



Why You Must Rehearse

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Published on HBR.org / June 09, 2011 / Reprint [H007AN](#)

A few years back, we worked with the CEO of a company on a speech assignment that promised to be both fun and challenging. The CEO had built the company from nothing to dominate its industry. He had achieved a great deal, and was now ready to tell his story to the world. He had spoken to his employees, and a few industry groups, before, but had never ventured outside of this narrow sphere of influence.

Now he wanted to go big. He got in touch with a speaker bureau, and asked it to book him. The bureau counseled him to go small — to begin with a modest venue and a small audience. Just to get the hang of it.

He rejected that advice. He persuaded the speaker bureau to get him a large audience — 6,000 people — and a high fee for his first time out. So the bureau called us in to help write the speech. The stakes were high and the speaker inexperienced. A coach seemed like a good idea.

We wrote the speech, and it was a compelling one — if I do say so — because the CEO was an immigrant who started with nothing and built the company up through hard work and business savvy — a classic ‘rags to riches’ story. This was a person who changed the world in a significant way and had as a result a good message for people to hear.

Once everyone was happy with the speech, we proposed that the speaker rehearse. The CEO resisted, saying, “I’m very comfortable under pressure, because of my extensive martial arts training. I’ll be fine.”

We pressed hard, but the speaker ultimately did not rehearse beyond talking through the script in a 10-minute session in his palatial apartment overlooking Central Park in New York.

I called my good friends at the speaker bureau to warn them that our speaker hadn’t rehearsed and I was worried. They thanked me for the warning, and we all held our collective breaths.

The big day and the debut came, and with it ... disaster.

The stage was quite wide, and the conference organizers had put a couch in the middle of the wide expanse to break it up. At one end of the stage — stage right — was the podium, and at the other end, a potted plant. The speaker began at the podium, but soon left it to roam the stage.

A couple of minutes in, he jumped up on the couch and executed what everyone figured out later must have been a half-remembered Kung Fu move. It was dramatic; the audience was riveted. Then he jumped down, uttered a few lines from the speech, and jumped up on the couch again, performing another semi-martial-arts maneuver, and a few more lines from the speech.

He kept up this astounding mixture of speaking and martial arts ballet until he had managed to get through — incoherently — about half the speech. Then he (mercifully) stopped and asked for questions.

There were none. 6,000 people in the audience were stunned into silence.

The CEO has never spoken in front of a large audience again. The speaker bureau didn't talk to me for three years, even though the CEO had the decency to call both me and the speaker bureau up and apologize. The organizer of the event has a 'bootleg' tape of the speech which is played at late night 'after event' parties to riotous laughter. They coined the phrase 'jumping the couch' from this incident to describe a speaker who melts down during a speech.

You must rehearse. You don't want to jump the couch. Adrenaline plays funny tricks on the mind, and you need to establish the muscle memory of a full, physical rehearsal in order to give your body something remembered to do when the adrenaline kicks in. A mental run-through is not enough. You must rehearse.

If find yourself arguing with me, or yourself, giving reasons why you don't need to rehearse, that's a red public speaking flag. Professionals rehearse. Amateurs jump the couch. So rehearse.

(Some details have been changed to protect the CEO in question.)

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This article was originally published online on June 09, 2011.



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