



Business Communication

# Going from “Suck to Non-Suck” as a Public Speaker

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**People often ask me for advice about** public speaking, since I do a lot of it. Of course, it’s often reported that people are more afraid of public speaking than death (which is not exactly empirically accurate, but it is close). In my experience, becoming a good public speaker is not a natural skill for anyone. While I now speak professionally about once a week, for sums I could never have imagined just a few years ago, I have had to learn through many difficult and painful experiences and a great deal of feedback how to basically just be myself on stage.

The reality for any creative process, from public speaking to innovation to playing the piano, is that we must be able to go from “suck to non-suck,” as Ed Catmull describes the reality of Pixar’s creative process, something he has observed and understood for over 30 years as the company’s cofounder and president. That takes hours of practice — and a lot of easy-to-ask for, hard-to-implement advice.

The best advice I ever received about going “from suck to non-suck” as a public speaker came from former New York Governor Mario Cuomo. Cuomo visited Bowdoin College during my senior year, and I was the student assigned to show him around. Scott Hood, who led Bowdoin’s communications office, and I picked the Governor up at the airport in Portland, Maine. Making conversation on the 40 minute drive back to Brunswick, I asked him how he’d become such a good public speaker.

He graciously shared the story about how he started speaking publicly in law school and was a terrible speaker until he started 1) talking about things he believed in passionately, and 2) knew his material extremely well. I now routinely share that advice today, with one addition: know your audience.

Since then, I’ve heard stories from some of the best speakers around, whether it’s Daniel Pink or Malcolm Gladwell or Hillary Clinton, about how they all sucked when they started giving speeches. I know I did — despite getting Governor Cuomo’s advice. (Remember what I said about advice being easy to ask for, and hard to implement? Yeah.)

My first paid speech, at the University of Cincinnati, completely bombed. Here is the actual email my speaking agent received after the speech, with names changed to protect identities

*From: Christal Sanders*

*To: Dave Helmick*

*Hello Dave! The check is in the mail today:) The conference went great! We had a snowstorm but still had a decent turn out. Peter did well overall, but it would have been nice if you would have shared that he never spoke to college students or in this type of setting. I think he was more focused on this being the start of his book tour versus personalizing it to the students. Not sure if this was a miscommunication between the two of you or his focus. I, and some of my committee members, felt it was overpriced for the experience. Would have paid \$1500 for what we received. I have a limited budget and this could have been spent better. You were a little misleading but maybe you haven’t seen him present before.*

*Peter’s age and experience/research was great for our audience. The thoughts/message from the book of identifying your passion really stood out for many students and we had great dialogue in a smaller group. The choice session allowed for students to reflect and share which is good. More honest feedback on his presentation style: His energy isn’t really in his presentation and maybe it was due to him being on vacation earlier in the week. He didn’t really connect much to the college student experience and really focused on examples from the book. He wasn’t mindful of the time frame and went over time then did not have a wrap up thought or closure to his talk. Instead, just said: “Well, I’ve gone over the time so thank you”. Not much of a closing. Students had a lot of questions for him and he didn’t seem to prepared in answering them and would instead reflect it back to the audience for others to answer, which is fine but would have hoped his personal experience mixed with his research would have given him answers/examples to draw from as our keynote speaker. He would also change the question and answer it in a way he knew how to answer. Some of the feedback from the students was that he plugged his book too much, the time with him was too long and he focused too much on the leadership stories of just a few people from the book.*

*Like I stated earlier, Peter did fine and the day went great. The professional staff on our committee had a lot of feedback for improvement because he didn’t meet the expectation of what we would get for the price we paid.*

*Take care, Christal Sanders*

Ouch. Damn. That email stung for days, especially since it undermined my already-low confidence in my public speaking abilities right at the start of a big book tour. At first I responded defensively. I’d been going through a difficult time in my life! I did have doubts about the

usefulness of my ideas to college students. Of course when I didn’t know the answer to a question, I would turn it back around to the students and ask them! How was I supposed to know how they should manage college roommate conflicts?

But once I got past my initial reaction and defensiveness, I knew I had to take this feedback seriously because I had no perspective about how audiences would react to my messages or speaking style. What I learned over time was that, true to Mario Cuomo’s advice, the more that I came to really understand my material, such that I got to the point where I wasn’t actually thinking about what I was going to say, I started to better connect with audiences. I did use slides to help structure my comments to prevent me from wandering (a challenge I have without some structure), but I stopped putting notes in my slides, or trying to memorize what I was going to say and when. I relied on what was already in my head, and slowly, I got out of my head and into the moment and sharing the insights and learning. It was counterintuitive, but the more I was able to let go of my own ideas and expectations of what the audience wanted or needed, and instead, allowed myself to just improvise, my ratings went up steadily. And as it turned out, my own goofy sense of humor was actually a strength, not a weakness as I had previously thought.

As the audience came to see that I was just being me and trying to share and teach them, quirks and all, they stopped analyzing and judging me, and could just enjoy the moment. That’s how I feel at least, noting how the energy in the audience now seems to shift about a quarter or a third of the way into each event. It’s an experience for us all, not a lecture. When I can just be me, it gives the audience to just be themselves, and that human experience is what ultimately unlocks and empowers creativity, my ultimate goal. It has taken me thousands of hours of practice — and reams of hard-to-hear feedback — to improve. I’m not

sure I’ve reached the “10,000 Hour Rule” drawn from psychologist Anders Ericsson’s research, but I must be getting close.

I’ve spent years studying leadership, entrepreneurship, innovation and creativity, and as we’re very slowly starting to understand, no one is born as a great leader or innovator. It must be learned and consciously developed through experience.

So, if you want to improve your public speaking, are you prepared to put yourself out there repeatedly to improve, and go from suck to non-suck and become a great speaker? The choice is yours.

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