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# Think Fast, Talk Smart

Communication Techniques

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Workplace Skills / Communication / Public Speaking

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## Take-Aways

- To communicate effectively off the cuff, you first need to rein in your anxiety.
- To feel more comfortable ad-libbing, get out of your own way.
- Reframe the improvisational speaking situation as an opportunity.
- Slow down and listen.
- Liberate yourself to speak by applying structure to your words.

## Recommendation

An estimated 85% of people suffer from a fear of public speaking, and being called upon to speak spontaneously is a nightmare-inducing scenario for many. Presenting at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, communications lecturer Matt Abrahams shares several strategies to help you speak effectively off the cuff. With fun and games, he encourages his audience to embrace occasions to speak ad hoc as opportunities to shine. While his tips may not cure you of your anxiety, they will take the edge off the fear.

## Summary

### **To communicate effectively off the cuff, you first need to rein in your anxiety.**

Some 85% of people admit to a fear of public speaking. While many of those afflicted can muddle through a formal, rehearsed speech, they often clam up when called upon to give feedback, an impromptu speech, an introduction or a toast. As a courtesy to your audience, you need to get your anxiety under control. If you exhibit nerves, your audience will feel uncomfortable and won't be primed to receive your message.

*“It’s incumbent on you as a communicator to help your audience feel comfortable, and we do that by managing our anxiety.”*

To overcome your anxiety, you must first acknowledge it. When you feel jittery, take a deep breath and recognize the response as a natural reaction. Nervousness is the brain's way of preparing you for something of consequence – in this case, the delivery of an important message. Simply acknowledging your nerves will prevent them from spiraling out of control.

Next, remind yourself that the speaking engagement is not a performance that you must perfect. Instead, view it as a conversation with your audience. Ask questions – rhetorical, polling, or otherwise – to draw your audience in and encourage participation. Favor conversational language to esoteric language, and use the inclusive pronouns “us” and “we” to draw your audience into the conversation.

Finally, stay present. Worrying about the unknown future consequences of a speaking engagement feeds your anxiety. To stop ruminating on the future, ground yourself in the present: Before speaking, do some push-ups, take a walk, listen to music or recite tongue-twisters.

### **To feel more comfortable ad-libbing, get out of your own way.**

It is human nature to seek perfection when speaking. Unfortunately, this drive to be simultaneously eloquent, insightful and clever inhibits your fluency when speaking spontaneously.

*“The very first thing that gets in people’s way when it comes to spontaneous speaking is themselves.”*

To get out of your own way, train your brain to embrace imperfection. Point at items around you and mislabel them with conviction. Avoid pre-planning what you will shout out, and abstain from reciting a list of, say, fruits or breeds of dog. Let your mind go blank, and call out the first words that pop into your head.

## Reframe the improvisational speaking situation as an opportunity.

View impromptu speaking situations as opportunities rather than threats. Q&A sessions, for example, tend to provoke anxiety because speakers can't prepare. But if you reframe a Q&A as an opportunity to clarify what people are thinking and improve your audience's experience, your anxiety will dissipate.

*"When you reframe...spontaneous speaking as an opportunity...you are less nervous, less defensive, and you can accomplish something pretty darn good."*

To practice this skill, pretend to give an imaginary gift to a partner, who responds with, "How did you know I wanted \_\_\_\_\_?" You, in turn, must think on your feet by expounding on the reason you gave that gift.

## Slow down and listen.

Your brain begins formulating replies before your conversation partner has finished speaking. This anticipatory response prevents you from fully gauging the needs of your audience. Slow down and listen completely to the participants.

*"As a communicator, your job is to be in service of your audience. And if you don't understand what your audience is asking or needs, you can't fulfill that obligation."*

To practice listening, try conversing with a partner by spelling out every word. This game inhibits you from planning your response ahead of time because you need to focus and listen throughout the conversation.

## Liberate yourself to speak by applying structure to your words.

Applying structure to your impromptu addresses helps you think on your feet by reducing the mental burden of simultaneously trying to plan what you're going to say and how you'll say it. Moreover, an audience retains 40% more of a structured speech than of an unstructured one.

*"Structure sets you free...It reduces the cognitive load of figuring out what you are saying and how you are going to say it."*

One effective conversational structure is the "What? So what? Now what?" structure, whereby you describe something, say why it is important and explain what will happen next. The more you practice structuring your speech, the more comfortable you'll be with speaking off the cuff.

## About the Speaker

**Matt Abrahams** lectures in strategic communication and effective virtual presenting at the Stanford Graduate School of Business.



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