

Chapter 2

Managing Nervousness

Chapter Objectives and Resource Integrator

After studying this chapter, students should be able to:

Objectives	Resources
1. Identify and describe the five fears that can cause nervousness.	<p>In the Text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Page 22
2. Explain why nervousness can actually help a public speaker.	<p>In the Text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pages 22-23 • Key terms: adrenaline, positive nervousness
3. Apply techniques that can be used before and during a speech to manage nervousness.	<p>In the Text:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pages 24-34 • Key terms: positive imagery <p>On Speeches DVD and on Connect Public Speaking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full Speeches #3: Maria Romano enters her speech, “Gold Fever,” with nervous tension, but she stays in control and is confident because she has prepared well and because she focuses her energies on reaching the audience. <p>On Connect Public Speaking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Checklist for Preparing and Delivering a Speech”—Careful planning can minimize anxiety. This checklist can be used for both classroom and career speeches. <p>In Instructor’s Manual (at end of this chapter)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Form 2.1, “Speech Phobia” – This handout is designed for students who have an extreme degree of stage fright. For more information on the subject, see the section “Fear of Public Speaking” in the front part of this manual. • Form 2.2, “The Curse of Perfectionism” – This essay is targeted at one of the most harmful notions that speakers can entertain: the idea that making a mistake is a terrible calamity.

Resources For Entire Chapter:**At End of Chapter in the Text:**

- Summary
- Key Terms
- Review Questions
- Building Critical-Thinking Skills
- Building Teamwork Skills

On Connect Public Speaking:

- Two practice tests for the chapter
- Checklist for Preparing and Delivering a Speech
- Application exercises for the chapter
- Glossary matching exercise
- Topic Helper

Online Learning Center (www.mhhe.com/gregory10e for instructors):

- PowerPoint: Chapter Highlights – Instructors can choose a version that has no videos or a version that includes video clips (speech excerpts). **NOTE: Many of the PowerPoint slides have no text and require the explanation given in the accompanying script. This was done intentionally so that the slides don't violate what the text teaches about the need to minimize text on a slide.**
- Tests – Ready-made chapter tests and a computerized test bank are provided.

Your Thoughts?

p. 23: Many musicians make a distinction between “good nervousness” and “bad nervousness.” What does this distinction mean? How does it apply to public speakers?

(Answers will vary). Good nervousness helps a musician to stay energetic and focused, while bad nervousness can cause errors. In public speaking, a moderate level of nervousness energizes a speaker, while an excessive level can interfere with effective delivery.

p. 29: “It is folly for a speaker to focus on his or her personal appearance.” Do you agree? Defend your answer.

(Answers will vary). Focusing on personal appearance is a distraction at a time when a speaker needs to focus on getting a message across to an audience.

Review Questions

Key to questions on p. 35 in the textbook:

1. What are the five common reasons for speakers' nervousness?
Fear of being stared at, fear of failure or rejection, fear of the unknown, a traumatic experience in the past, and social anxiety.
2. Why are fear and nervousness beneficial to the public speaker?
Fear and nervousness cause adrenaline to be released into the bloodstream, giving the speaker energy and vitality. This causes the speaker to be alert and dynamic rather than dull and listless.
3. Why is delivering a speech from memory a bad method?
A speaker who memorizes a speech usually sounds mechanical and dull, and he or she runs the risk of forgetting parts of the speech.
4. Is shyness a liability for a speaker? Explain your answer.
No. Many shy introverts succeed in show business and in the public speaking arena.
5. How can a speaker reduce excessive tension before a speech?
(1) Take a few deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly; (2) do tension/release exercises; (3) mingle with listeners and chat with them to release tension from chest and larynx.
6. Does an audience detect most of a speaker's nervous symptoms? Explain your answer.
No. Listeners are usually unaware of the physical symptoms that seem so severe to the speaker.
7. Why should you never call attention to your nervousness?
If a speaker mentions some physical symptom of nervousness, such as trembling hands, the audience's attention is directed at the symptom instead of at the speech itself, and this can cause the symptom to worsen.
8. Explain the idea, "Think of communication, not performance."
When speakers focus on getting their ideas across to the audience—rather than on performing well—their anxiety level comes down, and they become more conversational and effective.
9. Why should speakers not be upset when they see the unsmiling faces of their listeners?
A peculiarity of human nature is that while most people have animated faces during a conversation, they wear blank masks when listening to a speech.
10. Why should a speaker act as if he or she is confident?
Acting confident sometimes leads to actually being confident.

