

# DEMYSTIFYING **PUBLIC SPEAKING**

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I've cherry-picked content for this presentation on the process of writing, practicing, and getting feedback on a prepared talk. There's a TON more info in the book, too.



This is a picture of me giving my first big talk. It was to a crowd of more than 400 people.

Everything went wrong...



look at that face

i'm in so much pain



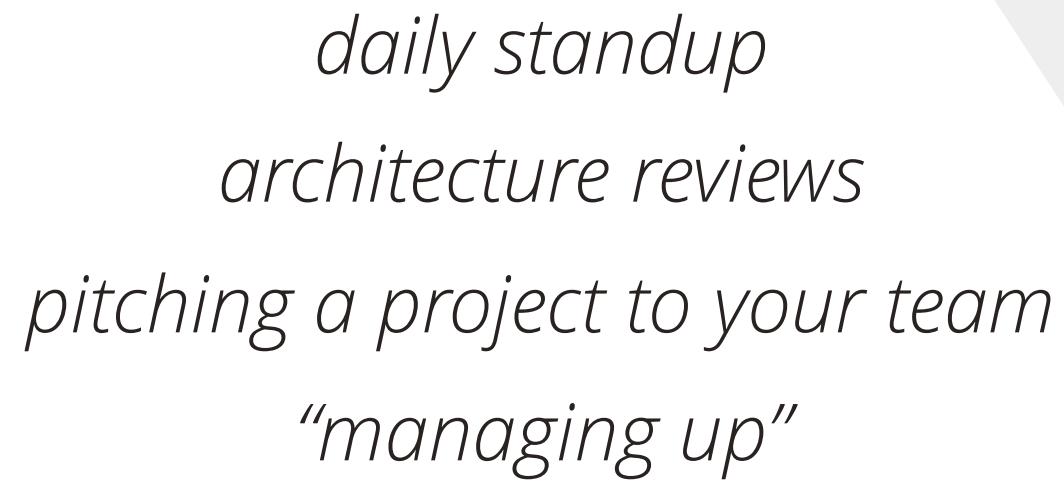
That wasn't the **end**.

But I kept going. I made it through that talk, and I went on to keep improving it and getting better at public speaking. I've had the privilege of giving lots of talks now, and I've learned a lot about what it feels like to get up in a spotlight and say some prepared words to some people.



The **spotlight** comes  
in many forms.

but public speaking isn't just about conference talks. It's about any moment when you have that spotlight on you, and you have to say some words to someone. These skills that I'm utilizing to not fall on my face while I'm talking to you right now are valuable when I'm leading a meeting at work, or when my boss asks me to talk about what projects are on my team's plate, or when I'm pitching a technical implementation in an architecture review.



*daily standup*  
*architecture reviews*  
*pitching a project to your team*  
*“managing up”*

there are lots of different places where we have a spotlight on us, and we have to think about some words that we want to say, and hopefully make it through that moment without puking or being reduced to a fit of nervous giggles

you do these things already! they're a big part of our work in this industry. think about what circumstances you have in your daily work life where there's a spotlight on you and you need to say something coherent.

# Public speaking is our #1 fear

most of us get nervous when we're in that spotlight. I'm going to guess that the majority of people in this room get a little anxious when we think about public speaking. And that includes the speakers. There's that famous study that found that public speaking is our #1 fear, more than heights or spiders or death.

When I was doing research on this, I put a survey out on Twitter and asked folks what in particular made them fear public speaking. and the spectrum was HUGE. my particular public speaking fear is tripping and falling while the spotlight is on me. but i now know that that's not what EVERYBODY fears about public speaking.

I'm going to read out some of the fears people shared. Let's see if any of this resonates with you.

# VOICE & APPEARANCE

“The sound/pitch of my own voice”

“Heart racing (& therefore getting out of breath quicker), getting tongue tied”

“People judging whether I’m dressed appropriately”

“Being judged for being fat, not on what I’m saying”

“Needing to pee while I’m talking”



# BEING WRONG

“Elegantly explaining something that is actually wrong”

“Showing that I’m ignorant about something that I thought I was knowledgeable about”

“Getting a question I can’t even begin to answer”

# BEING JUDGED

“Not being impressive enough”

“That everything I say becomes so messy that anyone can refute it”

“That no one learns anything, and the people I’m talking to are starkly aware of it”

“Being exposed for the fraud I have always felt like”



**We do it  
anyway.**

Each of us in STILL forge through those fears every day.

It's important for us to get good at sharing our knowledge with others, and being able to talk about the work that we do. It's important for us to know how to help someone understand something new, or to be inspired or motivated to do something different. It helps us in our daily lives, and it helps us get new jobs, and it helps us do better work.

My goal today is to help you reduce those fears for ANY spotlight, whether it's being on a physical stage, or talking to your team, or just having a really important one on one conversation.

- 
- 1. What do you want to say?**
  - 2. Practice and get feedback**
  - 3. Prep your environment**
  - 4. Eat a donut**

For this talk, I've cherry picked a few tactics that are relevant for ANY of those different speaking settings.

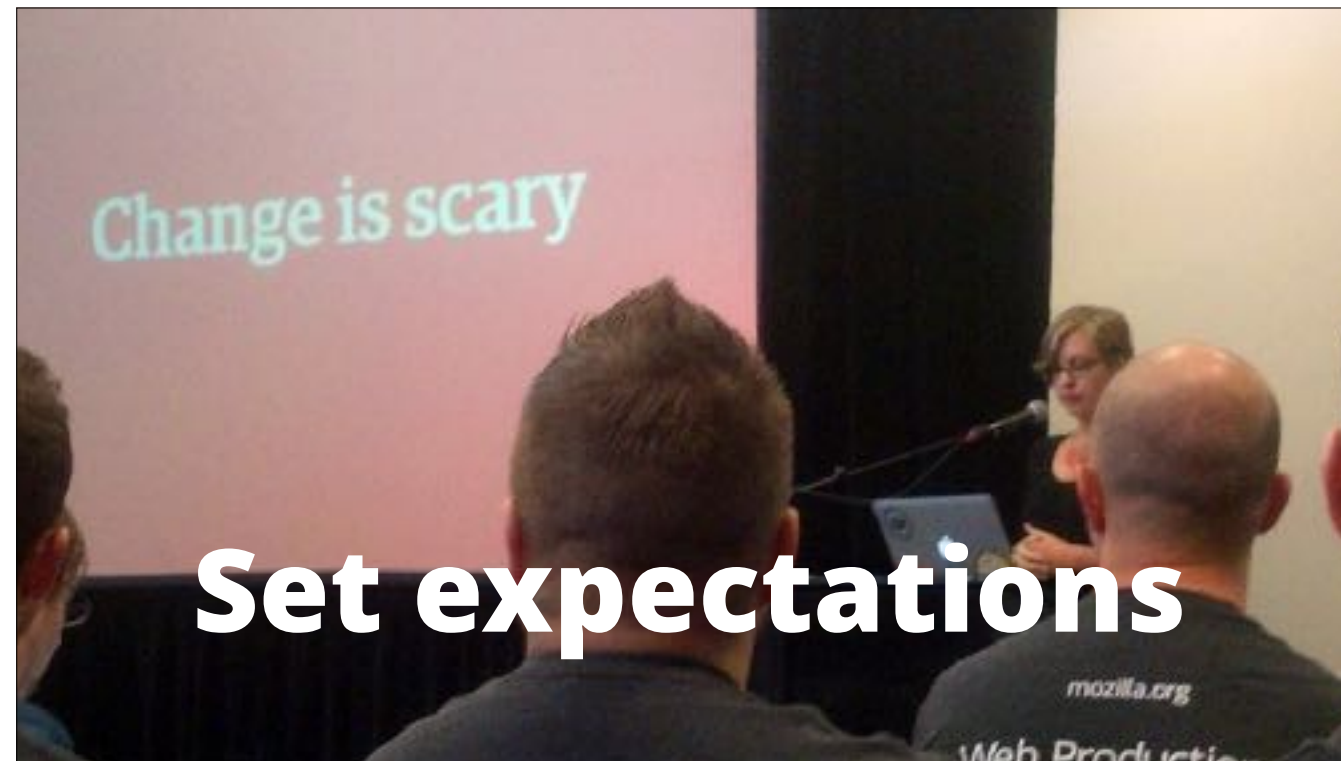
We're going to talk about finding the right words to say, and how to practice them. We're going to spend a LOT of time talking about feedback because it's crucial not just for these spotlight moments. Then we'll cover how to prep for your spotlight moment and then, well, celebrating it.



