

A Total System for Becoming
a Natural, Confident Communicator

SPEAK WITHOUT FEAR

Understand the *why* behind your “stage fright”
in public speaking situations

Identify and overcome the barriers holding you
back from expressing yourself authentically

Shine in any interview or public speaking
venue regardless of audience size

Ivy Naistadt

SPEAK **Without Fear**

A Total System for
Becoming a Natural,
Confident Communicator

Ivy Naistadt

An e-book excerpt from



*To my husband, David, for your love,
patience, and endless support*

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INTRODUCTION

All the World's a Stage

A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum

Dynamic and effective public speaking has been a concern since the days when Demosthenes stuffed marbles in his mouth to keep from stuttering at his legions of listeners in the Parthenon. And for many working Americans today, it is a concern that has only deepened. I've seen this confirmed not only in the growth of my business but in major newspaper and magazine articles, as well.

For example, a recent edition of the *New York Times* noted, "Workplace specialists say fear of public speaking is one of the most common career-stoppers in America." According to a recent Gallup poll, *forty* percent of Americans are terrified at the thought of talking to an audience (the only thing they dread more is snakes!). The article concludes that the ability to communicate in front of a group is becoming increasingly important in our age of electronic communication, when more and more companies are placing a higher premium on face-to-face interaction.

In other words, expectations are high these days for people in virtually every career or business to communicate in as polished and persuasive a manner as the professional interviewees we see everywhere on television. The inability to do so can damage a person's personal or professional credibility and career.

For example, George, a client of mine who runs a manufacturing company headquartered in New York City, started out as an accountant, so he's completely at ease speaking to individuals or small, intimate groups. In fact, he's very dynamic in such situations. But as a successful entrepreneur, he's now required to put himself before much larger groups of people at stockholder meetings and so on. Because he lacks experience speaking to large groups, he slips into a monotone, which prevents his real dynamic self from coming through, thus reflecting badly on his credibility as a strong leader.

During a recent downturn in his business, George had to deliver an important speech to a combined gathering of almost four hundred employees and stockholders. The purpose was to shore up morale and reassure investors that the company could weather the current down market.

Using the methods I will present in this book, we explored the underlying issues relating to his uneasiness about speaking before groups, then applied some exercises to address them, making specific, targeted changes to his delivery style and reframing his message so that he'd appear more human.

The results were immediate and significant. George's speech became more focused and personal; by incorporating experiences from his accounting years and relating them to his entrepreneurship in a humorous, self-effacing, and anecdotal way, he connected with his audience on a more intimate level, as if he were speaking to each person one on one. And as his nonverbal skills (body language, eye contact, hand gestures, and so on) grew stronger, they supported rather than distracted from his delivery.

At the event itself, the audience took to George's message just

as he'd hoped—because he was able to communicate his real self. He not only looked but he sounded like a person in command of a company of significance, someone whom others would want to follow.

My conclusion, drawn from working closely with hundreds of individuals with benign forms of stage fright like George's or the more extreme forms of panic and nervousness experienced by others, is that *anyone* who suffers any form of stage fright can accomplish what George did, in either a group setting or face to face.

No matter how anxious you are about going before an audience, any audience, whether it's one or a thousand; no matter how many jobs or other opportunities you have passed up, or lost, because of it, you can combat your stage fright and liberate yourself to speak without fear—that is, comfortably, confidently, compellingly—in any circumstance.

The Importance of Being Earnest

My program for overcoming stage fright and developing a style of communicating that is natural and authentic grew out of my early background as an actress on the New York stage and in television. This solution consists of identifying both the practical (e.g., lack of a skill) and the emotional (e.g., fear of being criticized) hindrances that are standing in our way and working through them. Missing from all other books and methods on public speaking, and winning friends and influencing people, this component is critical.

Look at it like putting out a fire where there is a lot of billowing smoke. Similar to nervousness, which is just a symptom of what's holding you back, the smoke is just a symptom of the fire. Aiming a hose at the smoke won't put the fire out. You need to identify the source of the fire in order to extinguish it. Without adding this critical component to the mix, no amount of tools, tips, or other

how-tos for auditioning, interviewing, speechmaking, or presenting effectively will produce results that last.

How to Use This Book

Part 1 will take you through the process of determining your level of skill and anxiety. This will have an impact on how quick and easy the fix may be, because it will help expose the *why* behind your anxiety—whether it’s attributable totally to a lack of experience or need of a particular skill, a deeper emotional inhibitor, or perhaps a combination of the two. I have often found in my work that even clients whose primary difficulty is lack of a particular skill may have an emotional component, however small, preventing them from getting to their next level. Therefore, whether you are just beginning to hone your speaking skills or you are a more seasoned professional, I encourage you to read part 1 carefully. Here is where you will:

- determine *all* the issues—whether skill-based and / or emotional—standing in your way of being an effective communicator
- learn techniques designed to bring any negative emotions accompanying hidden obstacles to the surface and clear them away
- visualize a new possibility for yourself and make it a reality

In part 2, you will then be taken through the process of combining your newfound freedom from whatever degree of anxiety you may have with some straightforward tools, tips, and exercises that will enable you to develop and master a technique for speaking naturally and persuasively in any circumstance.

These tools, tips, and exercises are not “one size fits all” but are adaptable to *your* level of experience and need. Just as in part 1,

whether you are an absolute beginner, someone with more speaking experience who still feels apprehensive about it, or an accomplished speaker who wants to achieve even better results, you will benefit.

