

Speak out, girlfriend!

From Fearful to Fabulous! Step One

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Do you feel nervous when you have to make a presentation or speech – whether to an audience of one or of many? In working with my presentation coaching clients, I've come up with nine steps to help you get more comfortable and actually transform your fear into the great energy needed for a fabulous presentation. Read on for Step One!

Step One: Find Your Own Voice; Be your authentic self.

Did you see the Saturday Night Live spoof of the Tax Masters commercial? I had seen the actual commercial – the stiff-as-a-board spokesman “Patrick,” eyes scanning his prompter, standing sideways so we could only see his profile, with not even a hint of a smile – it was almost too easy to make fun of him. But I don't think SNL realized that their spoof offered a perfect lesson on the first step to making a great presentation: “Find your own voice – be your authentic self.”

As part of the spoof, the spokesperson “Patrick” got upset that his director was making him stand so rigidly in profile. “I know why you want me to stand this way; you don't want anyone to see my half-formed twin brother coming out the side of my head.” So he persuades the director to do another take, and the audience howls as Patrick turns and introduces his “little brother Daniel.” At the end of the retake, during which he seemed much more relaxed, Patrick says, “That felt really good!”

So what does this have to do with Step One – Find your own voice; be your authentic self? Probably none of us has a “half-formed twin brother” coming out of the side of our head. And maybe there are a few of you out there who are completely comfortable with who you are. But most of us have at least a few things about ourselves that we don't want others to see – “flaws” that we're ashamed of, or embarrassed about.

At first it seems to make sense to hide our flaws. The problem is that it takes energy to keep them hidden. And by doing so, we are blocking access to that most valuable asset – our authentic, true selves. The place deep inside us that is the source of our creative energy. That's why, when we are holding back, we seem cautious and a bit stiff, or maybe even arrogant and pompous.

Now I'm not suggesting that we stand up in the middle of a business presentation and reveal all our flaws. That would be just as counter-productive as presenting a stiff perfectionism. But there is a middle ground of self-acceptance that we can achieve if we spend some time with ourselves in preparation. We can reach that middle ground – connect with our authentic selves - if we follow three directions: Be Honest, Be Compassionate, Be Courageous.

Be Honest

Gently ask yourself, “What aspects of myself am I ashamed of, or feel I need to hide? This could include specific things like your weight, your education, how disorganized you are. Or it could be something more general like a feeling of unworthiness. Notice what judgments you hold against yourself as you think of these aspects. Then notice how uncomfortable or bad you feel when you bring up these judgments. When we hold harsh self-judgments, we cut ourselves off from our deepest selves, and we cause ourselves to suffer.

Be Compassionate

(from the Latin for “co-suffering”) Compassion is a virtue in which the emotional capacities for empathy and sympathy for suffering are regarded as a part of love itself. I know this may seem counter-intuitive, but compassionate acceptance of our “flaws” not only reduces our suffering and reconnects us with the judged parts of ourselves, it also give us a better chance of modifying those flaws! Imagine how it would feel to offer yourself a few moments of gentle, loving acceptance. How about something like:

“Ok Terry, maybe we won’t make the cover of Sports Illustrated, but I really love you and I’m sorry for all the times I put you down for your big belly. I’m going to try to be more loving and who knows, maybe we’ll even start that dance class!”

Try this, and notice how you feel more relaxed both with yourself and with others.

Be Courageous

The core word in courage is “heart,” from Latin “cor.” Once you’ve spent some compassionate time with your flaws, you can decide, with courage, with heart, what aspects of yourself you might feel comfortable including in your presentation to your audience. Maybe it would be a brief story of one of your own struggles. Maybe it would just be your own inner sense that you are ok, flaws and all. It takes courage to show up in the world “warts and all” AND it’s worth it!

Whatever choices you make, as you continue this process, you will feel more connected and comfortable, not only when making a speech, but at any time! Your audience, whether of one or of many, will be able to tell that they are spending time with the real you. And they will be much more likely to listen to what you have to say.

Blessings to you and yours!

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