# WHAT DO YOU WANNA SAY

This is the section for people who, when they thought about their fears, figured out that they were afraid of, “Not getting points across” or “Being boring or rambling”.

Creating a solid structure for your content is the best way to guide your audience through your topic—structure helps set expectations for what’s next, strengthen your arguments, and keep folks more engaged. It also gives you a foothold if you lose your train of thought.



When we get nervous, we often try to jump right into what it is we're trying to communicate.

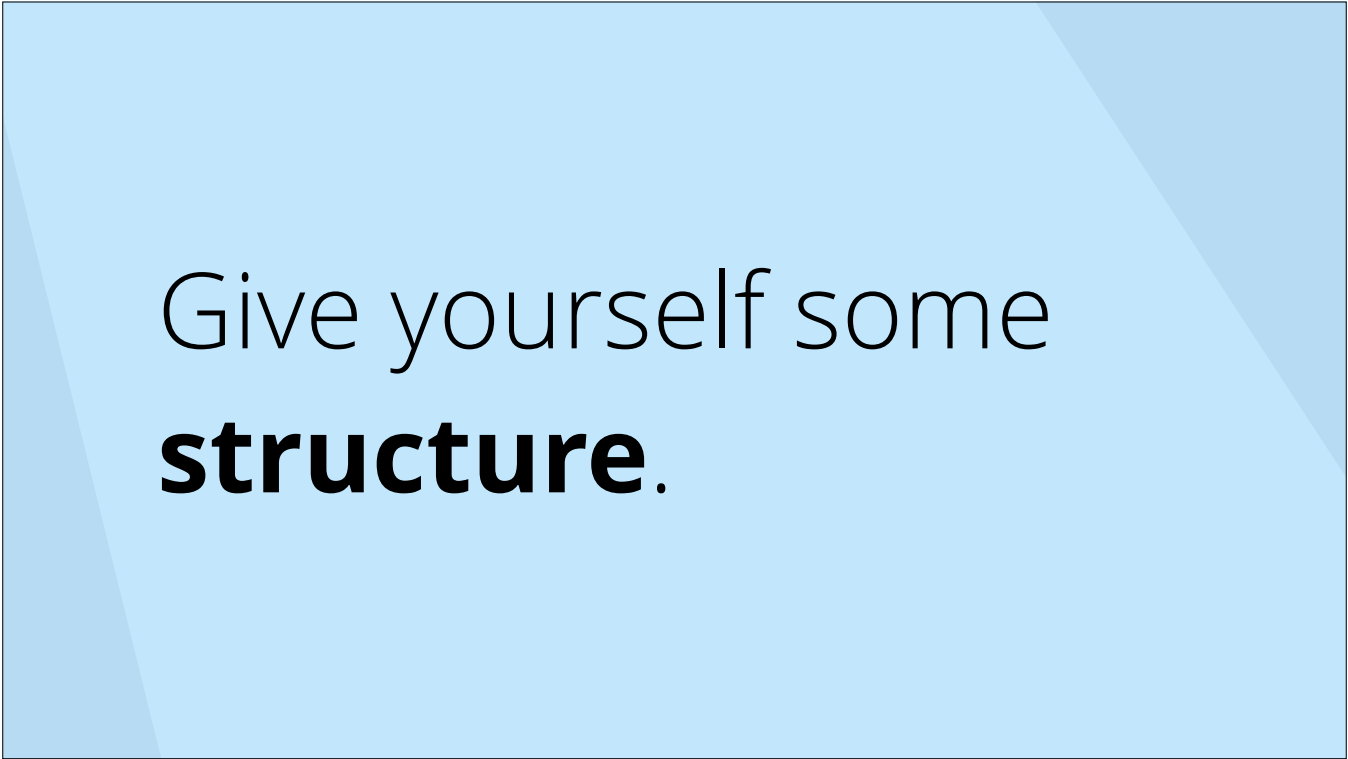
But it's important to set expectations at the top of why you're there, in that spotlight. Even before you jump into your narrative structure and thesis, make sure it's clear to the folks in the room - what are you going to cover? Why is this important to you, or to them? What do you hope they'll walk away with?

By setting expectations up front, your audience - no matter how big or small - will be primed for what you're going to say next. You'll open their ears and their brain and make it even easier for your info to land.

A dark blue rectangular background with a diagonal line running from the top-left corner to the bottom-right corner, creating two triangular sections. The text is centered in the upper half of the rectangle.

*( this is where it  
starts getting meta )*

... you'll start to notice me doing the things i'm talking about in the presentation. I can't tell you how nerve wracking it is to be talking about public speaking while trying to look good at public speaking.



Give yourself some  
**structure.**

this could look like telling a story to get your point across

or, this could look like a thesis statement followed by supporting arguments

once you have the main ~nugget~ you'd like to communicate, think about what you'll need to back it up and help make it land.





**Landscape**  
**Analysis**  
**Problem**  
**Options**  
**Solutions**  
**Reason**  
**Bigger Idea**

when i've got a prepared thing to say and more than 10 minutes to cover it in, this is the structure that i like to use. This works for moments like explaining a reorg to your team, or defending your choices in an architecture review, or giving a talk like this one on a stage or in a company meeting.