Sweet Smell of Success

The one-two punch of using part 1 in combination with part 2 spells the difference between a short-term solution and a long-term fix. This is a complete solution, one that will enable you to:

- understand, manage, and even be free of your stage fright
- develop a personal style of communicating that reflects who you are, with self-assurance and authority
- translate your self-worth persuasively to get that important job or promotion
- expand your skills to increase personal productivity and marketability
- improve personal health and happiness through pride of accomplishment and bolstered self-esteem
- enjoy, rather than avoid, the experience of communicating to groups or individuals
- unleash the creative process and have more fun on the job
- find your own light and let it shine

Easy to understand and to master, it is a solution that will work successfully for *you*. And, best of all, it is one that will last.

PART ONE

The Missing Link to Communicating Confidently

1

An Approach Less Taken

Down the Up Staircase

If anyone had told me when I was growing up that I'd make my living helping people overcome their fear of public speaking to become more powerful, persuasive communicators, I would have said, "You're crazy!"

But in a way, I suppose the path my life has taken was inevitable.

You see, I'm a good example of what I preach.

Picture if you will a little girl, ten years old, about four feet tall (she'd never get much taller), lugging a three-quarter-size cello that's bigger than she is into the living room of her upscale two-story suburban home. It's practice time, which goes down like vinegar. Her mother, who happens to be a professional violinist, insists (as many well-intentioned parents do) all of her children learn to play a musical instrument. However, in this case, the cello just isn't this kid's thing. Singing, dancing, and acting *are*. Heading out the door that afternoon, the mother gives the usual

instructions: “Practice, or no playtime!” And with those words, she’s gone.

As soon as the little girl hears her mother’s car pull out of the driveway, she shoves the cello aside, springs from the chair, dashes to a closet, flings it open, and retrieves a long-handle broom.

Tucking the broom under her arm, she makes her way up the staircase that leads to the second-floor bedrooms and positions herself at the top of the landing. She is alone in the quiet house.

The orchestra in her mind begins to play, the music swells, and she gracefully begins descending the staircase with her partner, the broom, in imagined top hat and tails. Belting out the lyrics of a show tune at the top of her lungs, she has the time of her life, lost in the joy of singing.

That night, she and her mother are watching a variety show on television. The little girl, still taken with her performance that day, is enchanted by the lead vocalist of the featured singing group, whom she imagines herself to be. Her mother gets up and suddenly switches off the TV. Disappointed, the little girl asks why, and her mother replies, “Because singers look stupid with their mouths open. That’s why!”

My mother, who set an extraordinary professional example, which has served me well throughout the years, couldn’t have known I would eventually pursue an acting and singing career. However inadvertently, her words did have an impact on me. And while it wasn’t a total showstopper, her comment simmered inside my brain, and I allowed it to linger and affect me professionally for years.

The interesting thing is, as a child, I never thought about singing from this visual perspective. I just enjoyed doing it. And yet, this seemingly benign comment, reinterpreted and internalized by me, became a critical message I would send to myself later on—creating inhibitions. As you will find out, these interpreta-

tions have tentacles that, if the messages remain unexamined, can creep into other areas of our lives.

Butterflies Are Free

The two biggest deterrents to speaking without fear are *nervousness* and *inhibitions*. They are not the same thing.

Most everyone experiences a certain amount of nervousness at the prospect of speaking to a group, pitching a new customer, or asking for a raise. Usually, these butterflies are mild and just flutter away. But those that take wing to become a crippling form of anxiety that stops us in our tracks I call *stage fright*.

This is the condition I found myself experiencing when I moved to New York City in the early 1970s to embark upon a career as an actor and singer. To learn my craft and prepare for auditions, I studied with the best acting and voice teachers in the business. They reassured me that I had talent and a fine singing voice, and was developing the technical skills to go with them.

Auditioning is difficult at best. But for me, it was an especially painful experience because of my own self-doubts and self-consciousness. You are truly being judged, the competition is fierce, and if you don't get the job, you very often have no idea why. This just adds to your insecurity. Rejection is part of the game. This is why, in addition to talent and hard work, the way you feel about yourself and the work you do is essential to your being able to keep pressing on until you achieve success.

For me, this was a constant struggle. I was continually replaying an old tape in my head—one that said that since singers look stupid with their mouths open, I must look stupid singing, too. What I've since learned is: messages sent to us in the past by significant people in our lives, whether unintentional or intentional, can leave lasting impressions . . . creating inhibitions that affect

how we deal with the present. Through sheer persistence and some very good luck—both of them a must in show business—I gradually became more secure in my craft and began landing jobs off-Broadway and small parts in films and daytime soaps. But my anxiety issues persisted, even increased.

I was almost used to the fact that auditions brought on the sweats, but now they even accompanied the jobs I landed.

I recall performing a nightclub act at a premier New York City club called the Ballroom, an opportunity that offered the kind of exposure that could open a lot of doors for me.

It was opening night. There I was in my dark little dressing room a flight of stairs down from the stage, getting ready to go on, when suddenly . . .

I started feeling physically paralyzed.

When my call came, I was unable to move from my chair.

I sat there frozen, incapable of moving up the stairs.

