

# Speaking under Pressure

©Lynn Gerlach

Communication Consultant

*All Write!*

Speaking in front of a group does not invite relaxation and serenity, does it? No one, no matter how experienced, finds giving a presentation quite as comforting as lying on a beach or nibbling popcorn in front of the big screen. Public speaking always brings a level of stress to our lives, and most of that stress is positive “stage fright,” the adrenalin rush that pushes us to the top of our game for a great performance.

## High-Pressure Scenarios

Some speaking scenarios, though, plunge us into a pressure cooker. When the stakes are really high (e.g. your next promotion is riding on this speech), when the news is only bad (such as when *you* get to explain the downsizing plan to the employees), when the audience is already hostile (as when a Democrat speaks to the Republican Club), or when you have little or no time to prepare, the pressure is truly on. What can you do? How can you plan and deliver a great presentation under such stressful circumstances?

## The Source of the Anxiety

Give some thought to those four scenarios mentioned above, and you’ll soon see that the anxiety comes almost exclusively from the audience. We’re not sweating how this speech is going to make *us* feel. It’s *their* response that has us worried. *How will I appear to them? What will they think of the content I’ve included? Will I insult them? Will I bore them? Will I make a monkey of myself in front of them?* Those types of feelings are what make the pressure cooker simmer and pick up a head of steam.

Once you understand the human communication process, you will realize that some parts of the process you can control and other parts are beyond your control. Your goal should be to make the absolute most of the parts you can control and learn how best to deal with the parts beyond your control. Let’s take a quick look at the process.

## The Human Communication Process

Human communication takes place when a sender sends a message to a receiver. Simple, right? Not so fast. As that message approaches the receiver, it is filtered through all the receiver’s limitations: biases, attitudes, level of understanding, past experience with the topic, physical infirmities such as impaired hearing or vision, preconceived notions about the speaker or the message, and much, much more. The message that finally reaches the receiver has been bent and twisted into a new shape; it’s not exactly what the sender sent.

Now the receiver responds with feedback, either verbal or physical: gestures, facial expressions, questions, comments and even posture. As the feedback travels to the speaker, however, it too encounters a filtration system: all the sender’s biases, emotions, expectations, etc., etc. Like the original message, the feedback undergoes a bit of massaging. A comment intended to be complimentary, then, might be misinterpreted as a slight or a mild attack. Talk about miscommunication!

But we're not finished. Once the sender accepts and interprets the feedback, he or she continues to speak, now sending what we call a modified message. Again the modified message hits the receiver's filtration system and gets a little twisted as it is received. And so it goes, a constant cycle of sending and receiving and filtering and interpreting.

And that's still not the end of it. The environment surrounding the communication act imposes its own pressures. Noise from the neighboring room interferes. The seating plan renders some listeners temporarily "blind." Someone in the row behind is whispering. The lighting isn't quite what it should be, and the room is as cold as a meat locker. Now look at the stew we've got going in this pressure cooker!

If the whole process seems overwhelming to begin with, imagine adding the stress of too little time to prepare or a hostile audience, a high-stakes outcome or a message you'd rather die than deliver! So what do you do? How do you handle the pressure?

### Taking Control

The first thing you need to do is sort out what is under your control and then take steps to exert as much positive control as possible. The table below illustrates:

What I Can Control	How I Can Control It
Myself: my image and preparedness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start early</li> <li>• Rehearse often</li> <li>• Dress carefully &amp; appropriately</li> <li>• Get plenty of sleep</li> </ul>
My message: content and organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start early</li> <li>• Consider audience level of understanding</li> <li>• Choose clear examples</li> <li>• Avoid offensive language or examples</li> <li>• Select items in tune with audience's goals</li> </ul>
The environment: seating arrangement, sound system, temperature, lighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrive early or check the room in advance</li> <li>• Adjust and test your microphone</li> <li>• Locate a technical assistant</li> <li>• Learn to work lights, heat, A/C, etc.</li> <li>• Adjust the seating arrangement as needed</li> </ul>
My emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be well rehearsed and well prepared</li> <li>• Have notes, props, visuals organized &amp; ready</li> <li>• Set up in advance</li> <li>• Meet audience members personally</li> <li>• Breathe deeply and slowly</li> <li>• Repeat affirmative self-talk</li> </ul>

## **Adapting to All the Rest**

It shouldn't come as any surprise to you that the element that causes you the greatest anxiety is also the element over which you have the least control: the audience! A skilled, seasoned speaker can exert some subtle control over his or her listeners. Conversely, a raw beginner can blather on for 45 minutes without so much as getting the audience's full attention—and never even realize it! No sender, though, can actually exert full control over the listener, even though that is the one element of the process the sender most fears and would most like to control completely. So, what to do?

## **Understand and Adapt**

That's the two-part solution. For parts of the communication process you cannot fully control, develop as great an understanding as possible and then adapt as fully as you can. For illustration, let's take a more straightforward example than a group of human beings. Let's say you discover just before your speaking time that certain features of the environment leave much to be desired: Due to the way the seats are arranged, part of the audience will not be able to see your screen. In addition, the room is frigid. You requested a lavalier microphone, but you got a mic on a stand. How do you respond with as much control as possible?