Building Critical-Thinking Skills

Key to questions on page 39 in the textbook:

1. In an experiment, psychologist Rowland Miller asked college students to do something embarrassing, such as singing *The Star Spangled Banner*, while classmates watched. Those students who reported a great degree of embarrassment thought that their classmates would consider them fools and like them less, but Miller found just the opposite: the classmates expressed greater regard for the easily embarrassed students after the performance than before. What lessons can a public speaker draw from this research?

(Answers will vary.) When a speaker makes mistakes, the audience does not automatically lose respect for him or her. In fact, mistakes often cause an audience to have greater regard for the speaker. Therefore a speaker should not be obsessed with attaining perfection.

2. Imagine that while you are speaking to an audience, you notice that (a) everyone is very quiet, (b) a man in the front is rubbing his neck, and (c) a woman is looking in her purse. Using two columns on a piece of paper, give a negative interpretation of these events in the first column, and then give a positive interpretation in the adjacent column.

(Answers will vary.) Some possible answers: (a) negative—everyone is bored and turned-off; positive—everyone is absorbed in the speech. (b) negative—the man is stiff and weary from a tedious speech, and is unconsciously signaling that the speaker is a “pain in the neck”; positive—the man is simply massaging a sore area. (c) negative—the woman has tuned the speaker out and is trying to find something to occupy her time; positive—the woman is so excited about one of the speaker’s ideas, she is looking for paper and pencil to make notes.

Activities

1. Assign skill builders at the end of the chapter in the text (Building Critical-Thinking Skills, and Building Teamwork Skills).
2. Have students conduct interviews—in person, on the telephone, or via e-mail—with persons who give speeches in their careers or in the community. Key questions to ask: Is nervousness a problem for you? How do you deal with it?

Objective Tests

Four ready-to-print tests for Chapter 2 (Forms A, B, C, D), and answer keys for all tests are provided in this instructor’s manual. The four forms cover the same material, but are sufficiently different to permit one test to be used as the class test, and the others as makeup tests for absentees. Form A features true-false questions, Forms B and C have multiple-choice questions, while Form D is more difficult, requiring students to fill in missing words or phrases. Instructors may want to combine Form D with some of the essay questions listed below.

Essay & Discussion Questions

The following can be used as essay questions for tests or as stimuli for class discussions.

1. Discuss the five common reasons for fear of public speaking.
 2. Explain why a certain amount of nervousness is beneficial to a speaker.
 3. “Public speakers usually look better than they feel.” Explain what this means.
 4. Why is it a good idea to pause a few moments before starting a speech?
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George C. Scott’s Fear and Trembling

Students find comfort in knowing of famous people who experience anxiety in public speaking. Here is an anecdote (that appeared in earlier editions of the text) that you might want to share with your students.

The late Hollywood actor George C. Scott, famous for his fierce, bulldog demeanor, played such gruff characters as General Patton, the dictator Mussolini, and Charles Dickens’s Scrooge. Also known as a blunt, irascible person in real life, he admitted that his nose had been broken five times in brawls. When actress Maureen Stapleton once complained to her director, Mike Nichols, that she was afraid of her co-star Scott, Nichols replied: “Don’t worry. The whole world’s afraid of George Scott.”

Yet, for all his intimidating ferocity, Scott confessed to a magazine reporter that “it’s terrible when I have to make a speech. I really suffer. I’m a nervous wreck. When I get up, I shake all over like a dog shaking the water off.” When Scott was asked why he was able to speak so effectively in films, he replied that while acting, he could “hide behind” whatever character he was playing, but in giving a speech “there’s nothing to hide behind.”