The show's director, Harris Goldman, who'd been the company manager of the original Broadway production of *A Chorus Line* and was used to such behavior (even if he didn't understand it), came down, saw what was wrong, and tried to reassure me as he helped me up the stairs. It was a great show, I was well rehearsed, and he knew I had the ability to pull it off, he said.

He knew . . . I didn't.

As things turned out, the act went off without a hitch, and I received enthusiastic applause. However, my underlying fear squashed any enjoyment I could have gotten from the experience.

I didn't yet understand the source of this underlying fear, nor the connection it had to the way I saw myself—or judged my own performance—onstage.

Little Me

While battling performance anxiety in pursuit of a showbiz career, I often had to take odd jobs to make ends meet. One of them, which I got through word of mouth from some actor friends and media contacts, was pitching the products and services of different companies at various trade shows as a corporate spokesperson.

At the time, I didn't take this work too seriously. It helped pay the rent and gave me the flexibility to keep up with my acting and singing classes and yet still be available for auditions. It was also more fun than waitressing.

But there was something else about it that I noticed: no matter what I was called upon to do at these shows—and I had to do some pretty outrageous things, like dressing up as a Sara Lee croissant or talking to an animated puppet—my stage fright vanished. In the face of any size audience and any technical snafu, I could be absolutely fearless.

Over time, I came to understand why. Acting or singing in a musical or nightclub act is about performing—playing a part, being somebody who isn't you. But as a spokesperson, I wasn't performing, at least not in the show-business sense, though I did draw on many of the skills I'd learned as a performer. I was getting up in front of people and speaking to them as *me* (except when dressed as a croissant).

As challenging as this work often was, I got a real kick out of doing it. Being authentic—which is to say, playing myself—allowed me to relax, even cut loose, and enjoy the “show” along with everybody else. This enhanced both my credibility and persuasiveness as a spokesperson.

Very soon I was asked by the companies hiring me to give seminars on speaking without fear to their managers and staff at business conferences.

However, as I began to move into this new and uncharted career direction, a funny thing happened: my stage fright came back.

I remember exactly when it occurred. I'd been asked to speak at a gathering of IBM executives at the Opryland Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. The morning of the event, I began to feel the cold sweats.

What am I to do? I asked myself, with creeping self-doubt and panic. Here I was, going before an audience of Fortune 100 big-wigs looking for professional expertise and guidance on speaking fearlessly, and the "pro" was breaking out in flop sweat!

Once again, I had to dig deep into my actor's toolkit to get me through. I repeated the mantra: "These people are here to *learn* from me, not see me pass out!"

I may have been exaggerating about the prospect of passing out, but that's truly how I felt. I couldn't get through the program quickly enough, or so it seemed to me, and when it was over, I couldn't wait to leave. But my assistant came up and said, "Not so fast. There's a line of people who want to meet and talk with you."

For the life of me, I couldn't imagine why. Didn't they know I'd been a basket case up there? Hadn't they seen it?

The answer was no.

My professional skills as an actor had indeed gotten me through, and I now knew they always would. But the experience had been an ordeal. I was determined to get to the bottom of why my anxiety had returned.

Sleuth

I went to every store in New York looking for a book on combating stage fright in different situations. I found books on how to speak powerfully in public and books on what makes a successful presenter, but, as far as I was concerned, this put the cart before

the horse. Nothing I found explored the entire issue; nothing went deeper into *why* I was afraid and how to get beyond it.

Frustrated, I explored the territory from top to bottom on my own. I worked with experts who helped me understand how my mother's comment and other childhood experiences impacted me as an adult. I also learned that whenever confronted by a new and different type of public speaking or communication challenge, I fell into several traps by approaching the challenge as *performance*. Let me explain.

As media guru Roger Ailes points out in his book *You Are the Message*, television has raised the bar on what we expect from public speakers. We expect to sit back, relax, and be entertained by them the way we are by the professional "talking heads" on TV—in the accepted television style, which is informal, chatty, and witty. Whether we consciously realize it or not, Ailes says (and I agree with him), we compare ourselves to that standard in public speaking situations, expecting ourselves to *perform* the same way. That's the first trap I fell into.

The second trap was forgetting one of the first instructions I got from one of my first acting teachers, the actor/producer Darryl Hickman. "You have to give up the need for a positive response," he said to me about the art of auditioning. As I came to understand what he meant, I could see that he was right.

As an actor, I had to be open and vulnerable to expressing a wide array of emotions under pressure. Naturally, I yearned for a positive response from my auditioners. Hickman was telling me that I had to learn not to allow the prospect of a negative response to get in the way of doing my work. Hard as it was, that meant giving up the need for a positive response, as well.

The same lesson applies to public speaking situations. At Opryland, in front of all those IBM executives, I'd slipped and let that need for a positive response get in my way again.

On a mission to find my own style and feel secure with it, I used everything I was absorbing, and applied the discipline I'd learned

as an actor/singer to developing a process of my own for combating stage fright in any situation that called for me to speak fearlessly out of my comfort zone.

Until I began giving seminars, I never realized how many others experienced a form of stage fright in their lives the way I did in mine. Having never actually discussed the problem with my fellow actors because I figured it came with the territory, I assumed it was just something I had to live with.

I was wrong.

By working through the process I'd come up with—which involved thinking strategically, having the courage to dig deep and remove what was standing in my way, channeling my energy in a positive direction, understanding how my body works under pressure, and learning how to achieve maximum effectiveness with the right kind of rehearsal—I freed myself of the stage fright that had plagued me on and off for so long.

