meet new people. Harrison refers to the group as a "fun self-improvement lab," where each meeting focuses on different aspects of public speaking such as vocal intonation, gestures, using humor and the differences between speaking to persuade an audience and speaking to inform them. He credits **Toastmasters** as having turned him from a shy and introverted person into someone who now makes his living as a professional speaker.

For people with a more focused goal of improving their skills for a professional setting, there's an array of more formal classes that cater to a business clientele. Doug Stanearth, who runs the Texas-based Leader's Institute, which has offices in Sacramento and San Francisco, says that focusing on individual personality traits is the best way to help people hold their own in front of a crowd. "Each person has a natural talent to speak, and our job as coaches is to figure out what that is," he said. "What many trainers will do is try to impart their own strengths onto other people. For example, shy or introverted people shouldn't try to blow people away with their enthusiasm. They might have more of a caring and nurturing style and can build a rapport with their audience."

Lee Glickstein, founder of Speaking Circles, teaches students to develop an approach he calls relational presence, and compares it to one-on-one conversations. "The fascinating thing is it doesn't look like public speaking," he said. "It's just people being real, being powerful. Good speakers with relational presence are people like Barack Obama or Jon Stewart. The reason Stewart is so good is he's absolutely present. His silences get big laughs because he's completely there."

Glickstein is quick to add that this method won't work for people who are giving talks on subjects with which they aren't intimately familiar. He insists that his help is only affective for people who believe in what they're talking about. "But even people who believe in themselves need practice," he said, "because they're worried they might get attacked."

The one subject all workshops on public speaking have in common is how to deal with the dreaded word "um." In fact, observing how people use the "U word" is a great way to gauge the speaker's ease and knowledge of the subject matter he or she is discussing. How to remove it from one's speech, however, is an individual pursuit. The **Toastmasters** approach is to have an audience member count the number of times a speaker utters this or any of its nearest cousins (such as "uh" or "ah"). This greater awareness of an often unconscious act can help reduce the number of times a speaker lets it creep into a presentation. Other trainers find that this technique isn't necessary if the speaker can focus on the bigger picture. Glickstein encourages his attendees to relax into the natural flow of the talk. "Learn not to cover up the silence," he said. "When you're really with somebody, there's no effort. Lead with your listening and listen as you speak. When you're really listening you don't say 'um.'"

Still another approach is the diametric opposite of that presented by **Toastmasters**, urging presenters to embrace the fact that an "um" or two shows up from time to time, and is simply part of the speaking process. "Whatever you focus on not doing, you tend to do more," said Stanearth. "Don't count the "ums," because then you focus on them. It's natural for people to say 'um' once in a while." This is also applicable to other nuisances that can besiege a presenter, such as putting one's hands in one's pockets or pacing too much. He also cautions against the perennial advice given to nervous presenters about imagining the audience in their underwear by saying, "I don't know about you, but I would be distracted if I was thinking about a whole bunch of people sitting in their underwear." Great orators don't necessarily need to have the baritone register of Barry White to hold an audience's attention — a simple, quiet confidence can be all it takes to get a group of people to listen with open ears. While there's no hard-and-fast rule for the definition of a perfect speaker, Glickstein comes close by sharing the following characteristics that he has observed in many great speakers: "A perfect public speaker takes breaths, looks into people's eyes, speaks into the listening and has presence. The relation with the audience is more important than the content. A perfect speaker gives the feeling that you're talking over coffee."

No ifs, ands or ums about it.