Landscape: here's what exists

Analysis: here's what I see

Problem: at the core is this issue

Options: here's what we could do

Solution: here's the best option and how it works

Reasons: why you should believe me

Bigger idea: why this concept matters to you even if it is irrelevant to your particular work

heh, where do you think we are in this narrative structure?



**Landscape**  
**Analysis**  
**Problem**  
**→ Options ←**  
**Solutions**  
**Reason**  
**Bigger Idea**

here! we're here



and kind of also here

but you'll also see that we'll weave back and forth through this. I've built this talk so that it resonates with people struggling with different kinds of fears, and also different kinds of spotlights. Once I determined that my point was that we all can and should be able to use our fears about public speaking to level up our game, I workshopped a narrative structure to support it.



Hold their **attention**.

Once I had the basic structure nailed down, I iterated on my narrative to make sure that it wasn't just a dry list of information.

Because just saying words at you doesn't mean it's going to land, right? You could list your work for your boss when you ask for a promotion, or just email a design to your client and hope that they "get" why it's the right direction. But you know better. It takes some extra magic to help your audience really hear you, or believe you.

So let's talk through the stuff we can do to level up our content to make sure it's not just informational - but that it has a chance of LANDING.



you may think it's smart to tell a joke.

firstly - jokes are terrifying  
don't feel like you have to be funny. be you.

but in the drier parts of any talk I'm giving, I'll see what I can incorporate to spice things up. In this picture, I'm telling a story of a time when I didn't document an icon font well, and it ended up causing maybe the most hilarious bug in Etsy history. That horse head showed up in star ratings.

I didn't need to tell that story. It wasn't *entirely* relevant to my talk about how to make websites fast. But my talk was dry in the part about web fonts, and I knew that I would lose some people out of boredom. I was able to put web font tactics on pause for a minute to tell this story, which kept people laughing and engaged through the end of the talk.

And the best part is, / laughed when I told the story. It was authentic, it was pretty ridiculous, and I think it really helped that I was grinning and laughing onstage.



I do this throughout my spotlight moments. It can be subtle and secret, like adding a post-it note to your laptop when you open it up with a message from your partner, or a picture of someone that makes you smile.

Or, it could be woven into your narrative structure, like my story about that horse head, or these pictures of sloths. I can't help but grin when i see this sloth named buttercup. I'm a better speaker when there's something in my talk that makes me feel really good. And that means that my message lands a lot better with my audience.



But it's really important to not distract your audience.

When I told that story about horses, or incorporated Buttercup, I was able to weave it in in a way that mostly made sense. I ensured it wasn't a distraction to folks, and it didn't feel like I was going off-tangent.

Unfortunately, when we incorporate humor or imagery like internet memes, we open ourselves up to alienating folks. I'm going to bet that we've all been in that company meeting where someone used an inappropriate image to make their point, without realizing how distracting that might be for those in the room.

If you choose to make a joke, or to use some imagery as part of your spotlight moment, triple-check that it's not going to accidentally offend or distract somebody. The last thing you want is the person who is listening to you talk be caught off guard or triggered.

And when I'm using imagery, I want to make sure that this imagery is as inclusive as possible. I use quotes and pictures of a diverse set of humans - and animals. I think it's the responsibility of the person who has a soap box, who's in that leadership position, to use that spotlight for good.

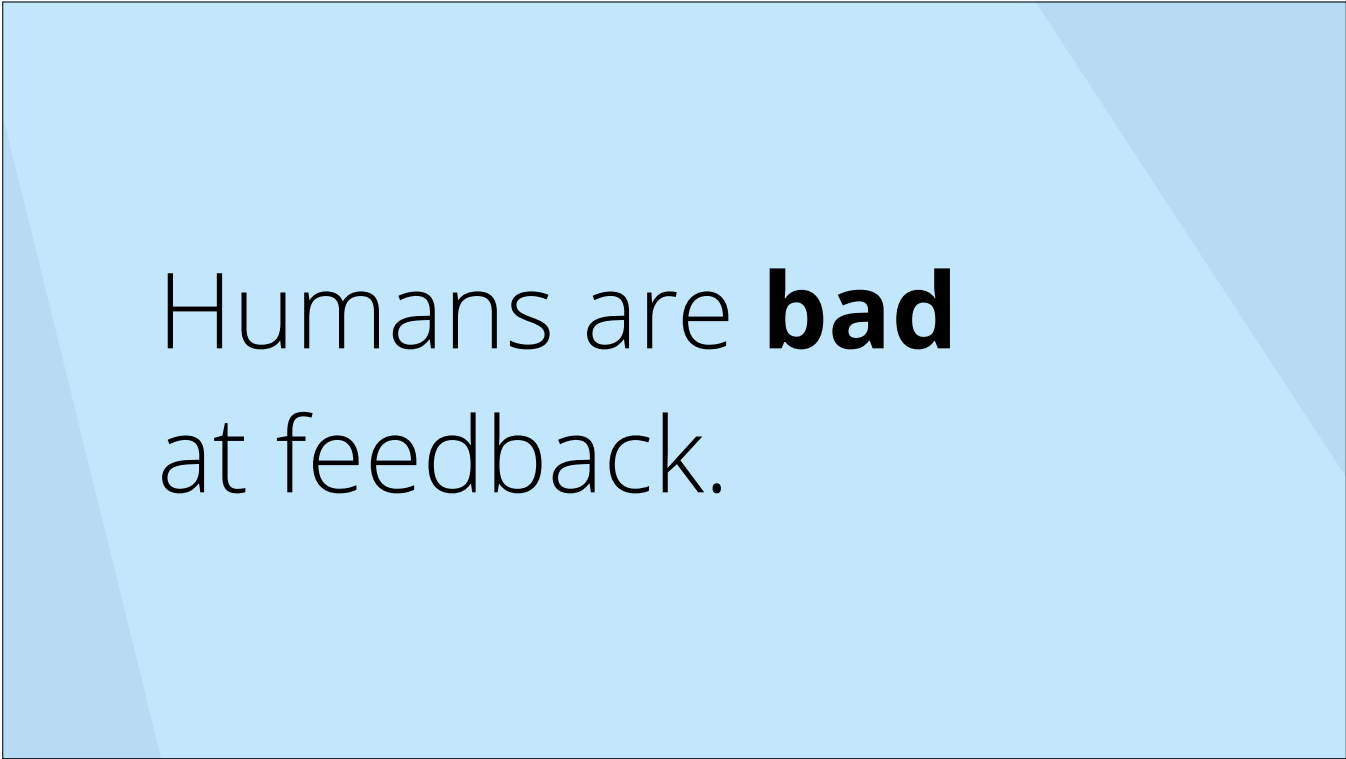


# PRACTICE & GET FEEDBACK

So, this is my #1 recommended trick to get better at public speaking. Practice what you want to say in front of a small, chosen group of people, and help them give you better, actionable feedback to level up your game. Doing this work of practicing your words and your body language and all and soliciting feedback on it from that trusted group will help us all be stronger at this.