Believing this process could work for anyone, in any walk of life, I began using it in my seminars. And as the demand for them increased, I bid an excited farewell to stage and screen without regret to pursue my new career as a professional speaker, helping others reach their highest potential as communicators—and to feel the same sense of joy and satisfaction that comes from it that I do. The book you're holding grew out of my workshops.

The Full Monty

The key to speaking without fear is exposing the core issues behind your stage fright (issues that can be different for each of us but have common denominators) and rooting them out, then developing a solid technique you can count on for creating and delivering your message.

Identifying these issues can spell the difference between combating stage fright successfully and sustaining the kind of ambient

anxiety that works like a low-grade virus. It lives inside you for years, dormant, but then, given the right set of circumstances, it rears its ugly head, exploding into full-blown illness. If you allow the source of this anxiety to remain undetected, or force it underground, you keep yourself from ever being free of it.

Ilene, for example, was a striking redhead in her midthirties who worked for the advertising group of a major magazine publisher. Whenever she had to present to senior executives in her company or to customers, she'd panic inside, throw a wall up around herself, and come across as defensive, even angry. She knew her problem would limit her future in the company at best—and at worst, make it precarious. But she was ambitious and determined to get ahead. So, she came to one of my workshops seeking a remedy.

Initially, I too found Ilene to be very defensive. She interpreted most of my feedback in the workshop as criticism. She never smiled, and projected a “little girl” image with her body language that was not at all her, diminishing her power.

I put my explorer's cap on and asked if she could think of any occasion in the past when she experienced a kind of stage fright that reminded her of how she felt now. “Whatever comes to mind,” I said, “even if it strikes you as seemingly unrelated.”

She thought for a moment or two, then replied, “Well, I had a lisp as a child and had to have lots of speech therapy.”

I remarked on how successful the therapy had been, because she spoke very clearly and was quite articulate. She explained that it was a difficult struggle. “I always felt humiliated.”

“Why?” I asked.

She described how every day at school she had to get up in front of her classmates and ask to be excused to go to the trailer next door for her speech lessons. Many in the class teased her and made other unkind comments every time she did.

There it was—the important, perhaps even critical, piece of the puzzle.

Ilene was still carrying those feelings around with her, letting them affect the present. When she made a presentation to her management or to new customers (and now presented herself to us in the workshop), she emotionally recalled the anxiety she'd felt as that girl standing up in class each day to be excused for speech lessons, and her old way of dealing with it kicked in. Her defensive wall went up, and she became guarded, unable to relax and be natural.

We all saw the relief Ilene experienced just by getting this into the open and seeing its connection to her present difficulties. Almost immediately, she lost the chip on her shoulder and began radiating a new confidence. Now that she understood the *why* behind her stage fright, she could move to the next step in the process: learning how to cope with it.

She accomplished this very successfully. Even her management noticed the change; when I next spoke with her, she proudly announced she'd been promoted.

Don't get me wrong; I'm not suggesting that the core issues behind stage fright always stem from some deep psychological wound or trauma. I'm also not suggesting that rooting out these core issues is all you need to do to succeed in overcoming your stage fright. What I *am* saying is that determining the real issues at play that are holding us back from speaking without fear is, more often than not, the overlooked weapon in the communicator's arsenal, and very often the most important one.

An Approach Less Taken

To be a good communicator, you have to be authentic, which requires finding out what's stopping you from being authentic, an approach many programs on public speaking give little regard to. They focus primarily on technique—how to write and deliver a speech, for example—rather than dealing with the issue of *presen-*

tation of self. Quite often they get good results. But typically these results don't last much beyond the workshop in which they're achieved.

Acknowledging that there's more here than meets the eye by saying to yourself, "Okay, how can I improve?" or, "What's preventing me from being the best I know I can be?" or, "I don't want to live with this fear one minute longer!" and spending the time upfront to resolve the issues holding you back, you're a giant leg up on becoming the natural, confident communicator you long to be. In no time you'll see a change in your perspective and wonder, "Why didn't I do this earlier?"

The late Bill Gove, one of the foremost keynote speakers of our time and the first president of the National Speakers Association, who won every public speaking award imaginable, once said to me, "Speaking is easy. You already know how."

With that in mind, let's turn the page and be on our way.

2

What's Your Nervousness Profile?

Four Categories

In my workshops, I've discovered that people who get nervous about giving a speech, making a presentation, interviewing for a job, teaching a class, or standing up in front of a bunch of people at a Rotary club meeting—and this pretty much describes all of us—fall into general types categorized by *when* they start getting jittery.

Knowing the general type you fall into will help guide you in the direction of a solution and toward the best course of corrective action.

Read through each type to see which description you identify most strongly with. There may be more than one, because as you go on in life speaking publicly, when and why you become apprehensive may change as your experience level and expanded self-awareness increase. For example, some of my clients have told me that they used to be what I call Avoiders (people who suffer severe symptoms and are terrified at even the prospect of giving a

presentation or speech because of a lack of experience and other reasons that require closer examination). But as they spoke more in public and applied the methods and tools provided in this book, they moved to another category. This will probably happen to you, too, as you move progressively closer to being able to speak without fear.

