

## BIG SPEECHES INTENSIVE

Ideally, we want to be breathing in through our noses and out through our mouths. As you breathe in send the breath down to your stomach. Imagine inflating it like a balloon. When we breathe into our chest that is where anxiety lives. When we breathe into our diaphragm we are supported. Inacting it is literally called being 'on support'

## WARM-UP

This is best done in the morning.

The following sections can be done in any order but for Zoom meetings I would suggest waking up your face right before going online and do the voice section in the shower if possible!

### Wake up your Body

You don't need a mirrored studio with a sprung floor to connect with your body.

Have an intuitive stretch.

Shake out your arms and legs, hands and feet, like you're trying to get mud off your shoe or water off your hands. Shake it out!

Pat your body firmly all over as if you were playing the bongos.

Put on your favourite tune and have a boogie in your kitchen while you are waiting for your kettle to boil. Just a little dance, any movement at any level is helpful. Try and move all your joints in any way you like. 90 seconds to three minutes... that is nothing, right?

### Wake up your Face

- Scrunch your face, clenching your fist in front of your face and release-do this a few times.
- Draw your shoulders up to your ears, and release. Repeat as necessary
- Massage your face, paying attention to the jawline.

### Wake up your breath

Breathe in through the nose, inflating your stomach and out through the mouth depressing your stomach.

Breathing this way, breathe in for four seconds, hold for four, breathe out for six and hold for two.

Repeat the pattern 4,4,6,2, a few times, then...

- Make a 'sssssss' sound like a snake
- Make a 'ssshhhhh' sound like the sea
- Make a 'ffffff' sound with your top teeth on your lower lip

- Make a 'zzzzzz' sound like a bee
- Make a 'jujjjjj' sound like 'ssssh' with your teeth together and your lips pouting
- Make a 'vvvvvv' sound like a formula 1 car

## Wake up your Voice

- Begin with a low hum...'mmmmmmmmmm'

Breathe when you need to. Pat the area around your sternum feeling the vibration you're creating. Build intensity. You should be feeling a strong vibration around your lips and teeth now.

- Now build the hum into a round 'O' sound. Feel the power of the sound in your mouth now escaping. Be LOUD but never force it. There should be no strain in your voice or pressure in your throat.
- Release the 'O' into an 'AAAAAaaaaahhh'
- Now repeat 'mmmmm-ooooohhhh-aaaaAAAAAHHHH'
- Do this several times, stretching your arms out, opening your chest, taking up space with your voice.

With practice you will have greater resonance and a richer tone. Who wouldrrying. Breathe in for four, hold for four, releasing for six and hold for two. Repeat 3-6 times. That cycle of slow, deep, sustained, supported breathing slows the heart rate and can over-ride to varying degrees what the adrenaline and cortisol are trying to do which is prepare you for battle. We logically know there is no battle, no swords will be drawn today. But our body can behave otherwise. It is important to note these are processes that have evolved for a reason. Believe it or not your racing heart, shaky leg, dizzy feeling, shortness of breath at the thought of speaking in front of a group people are all signs your biochemical processes are doing their job all too well. They are trying to prepare you for a stressful encounter. But the encounter will not involve any lions of tigers or bears... your worst-case scenario may well be an interrupting Geoff or a speak-over Sonya or just dreaded indifference. None of these can actually threaten your being! But your brain anticipating many faces and many eyes can think otherwise. When we attempt to shut these feelings down, they brace and flare like a blowfish and our manifest nervous reactions can intensify. Think about it like this: A wave is coming towards me and I don't want to be submerged. If I try and outrun that wave its force will intensify. If I stay put, drop my shoulders, slow down and let the wave break on

me it will be over sooner.

\*This too shall pass\*

---

## GAMES

The aim of any game in Big Speeches is always to take your attention away from yourself... to become literally less self-conscious. I find the following game that I learned at The Spontaneity Shop helps me engage with my surroundings and shift my brain into a more lateral and playful place.

### Pointing Game

1. Look around the room. No, reeeally look around the room. Notice shapes, colours, angles and objects.
2. Point at things and say what they are. Have specificity, commitment and clarity. Easy right? Then let's move on to...
3. Pointing at things and say the last thing you saw. Look at an object... let's say it's a chair. Then look at something else... The wall for example. When you point at the wall you say 'chair'. When you point at the next thing, maybe 'window' you'll say the last thing you saw 'wall' and so on and so forth.
4. Pointing at things and saying what they're not. Exactly that. Point at an object and call it anything you like except for what is. The only way to get this game wrong is to point at a light and say 'light'.