Though you may not have a lot of reason to practice this particular bit in your day-to-day work, I wanted to really go into detail on the feedback bits here today, for you all. Because giving and receiving feedback is a key part of our jobs, but we're mostly terrible at it.






Humans are **bad**  
at feedback.

Right? Humans are mostly bad at giving feedback. We're also really bad at preparing ourselves to RECEIVE feedback. This is true no matter the situation - hearing that we do something at home that drives our partner crazy, or our coworker, or our BOSS.

And most of us are paralyzed by the fear of having these awkward conversations. We actively avoid asking for feedback because it's just so painful sometimes. Or we will go out of our way to give nonspecific, general feedback, sometimes via what I like to call "compliment sandwiches", where you sandwich some constructive criticism in between two compliments in the hopes that it'll soften the blow. Hey you look great! You really screwed up that thing on Friday. But you're really smart!



# **Let's get better** at giving and receiving feedback.

So in this next section, I want to help encourage you to overcome your fear of asking for feedback, AND help people give you specific, actionable, and truly helpful feedback.

I'm going to use the example of getting feedback on saying some prepared words to ground this in specifics, but I'm hopeful that it'll help you in any circumstance you encounter in your daily work.



# Pick your **feedback crew.**

... Draw from your coworkers, friends, and other peers. (I like to limit it to three to four people, at least at first.) It's helpful if they are people who you already KNOW are good at giving feedback, or folks who share similar context, like someone who knows your team or your client or boss or whoever you want to say these words to.

Don't just pick people who you think are going to speak highly of you. Be sure to pick people who will give their trustworthy and honest opinions. Because that's the only way you can learn how to get better, right?



Pick your  
**feedback medium.**

So the obvious choice for getting feedback is in person, right?

But if practicing in front of people is less than comfortable, but you'd like feedback on narrative, word choice, or other non-body-language stuff, consider recording a dry run privately and then asking asynchronous feedback from your crew. My coworker practices alone, records his talk on his computer, and then sends it to others to get their thoughts via email. This lets him dedicate time and focus to each separate activity (practicing, receiving feedback), and gives him the mental space to shift gears.



But if you choose to practice your words in person, this is your chance to gather nonverbal feedback and practice reading the room. This is a photo of two audience members during one of my conference talks. I hope that you all feel as engaged right now as they look. I really really wish I knew what I was saying that made them both do this.

As you're practicing with others, watch how people respond: do they laugh? Do they lean toward you and look focused? Are they nodding? Or do they look confused or distracted? By tracking this kind of feedback, you'll develop a sense about which parts of what you're saying are more engaging, move too quickly, or should be further workshopped.

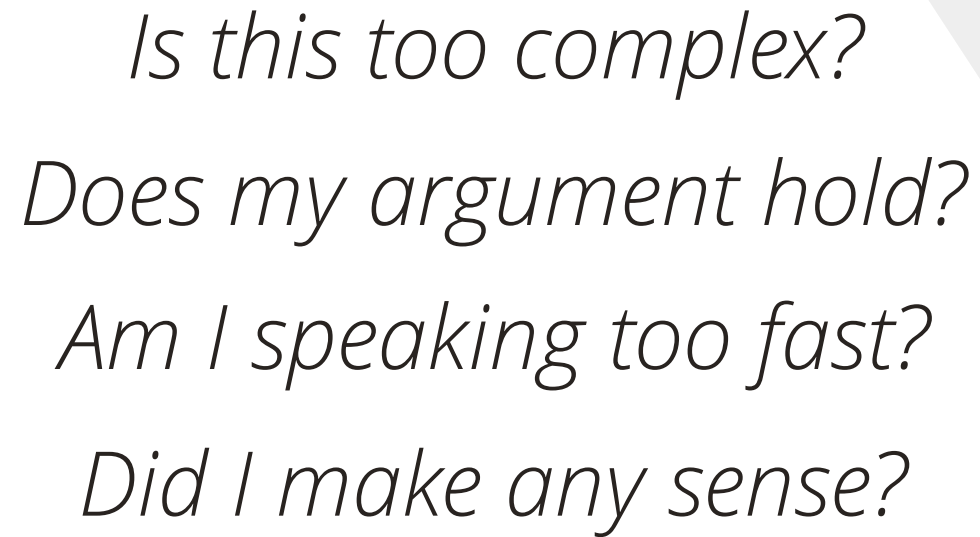
Oh, and by the way, this slide image is sneaky.



# **Tee up** good feedback.

It can be nerve-wracking to request feedback, let alone on something as personal and anxiety-inducing as public speaking. It's key to set expectations for your feedback-givers and prepare yourself to absorb their notes.

Do the same for your feedback crew. Give them details about the point you want make, who your audience will be, and what kind of feedback you're looking for.



*Is this too complex?*  
*Does my argument hold?*  
*Am I speaking too fast?*  
*Did I make any sense?*

here are just a few examples of the kinds of things you can ask your feedback crew to think about as they listen to you practice

by priming their brains ahead of time, and clueing them in to the kinds of feedback you're looking for, you'll both equip them well to help you AND make sure that you're READY for the kinds of things they might say.

for this prepared talk, I wanted to make sure that the flow of the content made sense, and I didn't jump around. So when I practiced, I asked for my crew to pay special attention to whether or not I was building the information in a way that flowed.

# Practice **surviving** a fumble.

And when you're doing this practice run, don't stop if you fumble your words or make a mistake.

Lots of us instinctively restart when we mess up during a run-through. We'll fumble our wording or something, and stop and sigh — and I know, there's that voice inside all of us that wants to wallow for a minute when we mess up. That voice wants us to just settle into that defeated feeling while practicing.


But you can't get stuck there. You've gotta push on through - practice making those mistakes and recovering from them. Work on reducing that fear of messing up by getting to the end. A bunch of times. If you're able to work through a mistake in a practice run, you'll have confidence you can do so again should it happen once you're in that spotlight.



# Prep your **brain** to hear the feedback.

First, after the run-through, thank your crew and take a moment to shift your brain into feedback-receiving mode. Let your crew know how you'd like to receive their thoughts and when. Maybe you're energized from your practice talk, and want to high-five and dive right into a conversation then and there. Or maybe you're a little drained, and you aren't ready for feedback just yet.





Again, it's okay to request comments separately and in a different medium! You can ask people to email you, or talk about it over coffee later. You could even create an anonymous form for folks to fill out. Whatever makes you feel comfortable (and thus more receptive). Remember, we're working on reducing fear, and your feedback crew will want to help and support you.



Good feedback is  
**specific** and  
**actionable.**

Have you ever had someone tell you you did a good job? It feels good for a minute. But then you might wonder - wait what about that was good? What should I keep doing? Is there anything I could do even better?