With that in mind, let's find out what type you are. Remember: this is a tool for gaining greater clarity about yourself. There is no good or bad here. So, don't judge yourself or engage in any self-recrimination.

#1 The Avoider

When: at the mere suggestion of a public speaking situation

Avoiders experience the highest degree of anxiety at the prospect of public speaking because they will move heaven and earth to stay out of the spotlight, no matter how this may damage them personally or professionally. Here's an example:

Ryan, a market analyst recently bumped up to a supervisory job in his department, came to one of my workshops for help overcoming his fear of public speaking—not because he wanted the help but because his manager insisted on it.

As a supervisor, Ryan now had to give in-person reports to top management on a regular basis. Every time his manager asked for an advance look at Ryan's presentation, Ryan replied with an evasive "I'm . . . still working on it."

This is a classic description of the highest degree of nervousness symptomatic of the Avoider.

Ryan was terrified of having to give a presentation or get up in front of people to speak. He admitted attempting to turn down his promotion, even though his analytical and managerial capabilities clearly warranted a step up the ladder, so that he could remain safely behind the scenes. He had adopted a no try/no fail attitude, and there was no way he was going to step out of that comfort

zone if he could conceivably avoid it. However, his boss had forced him into a situation where he finally had to address his fear, with me.

The degree of nervousness exhibited by Avoiders is the toughest to get at because it cuts so deep. Typically, their skill at public speaking is minimal, because they've spent their lives doing everything they can to stay away from situations where such skill is needed. Preparation for them is a nightmare because they don't know how to prepare, and so they preoccupy themselves with other, often unimportant, details as a delaying tactic. In fact, it is not unusual for Avoiders to stay out of range of promotions, turn promotions down (as Ryan tried to do), or even quit their jobs to escape the possibility of being thrust into the limelight.

Avoiders also have a tough time responding to criticism. They tend to take it personally. In their eyes, to be assessed as having done a bad job at, say, making solid eye contact during their speech is to be considered a bad person. Conversely, they are extremely self-critical and tend to focus only on the potentially negative outcome of having to give a speech, make a sales pitch, or interview for a job rather than on the task before them. "I will look foolish. I will fail. I will be laughed at. I am not good at this. There is no way this is going to turn out well . . ." They heap criticism upon themselves. This catastrophic thinking becomes so pervasive that they develop a habit of giving up before they begin.

People with this degree of nervousness are always inhibited at the idea of speaking formally to a group and sometimes even one on one. Because they spend so much time living with their fear and trying to cover it up, they have great difficulty opening up and being themselves in such situations. So, flat-out avoidance, regardless of jeopardy to career or job, becomes a lifelong coping mechanism that lasts until their boss says, as in Ryan's case, or they themselves say, "Enough!"

#2 The Anticipator

When: from the moment the speaking event is scheduled

Otherwise known as the “worrier,” the Anticipator takes the Boy Scout motto of Be Prepared to a whole new level. The Anticipator reminds me of the Felix Unger character played by Tony Randall in the TV version of *The Odd Couple*. Neat, fastidious, and hypochondriac, Felix worries about *everything*. One can't imagine him ever relaxing, most certainly not in a situation where he may have to give a speech or presentation. At the conference hall where the speech or presentation is to be given he'd drive the technicians crazy with his obsessively acute attention to every minute detail, the way he does his roommate.

Proceed With Caution is another motto of Anticipators. Whether their skill level is high or low, they are consumed with every aspect of their upcoming speaking engagement, presentation, or interview; this extends right up to, during, and sometimes even after the event itself. They try to work out every conceivable wrinkle, an impossible task at best.

The problem is, no matter how much they prepare, Anticipators will still worry that it's not enough, that something somewhere they should have thought of but didn't will go awry. Instead of feeling confident and relaxed in their preparation, which is one of the objectives of preparing, they tend to be uptight. And, even if they give a great speech to a thunderous ovation, or deliver a dynamic presentation, they derive no joy from it. They second-guess and Monday-night-quarterback what they could have done better. I've worked with actors like this whose preparation techniques are so thorough and airtight that they leave no room for the oxygen called spontaneity that audiences need every bit as much as they do. On the flip side, I've seen actors who, while having done their homework, come onstage confident in their preparation but also ready to go with the flow

and take on whatever comes their way. A thrilling performance is often the result—maybe not perfect, perhaps, but thrilling nonetheless.

Anticipators, like Avoiders, also have a tough time with criticism because they tend to take it personally. In large part, their obsessive focus on preparation—and the anxiety that comes with it—is to avert the possibility of negative feedback at all costs. As a result, they are toughest on themselves, spending undue amounts of time coming up with the perfect paper clip for their handouts or finding that one water glass in a thousand that is perfectly shaped to fit their hand so there’s no chance they’ll spill a drop on themselves or their speech and look “foolish.”

Unlike Avoiders, Anticipators are inhibited to an extent. Their nerves tend to tingle the closer they get to the event itself, since their overriding concern is making a mistake. At the podium, onstage, or in the interview, they adopt a “safe” delivery style because the risk factor of being too demonstrative or too exciting is too great—or because they have a superstitious feeling that if they get too cute, it’ll backfire on them.