### PITFALLS AND TRIP-UPS

- Don't try to be original. I mean it! I know it might seem counter-intuitive but as I learned from Tom and Deborah teaching me improvisation many moons ago 'Trust Your Obvious'. Lots of people who play this game say things like 'Oh I just kept saying other objects in the room'. I think this translates to behaviour in meetings and boardrooms. If you believe you haven't come up with the best most unimpeachable plan or fool-proof idea you can be hesitant to offer it up. Here's the thing: You might have two-thirds of a great idea. You might have a spark of a plan. If you offer it up some one may be able to build on it and hey-ho what do you know... you are part of the conversation. If you're not part of the conversation you can't change the conversation.

- If your mind goes blank, let it. That is fine. As someone who has both forgotten a line or had a cue forgotten by a scene partner in front of 800 people the words will come, I just need to give it a second. Or two. Or however long it takes. I remember coming offstage from maybe the 80th performance of a show I was in and something had felt a bit off about the scene. It went well but the rhythm felt different. I was sure I had messed up until the actor opposite me said 'Thanks so much you covered beautifully'. It was they who had forgotten their line but had remained so relaxed, so free of tension I had jumped in with my next line without even realising their omission. They remained calm so I remained calm and the audience were none the wiser.

- Don't get in your own way. I have observed people playing this game saying things like 'I think I cheated I just said different fruit'. Well unless you pointed at a banana and said 'banana' then you played it correctly! The only instruction is not to call the thing by its name yet even when people do that, they find ways to criticise and judge themselves. If you are hard on yourself during this rather random unfamiliar exercise that you are getting right how hard are you on yourself in other spheres? When it comes to speaking in front of groups can you give yourself a pass to make it as easy as possible for yourself to do what is required of you? To know that we are all human and some of the best speakers I have ever seen have the odd stumble or slip up? It's not 'cheating', it's backing yourself.

### **'Clap, Snap, Stomp!' or 'Clap, Snap, Nod!'**

If you are playing this game in person it's 'clap, snap, stomp'-as in you stomp your foot but for zoom purposes in breakout rooms just nod your head.

This is done in pairs. Two people count to 3 over and over again. It is harder than it sounds! Play each round for a few minutes.

#### **Round 1**

Person A: '1'

Person B: '2'

Person A: '3'

Person B: '1'

Person A: '2'

Person B: '3'

Person A: '1'

And so on, and so forth.

As the game progresses you replace '1' with a clap and you're into....

## Round 2

Person A: \*claps hands\*

Person B: '2'

Person A: '3'

Person B: \* claps hands\*

Person A: '2'

Person B: '3'

Person B: \*claps hands\*

And so on...

## Round 3

Now replace '2' with snapping/clicking your fingers on both hands

## Round 4

Yes, you've guessed it... replace '3' with a clear nod of the head.

After a few minutes of this non-verbal round snap back into pure counting like you did at the beginning. You may be surprised to find that now you are a number counting ninja!

-----

This exercise works on many levels.

We all assume we can count to 3 but doing it with someone else and repeating through a sequence that switches each time often turns out to be more difficult than you thought.

\*confidence is great, assuming you have nothing to learn is not\*

As you start to use non-verbal cues in the sequence our brains can feel a little fried-that's totally normal! There is no trick to this exercise and you may be tempted to try and hack it or 'game' the game. As soon as you try to do this you are not engaging with your partner.

Your mind is elsewhere, and you are missing your cue! In this exercise as in meetings, interviews, networking events- the most important thing is the last thing you heard. If you struggle to be heard your way in is to listen. In this exercise you were by the end of it doing whole body listening. That is why the last round was so smooth. Being alert and alive to the

people you are interacting with rather than shutting down and retreating into anxiety and frustration gives you opportunities to build on what they're saying, make your point by connecting it to what they are saying.

\*being conscious of others stops us being self-conscious\*

We can all get tongue-tied and self-conscious... asking the other person about themselves or their day or their experience of the event takes our attention from ourselves and ups charisma. When in doubt ask questions! About the person in front of you, their day, their experience of the event. People like to talk about themselves more than they realise!