What we crave is feedback that will help us grow. Something to help our message land, or for us to have more of an impact. Or to know specifically what it is that people value. So let's talk about how to get that kind of feedback from folks.

	General	Specific & Actionable
Positive Feedback		
Negative Feedback		

A company called LifeLabs developed a way to think about feedback that uses suits of cards.

- Hearts: feedback that is positive, but not specific. “I really liked your talk!”
- Diamonds: feedback that is positive, and specific or actionable. “I thought your talk was funny, especially that joke about frogs. It held my attention.”
- Clubs: feedback that is negative, but not specific or constructive. “I thought your talk was boring.”
- Spades: feedback that is negative, but gives specific suggestions. “My mind started to wander when you described the technical changes. Could you include more screenshots or other visuals to help keep the audience’s attention?”

It’s a great shorthand for getting the feedback you’d like—explain these to your crew, and ask for diamonds and spades.

**SESSION C:** ☐ Cafeteria ☒ Mueller's ☐ Auditorium

I enjoyed this presentation: ☒ Yes ☐ No (if no, why not?)

My favorite Part was:

*Ms. Hogan <sup>is</sup> was really fun and cool!*

---

After Career Day, I am more aware of my own career goals : ☒ Yes ☐

Career Day is a worthwhile Program: ☒ Yes ☐

Part of what makes diamond and spade feedback so valuable is the focus on an actionable item— it gives you something specific to respond to. If your feedback crew is sharing more hearts or clubs, ask open questions to turn their feedback toward the concrete. For example: “Can you help me understand why I should include a code sample?” or “What specifically about that felt boring?” or “How can I make this more powerful?”

I’d call this a heart rather than a diamond.

# PRACTICE ANSWERING QUESTIONS

There's a chance that your public speaking moment will involve responding to surprise questions. Your boss or client or teammates, whoever you're talking to, may have follow-up questions.

How scary is this? We've spent so much time PREPARING our words! And now, we have to improvise. But don't worry - we can prepare for this, too.



# **“I’m afraid of...”**

In the survey, people said that they’re afraid that they’re not going to UNDERSTAND the questions, that “someone will point out a hole in my premise that I entirely overlooked”, or “Being belittled because someone knows (or thinks they know) more than me about my topic”

# **Your audience is rooting for you.**

(right? please?)

Have you ever attended a talk and actively rooted against a speaker? How have you felt when you watched a speaker get tongue-tied, get asked a tough question, or lose their train of thought? Sure, it's painful to watch, because as humans we have empathy. We for sure don't want the person in the spotlight to feel bad or to worry. If you've seen a presenter slip up, then you also know how great it feels to watch that speaker make a comeback and regain their composure, charging on to deliver their content. So remember: your feedback crew is here to help you, and so is your soon-to-be-real- audience.



# **“I don’t know”**

A major break-through for me as an engineering leader was when I realized that I could say, “I don’t know” out loud and it could go extremely well. No matter how deep of an expert you are on a topic, there will always be questions that you’re unprepared to answer. And frankly, whether it’s an audience like this or an audience of your coworkers, saying out loud “I don’t know” is SO MUCH BETTER than attempting to make up an answer.

There are many ways to say “I don’t know” in a positive and encouraging way. Here, I can practice:

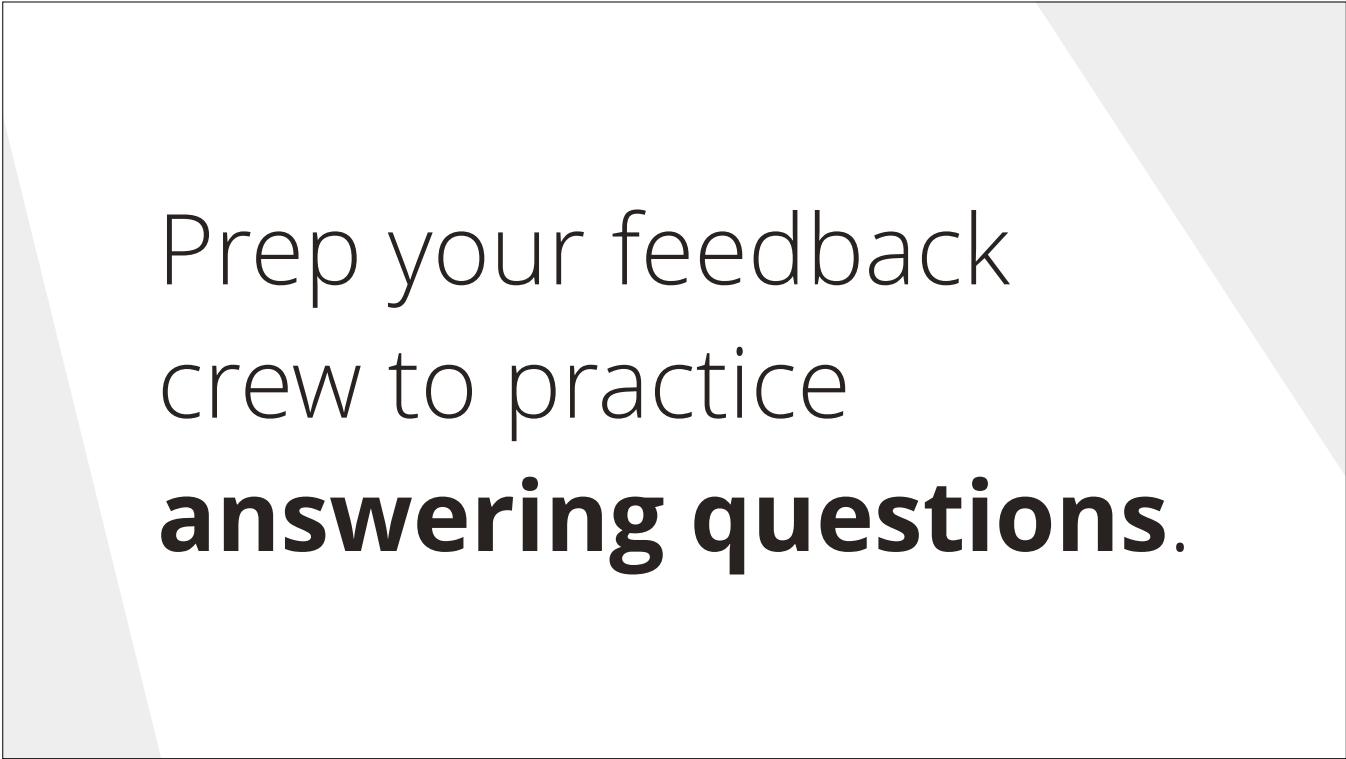
- “Oh, actually, I don’t know the answer to that question. I’ll look it up right after this is done and get back to you!”
- “Oh that’s interesting, I haven’t thought about that before. Who else could I ask?”
- in conference settings, I will sometimes straight up ask the rest of the audience if there’s someone here who knows the answer :)





You're still **in control**  
during Q&A.