#3 The Adrenalizer

When: just before the event

My husband, David, is a bass player. Back in the mid-’80s, he was playing a benefit to save Broadway theaters, which were then being demolished at an alarming rate. As he was waiting to go on and do a number with the cast of *Dream Girls*, a hit Broadway musical at the time, he caught an odd shape out of the corner of his eye. Looking closer, David saw that it was a man leaning over a stool and hyperventilating, as if he were either about to be sick or suffering a heart attack.

As David moved toward him, the man stood up and turned, and David recognized him. It was Jason Robards, the late actor who was well known for his performance in the Eugene O’Neill

drama *Long Day's Journey into Night*, a monologue from which he was scheduled to perform at the benefit.

Having apparently regained his composure, Mr. Robards looked at my husband, and David instinctively knew not to ask him if he was all right. Later, David said, Mr. Robards went on to give a powerful and moving performance at the benefit as if nothing had happened.

What Jason Robards was experiencing that night was neither illness nor symptoms of a heart attack but something he was very used to and knew how to handle: an intense rush of on-deck nervous energy caused by last-minute jitters.

Sometimes referred to as the Fight-or-Flight Syndrome, this manifestation means not necessarily that something is wrong with you, although it sure might look and feel like it, but that adrenaline is seizing control of you. Once you understand what's happening to you and learn how to manage this burst of nervous energy, you can turn it to your advantage by making it translate to a more forceful, compelling performance.

I once saw heavyweight boxing champion George Foreman interviewed on *The Charlie Rose Show*. Rose asked Mr. Foreman if he ever got nervous before a fight. Suddenly, this big tough guy started to look a little wobbly as he responded, "Yeah. When I'm making my way from the locker room to the ring and I get to the stairs, my knees are shaking so much I just want to grab them!"

These two examples describe the range of nervousness experienced by people whom I call Adrenalizers.

Generally, the skill level of Adrenalizers is very high. They know how to prepare consistently and build momentum toward the event, increasing their preparation as the event draws nearer. They understand that the surge of adrenaline that overtakes them when they're on deck is the result of a buildup of tension from their days, weeks, or months of preparation and anticipation; they recognize and acknowledge that it comes with the territory and is a product of their excitement, rather than fear. Because Adrenal-

izers tend to have solid skills and technique and know how to prepare well, they generally have no fear of being criticized. In fact, they often welcome an objective viewpoint and solicit criticism, which they see as feedback that will enhance their overall performance. They also know how to take the criticism they receive. In other words, they are able to distinguish between criticism that is sound, accurate, and aimed at being helpful and criticism that is negative for its own sake.

Adrenalizers must manage their on-deck nervousness with techniques such as breathing exercises that become part of their process in controlling the outcome of their performance. How well they manage it affects how fluid, grounded, or centered they will feel and, therefore, come across to their audience.

A totally uncontrolled release of on-deck nervous energy typically expresses itself in behavioral tics that distract an audience from getting the message, no matter how credible you seem. For example, I once saw an Adrenalizer who continually rocked back and forth on his feet during his forty-five-minute speech until all of us in the audience felt motion-sick.

#4 The Improviser

When: during the actual event

When I ask Improvisers how they like to prepare for an interview, give a speech, or make a presentation, the common refrain is, “Oh, I don’t prepare. I like to wing it. I like to come across as spontaneous.” They mistake the kind of preparation that allows you to be spontaneous with a free-flowing stream of consciousness that screams at your audience: “I’m a disorganized mess!”

An architect I worked with on improving his presentation skills is a good example. Befitting his profession, he’s a visually oriented person. Recognized and well respected throughout the industry for his creativity, he was made president of a growing architectural firm. His process of pitching ideas in the past had always

been to let his drawings speak for themselves. He believed this same process was, or should be, sufficient for gaining commitments from clients even now as president. Because of this, he felt any form of structuring his presentations to those clients would interfere with his creative flow, making him feel and sound stilted. However, he did express one of his concerns with me. He wanted to know why he would occasionally find himself uncharacteristically jittery during an actual presentation.

In a demo presentation he gave me, I witnessed the behavior firsthand. He proceeded to get more and more nervous as he went on. He fumbled with his papers and came across as not knowing where he was in the presentation or what should come next. Because he was improvising totally, thereby having no structure to build on, he seemed less spontaneous than confused, unsure of himself, and lacking credibility—as if he were making the whole thing up as he went along.

Improvisers tend to think, “Hey, Robin Williams just gets up and does it; so can I!” Well, Robin Williams doesn’t just “get up and do it.” As most professional comedians do, he tries out all of his material, including many of his so-called ad-libs, in a variety of venues prior to trotting it out publicly. This provides him a framework within which he gives himself room to move around and improvise safely, which he does brilliantly.

Improvising, or winging it, on the spot foments an anxiety that keeps building the more you improvise until, in some cases, an underlying insecurity develops that is so strong your nervousness type shifts from the Improviser column to the Avoider column.

Because Improvisers spend more time on the concept than the content of their communication, they mostly succeed in trying their audience’s patience, even if now and again they do get lucky and succeed in putting one of their ideas across.

As far as being open to criticism is concerned, when Improvisers atypically do succeed in having their ideas understood and well received by an audience, they tend to fly high. Met with dis-

approval, however, they feel misunderstood or hurt, and may shut down their openness to any suggestions for improvement entirely.

