How I Overcame the Fear of Public Speaking  By Adam Grant

Several years ago, I was invited to give my first public speech, and I made the mistake of saying yes. I was terrified: as a student, my heart used to race at the mere thought of raising my hand in class. For weeks beforehand, I had nightmares about forgetting my lines, waking up in a cold sweat. No matter how much I practiced, for the three days leading up to the speech, I could hardly breathe.

During the speech, nothing went terribly wrong. I was relieved… until I read the feedback from the audience. Here were some highlights:

- “Try not to be so nervous. You looked like a Muppet and it seemed like you memorized every single sentence for the presentation.”
- “It seems like you’re reading off a teleprompter. Breathe!! Too mechanical.”
- “You were so tense that you were causing me to physically shake in my seat.”

In the past year and a half, I’ve given over 100 keynote speeches and hundreds of presentations, and things have changed dramatically. I still get nervous occasionally, but public speaking is now one of my favourite activities. Here are the five steps that have been most helpful in reducing my anxiety:

1. Don’t try to calm down.

   In clever research, Harvard professor Alison Wood Brooks asked people to give a public speech on what would make them good colleagues. Anxiety alert: they would be videotaped and evaluated by a committee. More than 90% of people said the best strategy was to calm down. But it didn’t work.

   When independent raters evaluated the speeches, people who tried to relax ended up giving speeches that lacked persuasiveness and confidence. Instead of saying “I am calm,” people gave more compelling speeches when they said “I am excited.”

   The same was true when people were anxious before singing Journey’s Don’t Stop Believing, saying “I’m excited” led to more accurate karaoke performance on than saying “I’m calm.”

   Why? Physiologically, we have two different systems: the go system and the stop system.

   As Susan Cain, the introverted author of Quiet who overcame her own phobia of public speaking to give a record-breaking TED talk, explains, “Your go system revs you up and makes you excited. Your stop system slows you down and makes you cautious and vigilant.”

   Cain suggests that it’s a mistake to work at turning off the stop system; you want to turn on your go system. Anxiety is an intense emotion, and it’s hard to make it vanish quickly in the face of uncertainty. It’s easier to convert anxiety into another strong emotion like excitement.
You won’t catch me belting out Journey any time soon. But when I feel pangs of panic about speaking, I no longer try to fight the reasons to stop. I focus on the reasons to go: I’m delivering a message that matters deeply to me. I enjoy challenging assumptions, offering actionable insights, and providing some entertainment.

As my enthusiasm climbs, anxiety fades. It doesn’t vanish completely, though. As Richard Branson notes (paraphrasing a quip attributed to Mark Twain): “There are only two types of speakers in the world: 1. The nervous and 2. Liars.”

2. Practice in front of an audience. When I rehearsed my early speeches, I delivered them solo. Classic studies by the late Stanford psychologist Robert Zajonc demonstrated that the mere presence of other people raises our arousal. If you practice alone, you won’t have a chance to adjust to that arousal.

The key is to practice under conditions that resemble the performance as much as possible. With that in mind, I was surprised to discover that before a talk in front of a crowd of thousands, the best preparation was to practice in front of a small group. In a small group, you can see everyone’s facial expressions and feel their gaze burning a hole in your retina. (Want a sure fire strategy for freaking out an anxious introvert? Stare at him. Being the focus of other people’s attention can be seriously overstimulating.) In a large crowd, faces blur and eye contact fades, which can actually reduce arousal. So if you want to prepare under maximal anxiety, practice in front of a small group. It’s not a coincidence that before her TED talk, Susan Cain rehearsed in a room with 20 strangers.

3. Turn off the lights. To reduce anxiety during the speech itself, I like to darken the room. As faces become less visible, my arousal drops. I recently discovered that there’s a side benefit of dim lighting: audiences laugh more. Comedians prefer “dimly lit space,” Peter McGraw and Joel Warner write in The Humor Code, which seems to “help people feel more concealed and therefore less inhibited in what they’re willing to laugh at.” Of course, darkness also helps people feel less inhibited in falling asleep. So I only switch off the lights when I feel confident in the entertainment value of the speech.

4. Know your audience. I find that the more I learn about my audience in advance, the less nervous I become. Along with helping me tailor the material, it humanizes them and highlights common ground. Each August, I teach a weeklong course for hundreds of Wharton MBA students. It’s the first class they take in business school, and I don’t have much time to get comfortable with them. After spending a few days reading through their bios, I’m more excited than anxious. I see that one had a fascinating former life as an Olympic rower and another grew up in my hometown.

5. Lead with a puzzle, question, or story. Dylan Chalfy, a gifted speaking coach and professional actor, taught me that opening with a puzzle places the audience’s attention on the ideas, as opposed to the speaker. A question has a similar effect: it gets the audience thinking instead of judging. Malcolm Gladwell has made a similar observation about starting with a story: the audience gets absorbed in the narrative, and ends up focusing on the plot and the characters rather than the storyteller.

Earlier this week, I spoke at Google Zeitgeist. It was the most nervous I’ve been in a long time: the audience was full of extraordinary people and it was being videotaped for online posting. Although it was far from a flawless performance, I didn’t lose any sleep beforehand. My pitch was too loud at the beginning—a clear sign of anxiety—but it got better over time as I found my rhythm:

My next step is to work on improving my breathing with my uncle, Darth Vader.

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