2.1

Speech Phobia

This article is for students who have read Chapter 2 (Managing Nervousness) in the textbook and still feel an overwhelming fear of public speaking.

Introduction

Speech phobia goes far beyond the normal fear of public speaking that most people have. It is a crippling fear that is so severe that the phobic individual often goes to great lengths to avoid giving a speech. In schools that require a public speaking course for graduation, some phobics will take every other course they need and then drop out of school rather than take the dreaded class. Some will forego jobs or promotions if public speaking is a requirement—even though they know they are hurting themselves financially.

When there is no escape, and phobics are forced to give a speech, they suffer tremendous agony. In addition to the symptoms displayed by the average speaker, phobics may experience dizziness, faintness, nausea, loss of memory, breathing problems (such as hyperventilation), and overwhelming feelings of terror and panic. It is estimated that one out of 100 Americans suffers from this kind of phobia. If you are among the unlucky one percent, there is hope for you. You don't have to go through life with this crippling disability. By using some or all of the methods outlined below, you can bring down your anxiety to manageable levels. Thousands of speech phobics, either working alone or with a therapist, have conquered their problem.

The first step is not to run away: if you are in a speech class, don't drop out; if you are scheduled to give a talk to your fellow employees next month, don't quit your job. Get help. If the information below helps you, fine; if it is not enough for you, seek out someone who can work with you—a counselor, speech teacher, psychologist, psychiatrist, or anyone else who is sensitive to speech phobia (ask around for someone who has a good reputation for helping phobics).

Taming Dragons

If you are like many phobics, your fears become ferocious, fire-breathing dragons that prey on your mind. To tame these dragons, use the following two-step system.

1. Confront Worst-Case Scenarios

You have probably heard the old saying, “Hope for the best, but prepare for the worst.” Applying this advice, make a realistic, objective appraisal of your plight. Get out a piece of paper and write down at the top, “The Worst That Can Happen.” On the left-hand side put down the terrible things that you fear might happen during your speech. On the right-hand side jot down possible ways of handling each catastrophe (I will give you some hints as we go along.)

If you wrote, “I may die,” you can scratch this off your list. No one ever died from speech phobia. If you wrote, “I will faint,” you can probably scratch this one, too. Though some phobics feel dizzy or start hyperventilating, it is extremely rare for a speaker to actually faint. But what about the other items on your list? If you are like most phobics, you have written at least one of the following:

“I will lose my voice”

If you get choked up by a dry throat or lack of air, stop your speech for 5-15 seconds—or however long you need to regain control. You may want to take a long, slow drink of water (from the glass you have arranged to have on the lectern). If there is no water, ask a volunteer from the audience to fetch you a glass. There is no need to apologize or explain.

“My mind will go blank”

Fearing that your mind will go blank is realistic because this problem does happen to some speakers.

If your mind goes blank, what can you do? You can try the water glass technique mentioned above, and hope that your thoughts will get back on track during the long, slow drink. You can look at your notes to try to pick up where you left off. (While you are looking at your notes, take a deep breath.) You can ask your audience a question that you have planned ahead of time for such an emergency: “Let me interrupt my speech a moment,” you say confidently. “Can anyone tell me . . .” And you proceed to ask an easy question that someone in the audience is sure to answer. This little intermission may give you a chance to get your mind back in gear. If all else fails, you can say—not in desperation but with a little smile—“I’ve lost my train of thought. Let’s see, what was the last thing I said? Could someone help me out?” You will be happy to discover that audiences are very sympathetic and eager to help.

If you have done a good job of preparing your notes, you should be able to get back on track if your mind does go blank. One thing you can do is write out your entire introduction and put it at the bottom of your stack of cards as an “ace in the hole.” The beginning is the most stressful part of your speech—the time when you are most likely to have a memory lapse—so if you need to, you can simply pull the card out and read it. I hesitate to give this advice for two reasons: (1) reading your introduction will cause you to lose vital eye contact with your audience and therefore hurt your effectiveness and (2) you may be tempted to draw out an “ace” and read it even though you are nowhere near a true crisis. With these warnings in mind, you may want to try this. Simply knowing that you have that ace will help your self-confidence. When I first gave speeches, I always made my note cards the correct way—jotting down nothing but a few words and phrases—but I put my written introduction at the bottom of the stack in case of emergency. I never had to pull the card out, but knowing it was there reassured me.