Improvisers generally have a very positive outlook as to how their speech or interview will turn out. They are typically bereft of any anticipatory or on-deck anxiety, which is precisely how they can be so last-minute. They feel they have great ideas (which they may) and just want to share them. The problem is that their lack of preparation sets them up for rejection because they will most likely be sharing their ideas prematurely. They need to shift the focus of that positive attitude more to organizing and presenting their ideas (even if developing a structural process strikes them as tedious work) in order to ensure a successful outcome.

Striking the right balance between no structure and a suffocating one is, for Improvisers, the key.

As noted in the introduction and at the beginning of this chapter, knowing your nervousness profile gives you an indication of whether the solution to your problem might be a relatively easy fix—as is often the case with Improvisers and Adrenalizers—or a more complex one because it is rooted in an emotional issue that must be exposed and resolved, as is often the case with Anticipators and, especially, Avoiders.

Most of the time, I find that to different degrees, all four types may require both kinds of fixes. Even an Improviser, part of whose difficulty is probably lack of knowing how to prepare properly, may also have a deeper, more emotional component, however small, working against him or her. My extensive experience working with hundreds of people has taught me never to assume that simply acquiring or refining a particular skill will mean that all is immediately and always well.

Using what you've learned about yourself so far as a guide to determining your nervousness profile, let's now examine the kinds of obstacles that contribute to or cause the anxiety holding you back, so that you can point yourself toward a solution.

Who You Are at a Glance

Avoiders—have so much anxiety associated with speaking or communicating in any formal setting that they will go to almost any length to avoid being put in a situation that demands it. May even give up promotions or pass up job opportunities to avoid the spotlight.

Anticipators—start getting nervous as soon as they hear a speech, presentation, or a job interview is scheduled. The event could be three weeks or three months away, it doesn't matter. They will spend all of their waking time until then worrying about what can, may, or will occur.

Adrenalizers—become nervous just before the event and are suddenly hit with a surge of energy that must be dealt with, like a track star gearing up for a race who controls the surge of excess energy with focusing techniques as a way of getting ready to meet the challenge ahead.

Improvisers—get nervous during the event because they are the last-minute type who either put off preparing or spend no time preparing, then typically run into all kinds of trouble that might easily have been avoided with even just a little preparation.

3

Surface Obstacles: the Easy Fixes

Stage fright affects millions of us each day all across the country—in corporate boardrooms and conference rooms, in convention halls and courtrooms, at sales meetings, on radio and TV—forcing us into making choices that severely limit us personally and professionally.

What fuels the stage fright we experience in situations where we're called upon to put ourselves on the line before a group or a person is:

1. Myths about public speaking pervading society at large that we have bought into. We can eliminate these obstacles easily and quickly simply by dispelling them.
2. Skill-related roadblocks, which require a bit more time and effort to remove because they require learning or honing a particular skill. But at least the fix is clear-cut.
3. Inhibitions that plague us on an individual basis, requiring a deeper level of commitment to resolve because they stem from fears we've nurtured as obstacles over time.

Recognizing and identifying what fuels your particular form (and degree) of stage fright so that you can move beyond or even overcome it is *essential* to being an effective communicator.

This chapter focuses on the surface obstacles (the myths and the skill-related roadblocks) that cause us difficulty, which are the easiest to fix.

Let's start with the myths that hold us back.

Myths Holding Us Back

There are widespread myths about public speaking that shape our attitudes about what it takes to be an effective speaker. These myths have the poisonous effect of stopping us in our tracks from the get-go because they sell the idea that we're lacking what's "needed" to become a powerful and persuasive communicator. By accepting them as true, we allow ourselves to become convinced from the start that we're bound to fail.

By examining these myths about public speaking and seeing how and why we let them stand in our way, we can get past them. I call these myths the surface obstacles because, unlike the deeper type of inhibitions I'll explore in the next chapter, they operate on a superficial level. This makes them the easiest obstacles to remove because, quite simply, they have little or no weight at all.

Here are the most common myths about public speaking I've identified in my seminars and individual coaching sessions over the years. Let's separate fact from fiction:

Myth #1: "Nervousness Is a Sign of Weakness."

Many people genuinely believe that if they get nervous speaking in public or at an interview, this characterizes them as weaklings. So, weeks before they have to make a presentation or go for that interview, they wake up each night with the sweats, having a

panic attack at the prospect of being found out they suffer from the jitters and will be seen by their employers, coworkers, and customers as not measuring up. Thus, their jitters are compounded by shame.

The truth is, most of the people I work with—even, perhaps especially, those at the highest levels of their profession—get a little tense in public speaking or interview situations. Professional speakers and performers who make their living in front of audiences get the jitters, too. In fact, if they don't get them, they get nervous about not getting them!

No matter who you are, when you're in a situation where you're putting yourself out there—on the line, as it were—you realize there is a chance you'll be rejected. So, you get nervous. That's a normal response. It doesn't mean you're a weenie. What you do with that nervous energy is what's important.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting the Tony Award-winning actress Chita Rivera. She is in remarkable physical shape and exudes the energy and charisma that make her a Broadway legend. I asked her if she was still performing. In fact, she told me, she was preparing to go into rehearsal very soon for a new play and was very excited about it.

I remarked how wonderful it was that even now, at this stage in her professional life, she could still look forward with such enthusiasm to the idea of performing before an audience. At which point, she raised her arms, clenched her fists, and said, "Yes. But I get *s-o-o-o nervous!*"

Imagine that. Here's a professional actress, a Broadway superstar, in fact, who has more than a half-century of experience performing night after night before Broadway audiences (a very tough crowd!), and she admits that she still gets the heebie-jebies at the prospect of going out there onstage.

