

Speak Your Way to the Top: Busting Seven Speaking Myths

By Suzanne Bates

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At some point in your career, speaking well could be the single factor that determines your success. You may have all the potential in the world but if your career feels stalled, the reason may be the way you are communicating with your important audiences. You may have enormous value to add to your business or organization. But at a certain point, you won't be able to bust through to the big jobs unless you can articulate your ideas fluidly and confidently.

What does this mean? It means mastering both the formal and informal presentation. It also means leading good meetings, conversation skills and writing, too. If you're terrified at the prospect of speaking in high stakes situation, you may have bought into common myths about speaking. See if you recognize any of these false beliefs and then look at the realities of speaking your way to the top.

Myth #1: Only a few people are really good at speaking.

The truth is, even the greatest orators were not born with innate speaking skills. Everyone must learn to speak well. And despite what you might think, extroverts have no advantage over introverts. Each personality type brings some natural skills to speaking. Extroverts may love to get up in front of people, but they tend to under-prepare and therefore deliver weak, rambling messages. Introverts, on the other hand, spend all their time preparing, but they hate having an audience's attention focused on them. Like learning how to tie your shoes or to solve algebra problems, speaking requires a skill set you must learn.

Myth #2: If I just work really hard, someone is bound to notice.

Unless your boss is Ebenezer Scrooge, chaining yourself to your desk and keeping your head down is not a good strategy for advancing your career. When you do that, you're simply not visible: to your boss, to others you report to, to your colleagues, or to the people who report to you. So no one perceives you as effective. Of course you want and need to be productive, but you also want others to view you as a contributor, and that means speaking, formally and informally. Your regular, well-prepared communication with everyone you work with will make you highly visible, and before long everyone will see you as a real asset and potential star within the organization.

Myth #3: My silence is respectful.

In business, people perceive polite silence as being too quiet, as if you have nothing to say. If no one on the team knows anything about you or your ideas, or what value you bring to the team, even if you're very smart and talented, you won't be promoted. Start thinking through your strategic view and write it down. Then practice it so that you're prepared to present and discuss your views in meetings with your boss and other colleagues. When two people of equal value are in competition for a promotion, the one who can articulate the strategy and value will always get it.

Myth #4: There are no opportunities for me to speak.

You might feel as if you would put a lot of thought and work into a big presentation if one came your way, but you need to seek out those opportunities, big and small, and even create them if necessary. Remember that those senior to you judge you every day, assessing whether you have the right stuff to be a leader in the organization. When you begin speaking, you are, as James Hume says, "auditioning for leadership," and with experience you'll get better every time. So start with low-key, friendly audiences, like Toastmasters clubs, or offer to make a small brown bag presentation within your company or to your department. Volunteer to lead meetings. Whatever you decide to try, get started!

Myth #5: I don't have time to prepare; I'll just wing it.

Speaking with confidence and in a way that adds value is essential to your career success. Your presentation must have both content and style, so your delivery must be relaxed and confident. The only way to achieve that is to spend a lot of time preparing for any formal or informal presentation. As that wise person Anonymous said, "The best way to look like you know what you're talking about is to know what you're talking about." So clear your calendar as much as you can and put in the time to prepare.

Myth #6: If my PowerPoint is great, my presentation will amaze them.

Preparation means more than untold hours putting together a killer slide show. Forget about the slides; if you outline some great, powerful ideas to speak about, place yourself in a room alone, and practice out loud, on your feet, you're going to do well. Practicing like this is the single most important thing you can do to become a better speaker. No one cares about your slides anyway, and they definitely don't want to listen to you reading aloud from the slides.

Myth #7: My utter terror is a sign I shouldn't be speaking.

Don't mistake anxiety about speaking for an inability to speak. Although your apprehension may feel overwhelming, it is directly related to under-preparation. Like 98% of people, your nerves are your body's way of telling you that you're not ready to speak yet; you haven't put in enough time writing, preparing, or practicing. Rather than letting it debilitate you, use your anxiety to mobilize you to take action, to drive you to get on your feet and practice. If you do, when you are in front of the audience, the hard work will be over, and you'll experience how much fun you can have delivering the speech.

You're As Good As You Decide To Be! Though certainly prevalent, none of these common myths about speaking are true. Anyone, including you, can become a great speaker if you're motivated to advance your career and willing to put in the time.

When you make a presentation, you will see immediate results. You may not receive a huge promotion after you speak just once, but speaking never fails to have a significant impact on careers. Every time you speak, you will create "buzz" about you, as people discuss what a great contributor you are and how much value you add to the organization. Senior management will recognize you for your confidence, initiative, and good ideas, and they will find ways to reward those qualities appropriately.

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