And if you're speaking to a larger audience like this one, remember that the goal of answering questions is not to make everybody happy, nor is it to teach material that is irrelevant to your point. For the most part, you are the person who is still in charge when you're in the spotlight; you have a lot of power to reframe questions, move on from weird questions, and do whatever you can to help the people listening continue to learn.



Prep your feedback  
crew to practice  
**answering questions.**

Running a practice Q&A can help you vet answers and phrasing, get comfortable saying “I don’t know,” and develop strategies and coping mechanisms for those key fears. Ask your feedback crew for some follow-up questions about your topic. Once you feel good on that front, you can level up your prep and ask to field tougher questions.



Ask them to get  
**weird.**

Ask your test audience to imagine creative ways people could misunderstand your point, go on complete tangents, give incorrect information, or bring up typical arguments that go nowhere (like, “But isn’t X a better language than Y?”). Maybe they say something silly or weirdly aggressive. Getting some practice handling this **WILL** help you feel more prepared for surprises when you’re finally in that spotlight. And this is usually the most FUN part for your feedback crew.

22min

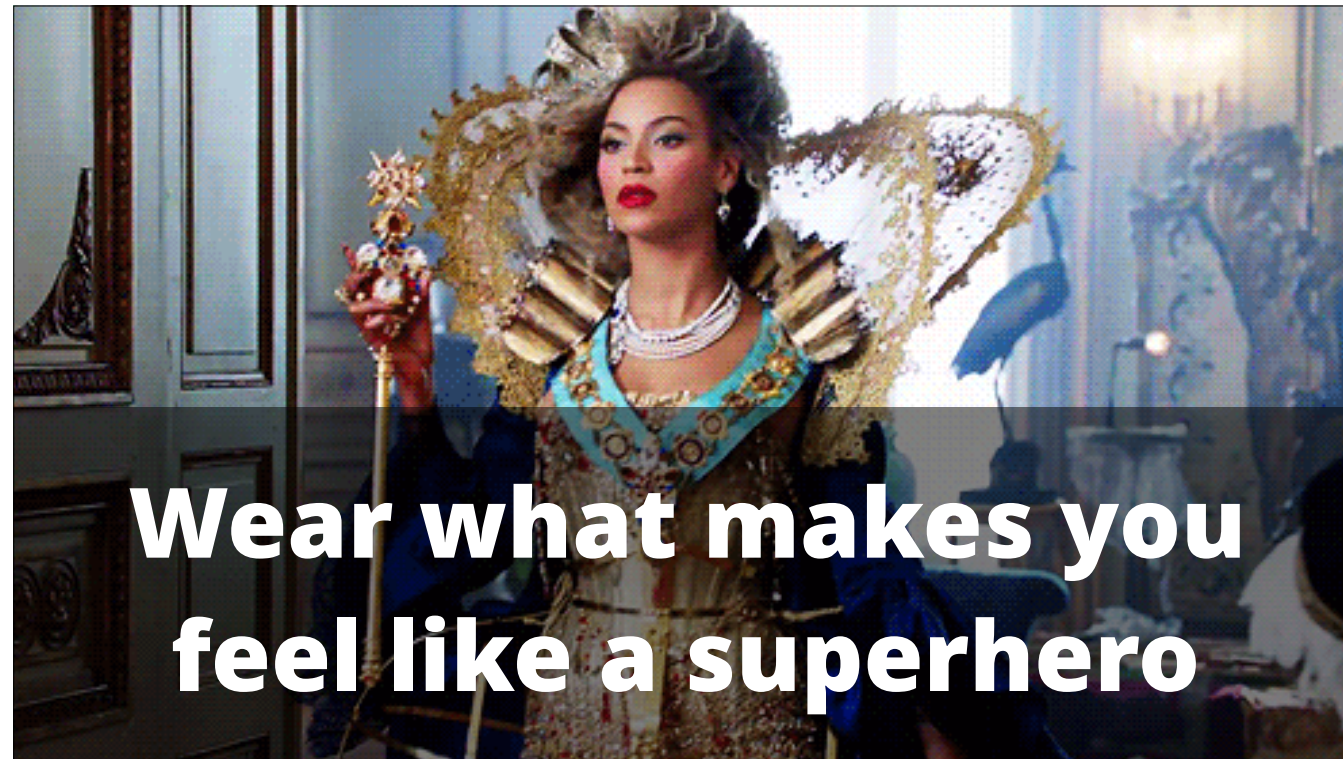


# PREP YOUR ENVIRONMENT

LET'S DO THIS.

You've figured out what it is that you want to say, you have found your groove in saying it, practiced a bit, and hopefully gotten some feedback that will help you make your words and speaking style even more impactful.

The last leg of our journey is to figure out which bits of our environment we can tweak to set ourselves up for success.



**Wear what makes you  
feel like a superhero**

Think about what clothing would get you in that mindset for your moment—what would make you feel like a superhero? What could you wear that will help you feel the strongest, most secure, and grounded while in that spotlight?

What I'm wearing right now makes me feel like myself, but like a slightly dressier version of myself. It holds up to the stage lights and the weight of the battery pack clipped to me. It doesn't make too much sound when I move. It hides my flop sweat. I think I look like I'm taking this event seriously. And the most important thing, for my own fears? I'm probably not going to trip and fall in it.



# **Back up** everything.

One time, the conference that i was speaking at was completely unprepared to connect my Mac laptop to a projector. Thank GOODNESS I had my slide deck and fonts saved to a thumb drive; I was able to load it up on someone else's machine.

I can't tell you how much better I feel, standing here, knowing that I have a backup plan READY TO GO if my laptop dies. I could just hand it to the excellent A/V team here.

if you're giving a demo of some work, check to see what happens if your internet suddenly drops. maybe record a screencast of it just in case. It's better to feel like you're prepared and not need it, than to go without and worry about it.



who here saw me a few minutes before i went onstage?  
did you see me power posing?

starfish, superman, there are body positions that, if you hold them for a few minutes, will change your body chemicals to help you power through. There's a great TED talk on it - they conducted a study in which half of the participants power posed before a job interview, and they got the job WAY more often than the other half. This really works. You may look ridiculous, but I swear by it.

Find a corner, a bathroom stall, or another quiet place to ready yourself for that spotlight. Do whatever you need to do to get energized or center yourself. Then go do it.



# **Breathe a sigh of relief.**

After that spotlight moment, it's time to take a big deep breath. Be proud of what you've accomplished. Your primary work is done: you delivered your prepared words, maybe you answered some questions, and now it's time to check in with yourself.



