

Beat stage fright at work

Don't let a fear of public speaking hold you back. Here's how to make your anxiety work for you.

By Anne Fisher, contributor
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NEW YORK (Fortune) -- **Dear Annie:** I got a fantastic promotion when my boss retired a few months ago, and I love the job. Just one small fly in the ointment: One of my new duties is giving a year-end presentation to the executive committee and the board of directors. So far in my career I have managed to avoid doing much public speaking, but I can't get out of this, and although it embarrasses me to admit it, I suffer terribly from stage fright. Can you and your readers recommend any proven techniques for losing the jitters? -*Quaking in My Shoes*

Dear Quaking: Would it help to know that lots of famous people (and many not so famous) share your affliction? Mark Twain, who made most of his income from speaking, not writing, once said, "There are two types of speakers: those that are nervous and those that are liars."

And consider this, from late CBS newsman Edward R. Murrow: "The best speakers know enough to be scared...The only difference between the pros and the novices is that the pros have trained the butterflies to fly in formation."

One such pro is [Scott Berkun](#), author of a new book called *Confessions of a Public Speaker* (O'Reilly, \$24.99). Berkun gives about 30 speeches a year, and some of his experiences would be enough to scare anybody.

"I've been heckled by drunken crowds in a Boston bar. I've lectured to empty seats, and a bored janitor, in New York City," he says. "I've had a laptop crash in a Moscow auditorium and a microphone die at a keynote speech in San Jose. And I've watched in horror as the Parisian executives who hired me fell asleep in the conference room while I was speaking." Yikes. No wonder his book includes plenty of advice on what to do if things go wrong.

Nothing that awful is likely to happen during your presentation to the executive committee and the board, so how can you conquer your fear? First, understand that human beings are genetically hardwired to dread certain situations.

"Our brains identify the following four things as being very bad for survival: Standing alone, in open territory with no place to hide, without a weapon, in front of a large crowd of creatures staring at you" - in other words, the very conditions that prevail when you stand up to give a talk, Berkun says. "Despite my 15 years of teaching classes, running workshops, and giving lectures, it's a scientific fact that my brain and body will experience some kind of fear before, and often while, I'm speaking."

That isn't necessarily a bad thing. "Fear focuses attention. All good things come with the possibility of failure, and fear of failure is what motivates people to do the work necessary to succeed," Berkun notes. "Fear gives us the energy to prevent failures from happening."

Use that energy to practice, practice, practice. Run through your entire presentation, ideally with an audience of a few trusted peers or family members, and do it over and over again until you are so comfortable with the material that you can easily imagine repeating the performance one more time for your real audience.

"Most people don't practice. It's not fun, it takes time, people feel silly doing it, and they assume no one else does," Berkun says. "I know I look like an idiot practicing a presentation in my underwear at home, talking to a room of imaginary people. But the confidence that comes from practicing makes it possible to improvise and respond to unexpected things, like tough questions or equipment failures, that might occur during the actual talk."

While you're rehearsing, says Berkun, take some pressure off by assuming you will make a few mistakes: "If you'd like to be good at something, the first thing to go out the window is the notion of perfection. If you look at the way we talk to each other every day, including people giving presentations, you'll find even the best speakers make tons of mistakes." Most audiences are far more forgiving, and notice fewer glitches, than you probably think.

In the case of your year-end speech, if you don't already know, figure out "the politics of the committee and the board," Berkun advises. "Know who has the real power in the room, which may not be the person with the biggest title. Then while you're speaking, focus your attention on that person." If you can chat with a few people in your audience before your presentation, it will help calm you down because then you're not addressing a group of strangers: "Friends are less likely to try to eat you," he says.