“I will throw up”

Nauseated phobics usually vomit before or after a speech; I have never seen or heard of anyone throwing up during a speech. But if this fear plagues you, plan beforehand what you will do: for example, place a trash can outside the room you will be speaking in. If you feel sickness coming on, tell your audience that you will be right back, rush to the trash can and vomit, and then come back and resume your speech. If you don’t act panic-stricken, your audience will politely wait for you. It is not the end of the world; people get sick all the time.

“I will omit an important part”

Omitting part of your speech is not likely to happen if you make good note cards (with just a few key phrases to jog your memory) and if you practice many times. But if it does happen, go back to the part you left out (“Oh, yes, let me tell you something I meant to talk about a few minutes ago . . .”) or simply omit the material. The audience does not know what you planned to say; they don’t have a copy of your outline or notes. If you omit something, they probably will never suspect it.

“I will shake all over”

If shaking is your worst-case scenario, you have little to worry about. You may remember that in Chapter 2, I explained that the audience is not aware of most of your physical distress. And I gave you some hints on how you can dissipate excessive nervous tension. If your shakiness is quite extreme, however, you should make sure that you don't advertise it any more than is necessary (so that you don't add to your own misery). For example, don't use notebook paper for notes or for visual aids because your shaking hands might cause the paper to rustle and distract your audience. And if you have shaky hands, don't try the water glass technique mentioned above—you might spill the water on the lectern or on yourself.

“My voice will be shaky”

In Chapter 2, I noted that if you are having a problem with your voice, the audience usually doesn't notice. Your voice may sound raspy or shaky to you, but your listeners simply don't notice. I must admit, however, that there are times when your voice is trembling so badly that the audience does become aware of it. If you are afraid this will happen to you, keep two things in mind: (1) Even if your voice is shaky, it will not sound as awful as you think it does; various studies have shown that some speakers rate their own voices as extremely shaky and uneven, while the people who listened to the speeches rated the speakers' voices as being only mildly tremulous. (2) Your listeners will not hold a quivering voice against you; they know that this is beyond your control. If they judge you on anything, it will be on the quality of your remarks; fortunately for you, high quality is achieved in an unscary way—by spending many hours at home in good, solid preparation.

What can you do to control a wobbly voice? Your main problem may be that you inhale and exhale too much air. To correct this, use the breathing exercises that I shall describe shortly. At the same time you are learning to control your breathing, practice lowering your pitch so that your voice sounds deeper and richer. You can do this at home with a tape recorder as you rehearse your speech.

2. Visualize Your Response

Go through your list of worst-case possibilities and nail down your plans for handling each. As you do this, visualize each problem and your way of coping with it. If possible, practice your response. At home, for example, actually rehearse what you are going to say or do if your mind goes blank and you have to pause.

Visualizing a problem doesn't mean that you dwell on it in a brooding, self-defeating way. What I'm recommending is a rational, healthy process—what psychologists call “the work of worrying,” an important technique for handling stress. In a study of patients who underwent surgery in a hospital, it was found that those patients who had no fear before surgery had difficulty in adjusting to post-surgery pain and helplessness. Those who had moderate levels of fear had a much better adjustment; they had done “the work of worrying” necessary for anticipating and rehearsing the future discomforts.

Does my advice on visualizing problems contradict what I said in Chapter 2 about the need for visualizing success? No, while you are visualizing your worst-case scenarios, you should also visualize yourself triumphing over them. For example, if you imagine yourself forgetting your introduction, you should picture yourself reaching into the bottom of your notes and pulling out your ace in the hole—your written-out introduction—and using it to get you through the crisis.

In your visualization—and during the speech itself—concentrate on getting your ideas across to your audience. Aiming your energy at your audience will make you a dynamic speaker and prevent an unhealthy obsession with your own discomfort.