**“Talks don’t define you; you define you.  
Talks come and go, but every single one  
will make you a better you.”**

- Raquel Vélez

After you say the thing that you wanted to say, and maybe after you’ve answered some questions, it’s important to gather some feedback, even if it’s just from your own gut, to see what you can improve for next time. Because this won’t be the last time you, as a lead, say some prepared words to some people. As Raquel Velez says...

# Eat your **donut.**



And then, eat your donut.

Years ago, I found that whenever something awesome happened in my career – maybe I got published, or promoted, or launched a project – I wouldn't take the time to celebrate the achievement. I'm an achiever by nature, the kind who feels like every day starts at zero. Not deliberately marking these moments left me feeling like I wasn't actually accomplishing anything. "Oh cool, that A List Apart article went up," I would think, then move on with my day.

Once I realized that this was happening, I decided to be deliberate about marking achievements by eating one donut. Well, sometimes more than one, if it's a really big deal. The act of donut-eating has actually helped me feel like I'm accomplishing my career goals because it forced me to take a minute with myself and focus on the accomplishment. Because donuts, to me, feel like a celebration.

As I started to share this idea with more people, I found that it resonated with others, especially young career-driven women who are routinely achieving goals and furthering their career but don't take the time to note their own success.

So find out what YOUR version of a donut is. Make sure that you are acknowledging to yourself the huge accomplishment of saying some prepared words, under a spotlight. It's a big deal, and you should be sure to celebrate it.

**Landscape**

**Analysis**

**Problem**

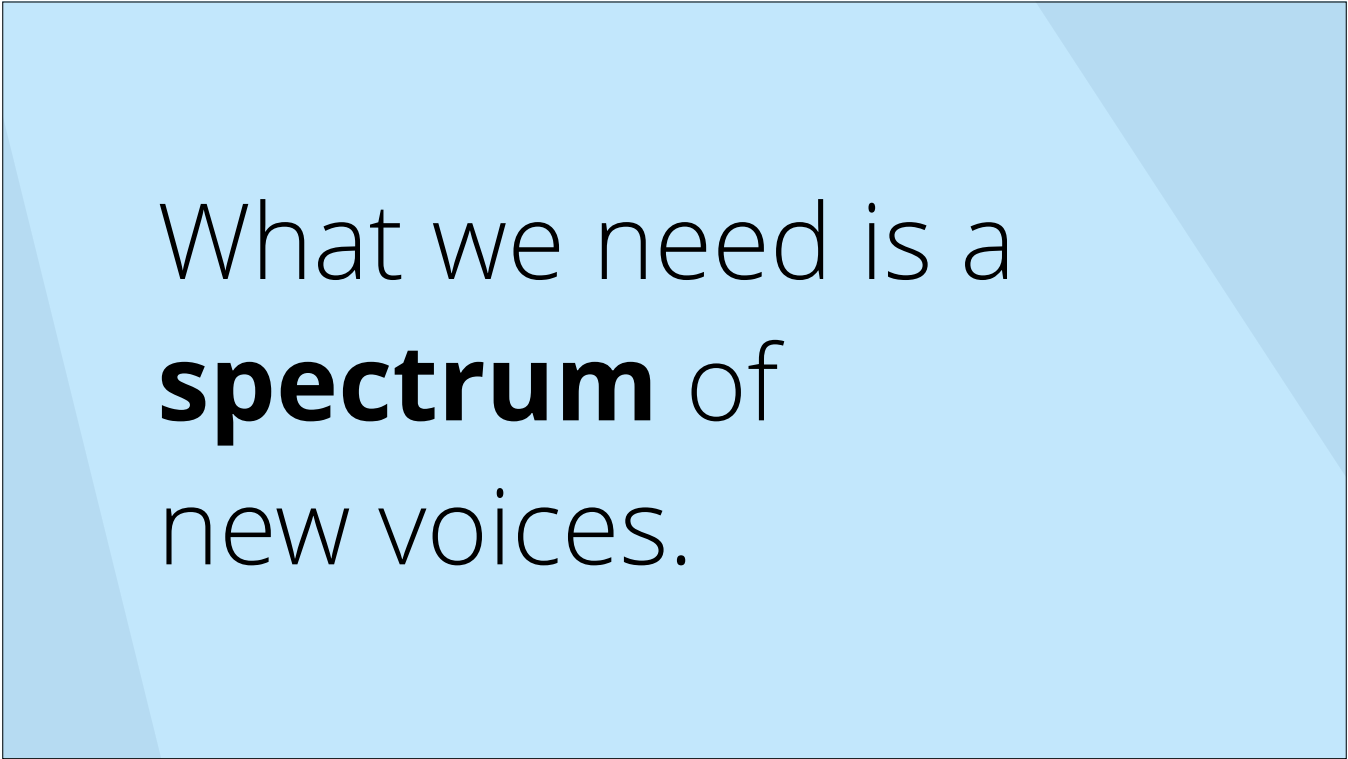
**Options**

**Solutions**

**Reason**

**→ Bigger Idea ←** *we're here now*

(we're here now)