\*put the spotlight on the other person to shine\*

The next exercise is a further study into active listening. It may seem a bit daft and it is a theatre improv game but it is an excellent way to get into a listening accepting and building space. The last round can be an excellent creative warm-up. Play it with a colleague before a presentation, play it as a group before a brainstorming session, play it on your own on your commute!

---

I have taken much of the notes for this game directly from Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances White's terrific first book 'The Improv Handbook'. It's a fascinating read and helpful in all kinds of areas, not just performance, I highly recommend it.

'Yes, and...'

(This is done in pairs usually but can be done in larger groups.)

Round 1

Person A makes Person B an offer. It can be anything, but a picnic as a setting is a good place to start.

A: Let's have champagne.

B: Eaurgh! Yuck, I hate champagne. It's disgusting. I refuse

to attend any champagne-infested picnic. Here, have some cucumber sandwiches.

A: With my cucumber allergy? Are you trying to kill me? If they're even in the same basket, I'll break out in hives. Er . . . let's have our picnic on the beach.

B: Beach picnics were made illegal months ago. We'll be arrested and shot if we even set foot on a beach carrying as much as a single sandwich. Um . . .

## Round 2

Again, you're going to take turns suggesting things you could do or things you could bring on a picnic. This time, however, I want you to accept every idea your partner comes up with—but without any enthusiasm. I want you to be a bit grudging, maybe even a bit pissed off. But you do accept your partner's ideas, their suggestions do make it into the basket, you are going to do them.

It should sound a little something like this:

A: 'Do you want some chicken drumsticks?'

B: 'Chicken drumsticks? Really? Well, I know you like them.

I think they're horribly greasy, but I suppose I could have a bit of one. What about playing Twister?'

And so on...

## Round 3

Start again from scratch. Take turns suggesting different things you could do or things you could bring on a picnic. This time I want you to greet every idea your partner comes up with with great enthusiasm. Respond as if it is the best idea anyone could possibly have come up with and you can't wait to put it into action.

It might go something like this...

A: Let's put up a parasol to keep off the sun.

B: 'Yes! And if it's hot, we can strip and go skinny-dipping in the lake!'

A: 'Yes, and let's put on our water wings so we don't drown!'

B: Yes, and let's pick the enormous ones, so we look bigger and scare sharks!

Interestingly, the psychologist John Gottman identifies three very similar behaviours in his analyses of couples interacting. Gottman claims to be able to tell with stunning accuracy whether or not a given couple will remain together, based on watching a few minutes of them talking about something other than their relationship. He identifies three different reactions to "Bids" (offers), which he classifies as "Turning Toward," "Turning Away" and "Turning Against."

According to Gottman, Turning Toward is a good sign, Turning Against is a bad sign and Turning Away is a terrible sign. A couple who are at each other's throats are at least communicating with passion and energy, but a couple who have given up even trying to fight for what they want have nothing left for each other.

We have observed the same things in our personal relationships, and with our corporate clients, but the problem is slightly worse than even Gottman makes it seem. You may be unlucky enough to know people who are so defensive, so negative or even so aggressive that talking to them is most like playing the picnic game the first way. You may be lucky enough to know people who are so unguarded, so open and so positive that talking to them is most like playing this game the third way. But you've certainly had plenty of conversations which most closely resemble the second option, despite the fact that the second option is the least fun, the least productive and—according to Gottman—the death knell for a relationship!

Why on earth should this behaviour be so prevalent?

The answer, we think, is again in our schooling. Whereas the needing-to-get-the-right answer behaviour exposed by Pointing At Things is something we learn pretty much on our first day at school, this “yes, but” behaviour we learn a little later in life. This is behaviour we learn as teenagers.

If, as a teenager, someone asks you “Have you seen this movie?” “Have you played this game?” “Have you heard this band?” and, in an unguarded moment, you respond with honest enthusiasm: “Yes, it's fantastic!” Oh my god—what a risk! You have just made yourself vulnerable. You can now be held up to public ridicule as the loser who likes the stupid movie, the sucky game, the lame band. Very quickly, you learn to say of everything: “S'alright,” with a dismissive shrug. Now you cannot be wrong. And the blessed safety of this behaviour is very rewarding, so we continue to adopt it in other areas of our life.”

Taken from **The Improv Handbook**

By Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White