Reducing Tension and Fear

Here are some techniques that can help you to bring your tension and fear to a manageable level:

Relaxation

Your body may become so agitated before a speech that you need to find some way to calm yourself down. You may already have experience with techniques such as yoga or meditation. Use whatever works for you.

Chemical Relaxers. Don't try alcohol. It is likely to cloud your brain, tangle your tongue, and weaken your coordination. If your throat tends to get dry, you will need water (right before or during your speech) but stay away from soft drinks (they might make you burp) and avoid coffee (caffeine stimulation is the last thing you need for your jitters).

What about tranquilizers or beta-blockers (a kind of pill some musicians use for stage fright)? This is a matter you should discuss with a physician or therapist. Musicians who use beta-blockers need a medication to prevent tremors while they are playing an instrument; as a public speaker, trembling is not as important an issue—by using gestures and movement, you can dissipate the nervous tension that causes tremors. I lean against medications, for the following reasons: (1) You need to learn how to manage your phobia because you might have to speak in a surprise situation someday (for example, you walk into the office and your boss says, “In five minutes, I want you to tell the board of directors about your new plan.”) (2) Any pill can have harmful side effects, though it may be months or years before you discover what they are. If, after consulting your physician, you do plan to use medication, a word of caution: You should never take any kind of medicine right before a speech if you have no experience with it; you can never predict how it may affect you.

Breathing Exercises. In the days and weeks before your speech, and during the minutes immediately preceding your speech, you may want to try breathing exercises to lower your tension level.

The wrong kind of breathing can be harmful. If you take rapid, shallow gulps, you can hyperventilate and feel dizzy. If you breathe with your upper chest (the way you would do if you were running a race), you might stimulate your central nervous system—just the opposite of what you want.

The kind of breathing that will truly relax you is done through the diaphragm (the muscular part of your respiratory system that separates the chest from the abdomen). To practice this, lie on your back and put a hand lightly on your stomach. Keeping your mouth closed, breathe through your nose in such a way that you feel your stomach rising as you inhale and falling as you exhale. Make your inhalation and exhalation last the same amount of time, and count to yourself (One, two, three, four...). Count as high as you want, but make sure you don't strain yourself. The idea is to be relaxed. After you have practiced this lying down, practice it sitting in a chair. Once you have become proficient, you will be able to do the exercise while waiting to be called to speak, and no one in the audience will realize what you are doing. The counting part, by the way, is a very good way to get your mind distracted from your anxiety.

Muscular Relaxation. Here is a technique you can do a few hours before you leave home to give your speech: Lie down on a bed or a reclining chair and make yourself as relaxed and comfortable as

possible. Clench your left fist as tight as you can, then relax. Observe the contrast between tension and relaxation. Clench your left fist again as hard as you can, then relax. Once more notice the difference. Now do the same thing with your right fist. Proceed in this way through all your major muscle groups—arms, lips, jaw, neck, shoulders, chest, stomach, hips, thighs, calves, etc. Tense each muscle, then relax it. If you practice this technique often enough, you may become so attuned to your body’s tension patterns that you can quit doing the tensing part and do only the relaxing.

Desensitization

Many phobias have been cured by a psychological therapy called desensitization. Let’s say that a man has such an extreme fear of snakes that he will not go on picnics in the summertime, let alone take a hike. In therapy, he puts himself into a state of deep relaxation and then goes through a series of events. First, he looks at pictures of snakes in a book; he does this until he feels no trace of fear. Next, he views real snakes through a window. When he becomes comfortable with this stage, he goes on to the next: perhaps he enters a room where snakes are being held by a person 10 feet away. Then as the days go by and he becomes less and less frightened, he moves closer and closer to the snake—perhaps even to the point of touching it himself. At the end of such therapy, many phobics are able to resume their normal lives—such as going outdoors in the summertime—without being terrified by fear of snakes.

This same sort of therapy has worked with speech phobics. The stages might go something like this: (1) Stand in front of one person and read from a book, (2) Stand in front of the person and give your name, address, and other basic information, (3) Stand in front of three people and give a one-minute speech, (4) Stand in front of five people and give a two-minute speech, and so on . . . The idea is that you start with a small, unthreatening situation and work your way up to larger audiences and longer speeches.

