

# FEAR OF SPEAKING

BY JAN HOPKINS



## True Confessions

Let me start with a confession. Despite having been a TV journalist and anchor for more than two decades, I get scared before a speech. Clammy hands, a knot in the bottom of my stomach: those are the familiar symptoms. A former colleague of mine tells the story that when she was first on the air she kept a can of soda on the floor beside her so she could take a drink in the commercial breaks to make sure she didn't puke on the air. Fear never really goes away, even after years and years of practice. It doesn't have to. Some anxiety provides an edge, which can be helpful. It's only the kind of fear that paralyzes that is a problem.

## Fear shows no gender bias

Performance fear is not unique to women. Men also experience fear. But I have seen men be much more willing to conquer the fear. I think women are often so afraid of making a mistake, they are afraid to take a chance. But if you don't face your fear it gets bigger and bigger, perhaps becoming a phobia. In order to move up the career ladder, in order to communicate what you want to your employees or your customers, you have to overcome the fear.

## Effective communicators move ahead in business

These days managers, and especially CEOs, have to be great communicators. They have to be able to do intelligent interviews with the media. They have to be able to communicate their message to the board, to shareholders, to employees and to clients. They have to stand in front of many different kinds of audiences. And they have to be able to deliver both good and bad news.

## How to conquer your fears

So what can you do about it, if you fear speaking in public? Like the Nike ad says, "Just do it". The best antidote to fear of speaking is to speak. The best way to be a good communicator is to communicate. The best way to prepare for an interview or presentation is to practice with a coach and a camera. If you don't have a coach, practice with a colleague or in front of a mirror.

## Consider the audience first

Before you begin to put together your presentation, find out about the audience and the place you will be presenting. I have seen presenters in the corporate world who don't consider the audience. They use the same power point presentation regardless of whether it is for colleagues or for clients. I have seen nervous speakers read pages of text from the power point screens. When the lights are down, the presenter may not realize how the audience is responding. She may not know that some people are nodding off. The presentation may be so filled with jargon that a client audience was lost in the first few minutes.

When there are no questions at the end, the nervous presenter may believe she has answered everything. Or the presentation may have been so long there was no time for questions. Think short. Think about the audience. Make your material simple and limit the number of points you want to make. Save plenty of time for questions.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

Make sure you practice and then practice some more. The more you know the material, the more able you will be to grab the audience and answer their questions. Tell stories to engage the audience. Remember brevity is difficult but effective. Pare down the material, and pare it down again.

## Television Interviews

Media interviews really scare people, but for women, especially; that is no reason to avoid them. In my nearly two decades at CNN, I saw many people grappling with their fear of looking stupid, of saying the wrong thing. I saw one of Wall Street's biggest players sweating so much we had to stop a taped interview to wipe his brow. This same Wall Street heavyweight had no fear when it came to takeovers or corporate politics, but an interview was absolutely terrifying. Women often say "no" when they are asked to do an interview because they don't think they look great or they have the wrong clothes on that day, or they have a meeting to attend or children to

pick up from school. Or they may say "no" because they haven't done it before.

## Men say "yes" to television

Men usually don't think twice about the opportunity to be in front of a larger audience. This is part of the reason why there are more men interviewed on television, especially business television. Change that. Accept the challenge. Be ready when the request comes. Get in front of audiences at work and at conventions. Start saying "yes". Make a name for yourself and offer to be a spokesperson for the company or a guest on radio or television. Ask your company to hire a media coach and sign up for training.

Communicating well is a skill. But it is a skill that can be acquired with help and with practice. You can do it. You can go from being terrified of being in front of an audience to being comfortable with yourself to having fun.

### Tips:

- 1) Get help if this is your first time or if you are scared – practice with a friend or, better still, hire a coach.
- 2) Know your subject
- 3) Know what you want to say
- 4) Find out about the audience and gear your talk to them
- 5) Use power point to illustrate your points, not as a crutch
- 6) Practice before a mirror or camera, with a friend or your team
- 7) Practice again
- 8) And again
- 9) Be well rested and relaxed...have a massage, do yoga or meditation to focus
- 10) Be yourself and have fun

*Jan Hopkins is President of The Jan Hopkins Group, which offers media training as one of the ways it helps companies, non profits and individuals build relationships through better communications. She is a former CNN business news anchor and correspondent and a former Managing Director and Head of Client Communications at Citigroup Private Bank. As a speaker and moderator, she is represented by the Washington Speakers Bureau.*