### **First, Develop Understanding**

Find the person who can answer your questions and begin to ask them: Can these seats be moved? Great! Would you give me a hand moving them? Can the temperature be adjusted? No? Okay, I'll deal with it. Is this the only microphone available? Okay, let's test it and I'll learn to deal with it. You asked the questions. You found out what could and could not be modified to your specifications.

Now you adapt. You've moved the chairs, so now everyone can see. By understanding the issue, you were able to take full control of it. However, you can't turn up the heat, you now realize. So, how about moving the chairs a little closer together and alerting the listeners at the outset to keep their coats and sweaters on? And maybe you'll build in an extra break to let them go out in the hallway and warm up. The microphone is a disappointment because you had hoped to keep your hands free and move around. Now you understand your limitations, so adapt to them:

- Ask for a small table or podium to be placed next to the microphone for notes or props.
- Consider taking the mic off its stand and holding it in your hand so you can move.
- Move the mic off to the side so you're not stuck right in front of your screen

So, you get the idea. Learn all you can about the issue, and then adapt as fully as possible. The more you know and the more you adapt, the greater control you have over the situation. That was a simple example. Chairs and thermostats and microphones are far easier to understand and adapt to than your audience; let's tackle that challenge next.

## **Understand your Audience**

Remember that "filter" I mentioned above? That's what you want to explore, finding answers to these questions if possible:

- What do they already know about my topic?
- What is their position likely to be?
- In what ways might they have already pre-judged me?
- What do they probably expect of me?
- Why are they in the audience today?

- Will my subject matter or delivery cause any problems for them in terms of understanding?
- What is the average level of education in the audience?
- What kind of demographic mix will I find?
  - Gender
  - Political bent
  - Religious values
  - Ethnic or cultural allegiance
  - Age
  - Socio-economic level(s)
  - Placement on the corporate ladder

The list could go on and on. Some areas of analysis are more appropriate for a certain speaking situation, less for another. Try to focus on the areas that are most likely to impinge on this audience's ability and willingness to embrace *your goals* as a speaker. Keep in mind your reason for speaking, but try to be aware of *their reason for listening*.

### **Adapt to your Audience**

That final statement leads neatly to the next step in audience analysis: adapting to these listeners. Based on what you know for sure, what you can reasonably assume, and what you suspect about your listeners, you now tweak your content and delivery to try to achieve two important, complementary goals:

- What you want to accomplish (your speaking goal)
- What they want to get from you (their listening goal)

The more closely you can bring those together, the more successful the speaking situation will be.

Let's consider the need to adapt in terms of the four pressure-cooker scenarios mentioned on page one.

**When the stakes are high**, chances are good that your goal is not the same as your listeners' goals. They are conducting a search for a new administrator, let's say, and you are a candidate for that job. Your goal in giving this presentation is to convince them you're the right person for the job. Their goal is to find the speaker who most closely matches their criteria. Obviously, the more you learn about their screening criteria, the better your chances. Perhaps the search committee wants someone with a Ph.D., and you have only a Masters degree; make sure your credentials, as outlined somewhere in the speech, reflect many of the qualities they might be seeking in a more educated candidate. Let's say they are looking for someone with a minimum of ten years' experience and you have 15 years in the field. Capitalize on that. To the best of your ability, give them what they want so you can get what you want. If you're a female and you've discovered they are prejudiced in favor of male candidates, dress in a tailored business suit with long sleeves; downplay your femininity.

**When you have to give bad news**, take time to consider what the audience would really like to hear from you. You are announcing a plant closing, but what do *they* want? Job security? A continued link with a company they've grown to love? A fair severance package? Discover their hopes and expectations, and then adapt by offering whatever concessions you can. Where you can't concede any ground, at least be aware of trigger words or phrases that will only make your message harder for them to swallow. If they're all blue-collar workers and you're a high-ranking executive, this might be the time to give up the suit and replace it with casual slacks and a golf shirt.

**If you know you'll be facing a hostile audience**, take the time to analyze the cause of their hostility toward you or your subject. Search in advance for common ground, and let that commonality provide the opening for your speech. Consider their position sincerely, and address their concerns with sensitivity; that's adapting to a high-pressure audience.

**When the preparation time is short**, no matter how much you need to accomplish in a short period of time, it's worth your while to take time to stop and think about your audience: What do they want from you? What do they already know? What do they need to know? As you quickly put your presentation together, let the answers to those questions guide you. In that way you spend your precious time shaping your message most effectively, and both you and your listeners get what you want.

Finally, there is one step you can take in advance to be somewhat prepared when any of these high-pressure speaking situations arises: your bag of tricks. Begin to assemble a file of incisive quotations, articulate and informative articles on your subject area, anecdotes you've heard, stories from your own experience that illustrate a point you always find yourself making. Maintain a collection of visuals too: posters and handouts that have worked well in the past; PowerPoint slides and overhead transparencies. Whenever the pressure is on, you will find comfort and a logical starting point in your bag of tricks.