If you don’t have the time or the opportunity for such an involved sequence, there is another form of desensitization you can try: Write down on cards a series of fearful events (starting with mildly frightening and going up the ladder to extremely frightening). Your hierarchy might look like this: (1) Practicing the speech at home, (2) Walking into the room where the speech will be given, (3) Being introduced, (4) Walking to the lectern, (5) Looking out at the audience, (6) Giving the speech.

Take each card in order and imagine the scene. If you feel anxiety, use breathing or muscle-relaxation exercises to calm yourself. When you have reached the point where you can visualize the scene without anxiety, you are ready to go on to the next card. When you reach the most important card—giving the speech—fantasize success. Imagine yourself as a confident, self-assured, poised speaker. Visualize the audience looking at you with interest and respect.

Cognitive Therapy

One therapy that can be used in conjunction with those already mentioned is designed to change your cognitions—or thoughts—about yourself as a public speaker. On a piece of paper write down your negative thoughts about yourself and your speech on the left-hand side; then on the right-hand side write down positive alternatives. Here are some examples:

Negative Thought: “When I get up there in front of all those people, I just know I’ll fall apart.”

Positive Alternative: “I will be very nervous, but if I practice a lot and prepare myself mentally, I can succeed.”

Negative Thought: “The audience will think that I’m a blushing, stammering, trembling incompetent.”

Positive Alternative: “No one in the audience is expecting me to be a Winston Churchill. They will be so busy listening to my ideas that they won’t pay much attention to my delivery.”

The next stage may sound silly to you, but give it a try: put a heavy rubber band around your wrist and as you go about your business in the days preceding your speech, if you have any negative thoughts about your speech, snap yourself with the rubber band and say to yourself, “Stop!” Then force yourself to substitute a positive alternative. The reason this sort of therapy works is that when you start thinking of yourself as a “winner” instead of as a “loser,” you often slip into the role of winner and start acting like a winner. And acting like a winner can make you one.

Some speakers handle their fright by pretending to themselves that they are someone else, like actors on a stage. If your name is Sandra Smith, for example, you could pretend that the person giving the speech is Sandra Smith, the world-famous orator, a person who is highly confident in talking to audiences.

Giving Your Speech

When you stand up to deliver your speech, bear in mind two important pieces of advice:

1. You must NEVER end your speech prematurely. No matter how miserable you are, no matter how bad your panic, no matter how constricted your throat, you must finish your remarks. Running away from a speech is a sure way of trapping yourself in a never-ending cycle of defeat, for the next time you try to speak, you will be tormented by the thought, “I blew it the last time and I probably will this time, too.” And sure enough, your negative thought will turn out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Therefore, long before the day of your speech, vow to yourself that under no circumstances will you sit down before your speech is completely finished.

2. No matter how serious your problem, you can “save” yourself from disaster by employing a brief pause. It is important that you stop your speech the instant you feel yourself losing control. Don’t wait until your symptoms pile up and you are a hopeless wreck. How long should you pause? As long as it takes for you to regain control of yourself. Yes, I know that silence is terrifying, but it is terrifying to no one but you. The listeners don’t mind if you pause five, ten, fifteen seconds. It seems like an eternity to you, but they will scarcely notice. And when you resume your speech, they will be so interested in following your ideas that in a few minutes they will have forgotten all about your pause.

What should you do during the pause? That is up to you. You may want to prepare an emergency kit in advance—a handout or a visual aid such as a chart—something you can pull out during your pause so that attention is diverted away from you. While your audience is looking at the chart or handout, you of course have a chance to pull yourself together. (This advance planning, by the way, might insure that your worst fears will not come true; it is like a barf bag on an airplane—if you have one handy, you will not throw up, but if you don’t have access to one, you are sure to need it.)

Being a Winner

If you are a phobic, being a winner sometimes means doing nothing more than giving a speech from start to finish—never mind how good it is. The important thing is to confront your problem head-on. As one wise person said, “The only way to conquer fear is to do the thing you fear.” The only way you can conquer your extreme fear of giving a speech is to give a speech.