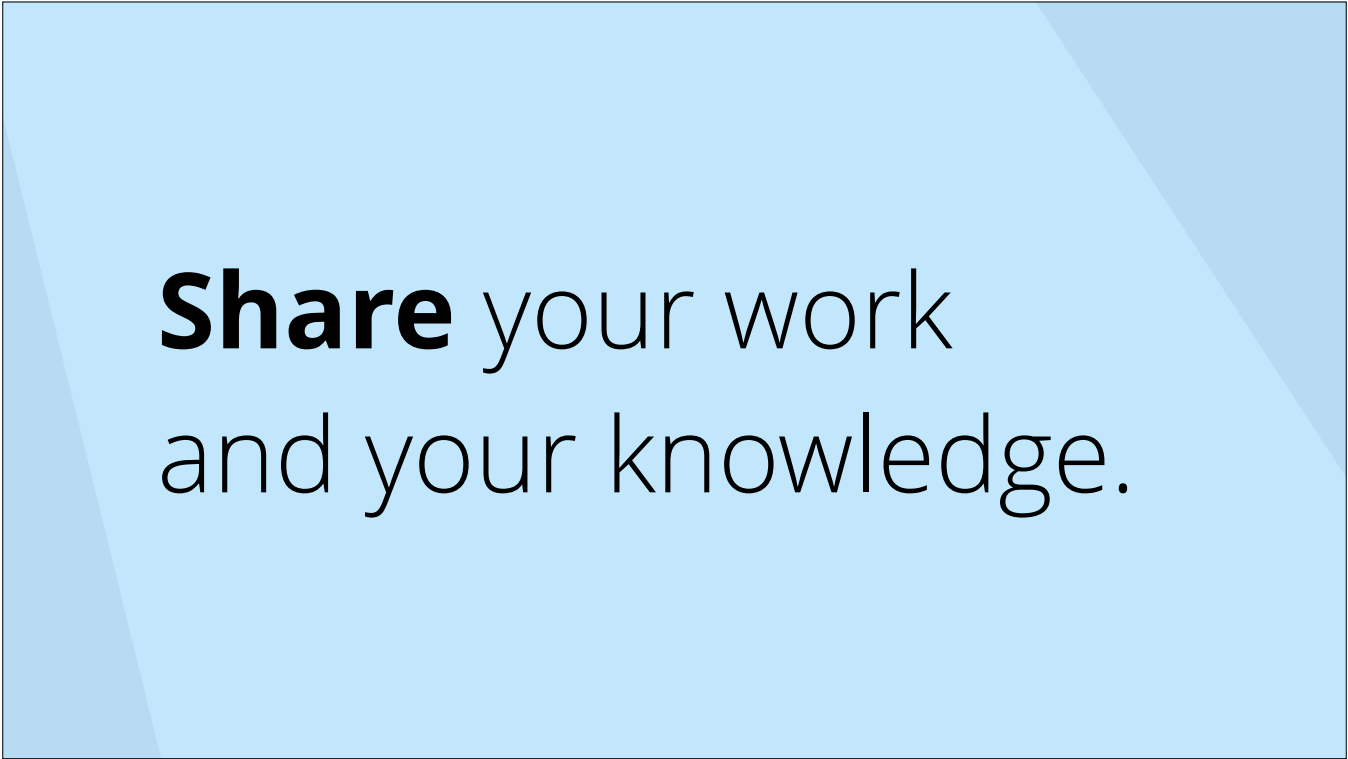


What we need is a  
**spectrum** of  
new voices.

So, why do I care? Why am I traveling all over trying to share this stuff with people?

I believe, and I think you all believe, that what we need in this industry is a spectrum of new voices.

Whether that's in a product brainstorming session and you see a brand new point of view  
Or a team code review where you learn a new technique that someone implemented



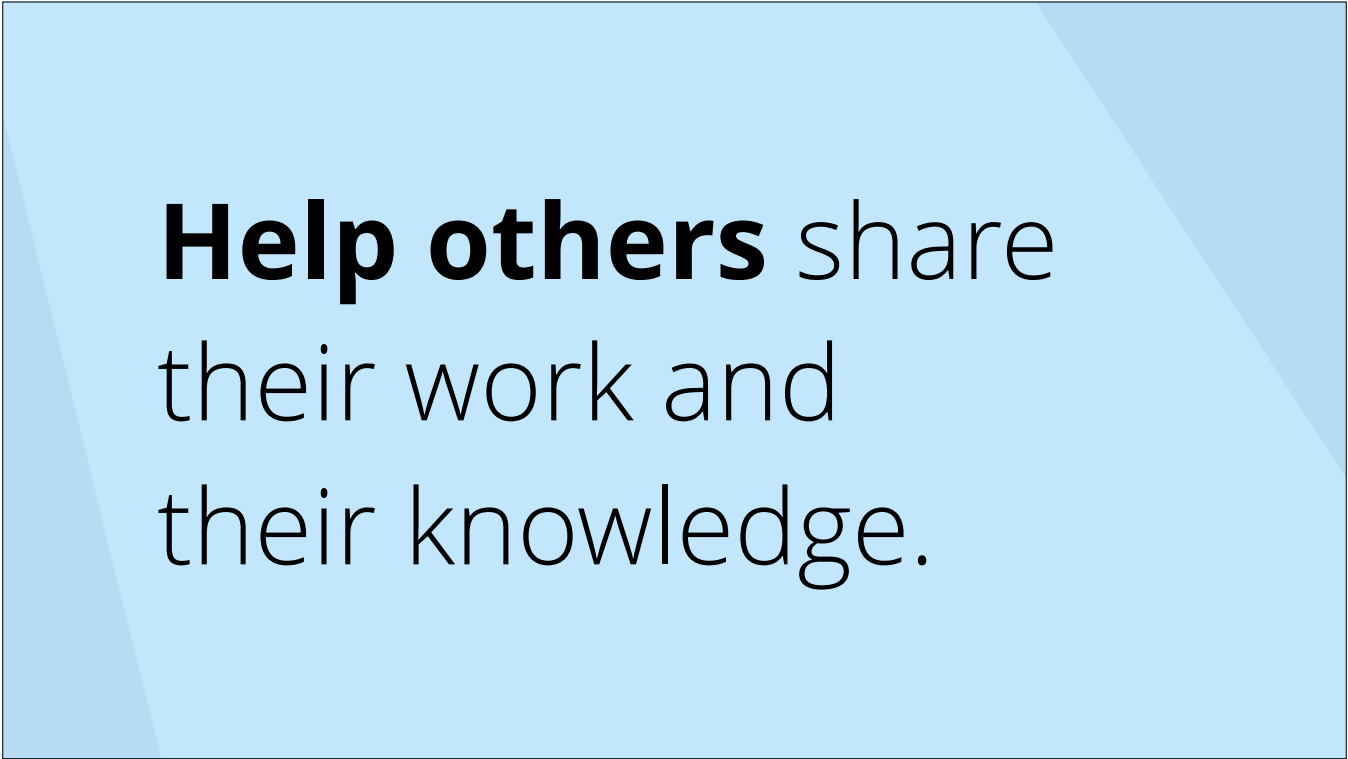
**Share** your work  
and your knowledge.

If you're a member of an underrepresented community in tech, please know that I wrote the book on this stuff FOR YOU. It's BUILT to help you get up on a metaphoric or literal stage and help you do this, to help keep you safe, to help you learn and grow and share.

with your boss or other higher-ups

with your team

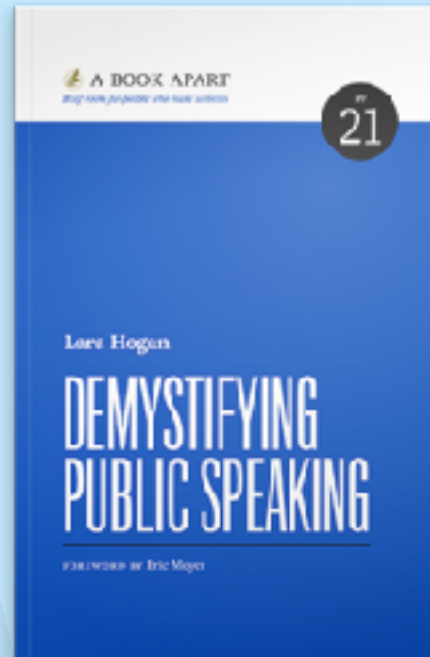
with your community



**Help others** share  
their work and  
their knowledge.

Please help those around you, other members of underrepresented communities, to get access to this information.

We need diverse voices. We want to learn from their work and their insight. And we need a broader spectrum of voices to help us move forward as an industry. Please use these tactics to help those future leaders find that spotlight. We're rooting for you.



*Thank you!*