

Confident Public Speaking – Our Audience’s Sacrifice

Show me a conference auditorium and I will show you a would-be presenter nervously mouthing their misfortune at presenting to a large audience. Putting aside any thoughts of ingratitude they should instead consider for one moment what it is like for their audience. Their presentation audience has to undergo an entirely unnatural experience -- and most of them do actually want to be there.

All of us are natural conversationalists. And our audience is definitely made up of talkers. We only have to listen to them before the speakers start to realize that. Yes, there are some of us who are better at the art of conversation than others. Some are more talkative and some are more reticent. But apart from these small differences we are united in our understanding of the rules of the conversation. These are:

- Conversations are held in small groups -- probably no more than 6 people.
- Only one person speaks at a time.
- Interruptions are rude.
- Pauses are rude. If there is a pause then someone else takes their turn at speaking.
- Pauses are very, very short -- or non-existent.
- "Umms" and "Errs" indicate that we want to keep our turn -- and are, in fact, just thinking our next word.
- If we repeat something our fellow conversationalists worry about our well being.

In the main, these are the simple rules of conversation. And we all understand them. Each of us takes our turn before passing the baton of conversation to the next in line. Conversational bores are people who either do not know these rules or will not abide by them. The classic bore is someone who always interrupts or never passes on the conversation.

But when we sit in an audience and listen to a presentation these rules do not count. It is not a conversational bore who is holding forth -- it's us, **the speaker**. Natural rules of speaker engagement are suspended for the duration of the presentation. Instead our audience has to follow a separate set of contrary rules:

- Presentations are made to large groups -- often total strangers.
- Only one person speaks at a time -- for a long time.
- Interruptions might be signaled -- but you had better be sure of yourself before you dare say anything.
- Short pauses, medium pauses and lengthy pauses are standard practice -- they don't signal it is our turn to speak.

- "Umms" and "Errs" still indicate that the speaker is going to keep going regardless.
- Repetition is standard practice -- we expect it as an audience.

In addition to the standard rules of speaker engagement being suspended for a presentation our audience also has to put up with a whole set of unnatural physical expectations:

- Sit still for upwards of 45 minutes -- and sometimes longer.
- Keep quiet for upwards of 45 minutes -- unless asked to say or do something.
- Sit in the dark as a speaker clicks through their series of PowerPoint slides. The human race is engineered to either sleep or party when the lights go down -- turning the lights down signals something in our brains and attention spans decrease quickly.
- Be attentive, focused and listening for a long period of time -- this is very hard work. Most speakers should try it now and again.

The very least that we, as speakers, can do is acknowledge their predicament. Instead of becoming uptight with speaker nerves our concerns should be for our audience. It is they who are clearly the most uncomfortable in any presentation.

Our aim as a speaker must be to minimize their discomfort. Our presentations must be clearly structured, signposted and themed for a listening audience. We should cut down on the ever present information overload of a PowerPoint slide deck. We should build engagement and participation with strong and focused eye contact, rhetorical techniques and reasoned argument. We should use our voice, signaling with tone and volume. We should aim for simplicity of sentence structure, composition and length. The shorter the better.

Audiences become best involved through their applause, their laughter and their response to a call for action -- even a call for a show of hands can be welcome.

So, instead of concentrating on our own speaker nerves, a better strategy is to consider the very needs of our audience. It is they who are in the most unnatural position. It is they who have made the biggest sacrifice. It is they who have suspended their rules of speaker engagement. The least we can do is acknowledge their effort, present clearly, be structured and seek their engagement. The simple things are best for confident public speaking.