I am not going to pretend that your task will be easy. But I will say that if your worst fears are realized (you pull a mental blank, for example), it is not the end of the world. Your only task (right now) is to get through the speech. Even if you shake like a leaf, keep going until you reach the end. And then, whether the speech was good or bad, you will have established the fact (to yourself) that you can give a speech.

If you do panic or choke up, remember that most people in an audience know from first-hand experience what stage fright feels like and they are very sympathetic. They are not expecting a brilliant performance.

In his inaugural address as our first President, George Washington was “so visibly perturbed that his hand trembled and his voice shook so that he could scarcely be understood,” according to one writer of that time. I don’t know what reaction his audience had, but I would bet their affection for him increased as a result of this display of nervousness, for he showed them that although he was a great military leader and statesman, he was also . . . human. Just like them.

Just like you and me.

2.2

The Curse of Perfectionism

Are you afraid that you will make a blunder in a speech? Or that your ideas will be rejected or ridiculed? If you have these fears, you are like many business and professional people. “Employees in corporate America today,” says a top manager in a multinational firm, “live in terror of being seen as wrong, of making a mistake...” During meetings and in presentations, they fear that if they voice a new idea or a creative proposal, they might make a blunder. They might be laughed at and viewed as fools.

In the workplace, this play-it-safe attitude causes stagnation. In public speaking, it creates speakers who are bland, predictable, and boring. I’d rather hear speakers who risk making mistakes while being passionate about new ideas than listen to cautious, timid souls who view error as calamity. Striving for perfection is a hopeless goal, for we are all human, and being human means making mistakes. When I give a speech, I do my best but I know that I am far from perfect. I know that some of my ideas may be misunderstood because of my shortcomings. I know that I may unintentionally choose a word or an anecdote that causes laughter at my expense. Here are some points to bear in mind:

A mistake is no big deal. What seems like a disaster to you is—in the words of one wise person—“just a moment’s diversion to others.” Your listeners don’t dwell on a blunder—they move along to other things.

If you make a blooper, join in the laughter. Because I give many speeches, I make my share of bloopers. Once I was wanting to refer to the basketball superstar Michael Jordan of the Chicago Bulls, but my words came out like this: “...That great basketball star, Michael Jackson!” The audience roared at my gaffe, and I laughed along with them. It is liberating to be able to laugh at yourself. “You grow up the day you have the first real laugh—at yourself,” said actress Ethel Barrymore.

Don’t overestimate your own importance. A friend told me that she was a nervous wreck as she planned to chair a meeting of an important public-service committee. Right before the meeting, in a conversation with an older woman (who had been on the committee for many years), she confided that she was afraid of “screwing up” the vital workings of the group. The older woman said, in a gentle, friendly voice, “Relax, you’re not important enough to ruin this committee—none of us are.” At first, my friend took this statement as a rude put-down, but upon reflection, she realized that the older woman “was just trying to help me gain perspective...She was right, of course. I was not so all-fired important that if I made mistakes in chairing the meeting, the committee would crash and burn.”

Realize that audiences like imperfect speakers. Sometimes mistakes reveal a speaker’s humanness and increase an audience’s warmth toward the speaker. Consider this anecdote by Sydney J. Harris:

Sir Cedric Hardwicke recounts the most moving moment he had ever witnessed in the theater. It was watching Ellen Terry when she was close to eighty, playing in the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice*. As she approached Portia’s “quality of mercy” speech, her face suddenly went blank. She struggled vainly for moment and then moved down to the footlights.

“I am a very silly old lady,” she said, “and I cannot remember what I have to say.” Almost unanimously, Hardwicke recalls, the audience shouted the familiar lines and cheered as she smiled her thanks and returned to her place. She played out the rest of the scene to an enthralled audience.

It is our strength that may attract people to us initially, but it is our weakness that makes them like us, that touches some of their own inadequacies and forges a common bond of humanity. It is this one touch of nature that makes the whole world kin.

If you have been stung by the curse of perfectionism, relax. Join the Club of Mistake Makers. There are millions of us members.