Others like the late actor Sir Laurence Olivier, singers Barbra Streisand and Carly Simon, actress Kim Basinger, and NBC *Today* show weatherman Willard Scott also have admitted experi-

encing severe bouts of performance anxiety in their professional lives. If that means they're weenies, then, hey, the rest of us might as well pack up our speeches and presentations and job applications and go home!

Nervousness is *not* a sign of weakness! It is a sign of *excess energy* that you must learn to control and redirect. When you come to understand in part 2

how your mind and body function under pressure, I will provide you with techniques for releasing stress-related energy and channeling the nervousness it produces in a positive direction that works for not against you.

This is what well-known battlers against performance anxiety have learned to do. They see their oncoming bout of nervousness, annoying though it may be, as a signal that they are getting ready to meet a challenge, and they use that awareness and their energy as fuel to do their best.

Myth #2: "You Have to Be Perfect."

Do you know people in your life who must do everything perfectly? In both their professional and personal lives, they find it necessary to cross every *t* and dot every *i* that life presents. In psychology circles, these people are known as perfectionists. While we tend to appreciate and associate hard work, responsibility, and ambition with these high-achieving individuals, there is a downside. Oftentimes they set standards that are too high for themselves, and if they fail to meet those unrealistic expectations or fall short of their goals, they are very hard on themselves.

It's also difficult, sometimes, to relate to perfectionists, because most of us are not perfect!

It's the same in public speaking, presentation, or interview situ-



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It's not a question of whether or not you get nervous but how well you work your nervousness to your own advantage.

ations. When I see someone who is too polished, too precise, too slick, who never makes a mistake or a misstep, my immediate reaction to them is that they're too good to be true. In other words, I don't believe them because they're just too . . . well, perfect.

What I want from a speaker, presenter, or interviewee—and I'm sure you do, too—is someone who shows up prepared, of course, but who comes across as a human being. I want a person who is capable of handling the situation—especially if something unplanned occurs, as it always does—with grace, perspective, and a healthy sense of humor.

The fact is, the best speakers and presenters rely on their willingness to be *imperfect* in order to put themselves and their messages across more effectively. They know they can't afford to be perfect because perfection doesn't exist; the unexpected will occur, and they must be free to let themselves go so they can respond to such situations.

I've experienced many such moments in my professional life. At first they were scary, but then I came to appreciate what they were telling me, which is that to aim for perfection as a speaker or presenter puts you in a tight box with no room for spontaneity and only adds to your nervousness.

Whenever I run into clients who get terribly distraught prior to facing their particular public, who start obsessing over minor details and develop an almost chronic sense of self-doubt that virtually (sometimes completely) paralyzes them, I know what arena we're in. Because of the belief they've imposed on themselves that they have to do this perfectly, they work themselves into such a state that they make the process of giving that speech, making that presentation, or going for that interview more difficult and pressure filled than it should be. By setting the bar so high for themselves (or anyone, frankly), quite often they become such nervous wrecks that they may opt out entirely.

Clearly, "I must be perfect" is an unrealistic attitude that takes

you to but one destination in your personal or professional life: nowhere. I remember reading columnist Anna Quindlen's commencement address to the graduating students of Mount Holyoke College in 1999. In it, she encouraged her accomplished, hopeful listeners to give up the need for perfection in their lives as she had done in hers. "Eventually, being perfect day after day, year after year became like carrying a backpack filled with bricks on my back," she said of her early years as a student at Barnard College. "And, oh, how I secretly longed to lay that burden down."

That sums it up just about . . . perfectly.

Myth #3: "It's a Talent You Have to Be Born with."

I'm not sure where this notion stems from—except, perhaps, that because the world's great speakers make it look so easy, the assumption is it must come naturally to them.

That is absolutely not true.

Great communicators like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton—to name only a few—spent years developing and honing the Art of Speaking. (Reagan, in fact, was a sportscaster, actor, and corporate spokesperson before entering politics; so, a lot of training and practice went into his becoming a great communicator.) Furthermore, they all had, and still have in some cases, professional speechwriters working for them, whereas most of us have the additional responsibility of coming up with our own material on top of delivering it.

The truth is, 50 percent of the people I work with who find themselves in the position of having to give a speech or make a presentation have had little or no previous experience doing so. Under these circumstances, they can't expect to be polished pros like a Reagan or a Clinton, for whom communicating ideas and persuading others was and is an integral part of their professional life.

I won't argue that many good speakers do have natural procliv-

ities in that direction. Perhaps they simply feel more relaxed and comfortable speaking before groups (although this, too, can be developed, particularly over time and with repetition). However, without a solid technique to support them, and constant application of that technique, they would not be nearly as effective, no matter how at ease they feel before an audience.

My belief is that great communicators are made, not born. And any of us can become one if we combine a real desire to achieve that goal with technique and discipline.

Myth #4: “You Have to Be a Comedian.”

There really should be warning labels on the backs of professional stand-up comics like Jerry Seinfeld and Jay Leno that read: “Don’t try this at home.” Or, perhaps, more to the point: “*Only* try this at home.”

There is no question that making your audience laugh is an asset as a presenter or speaker, or even when interviewing for a job or college. But you don’t have to be a stand-up comic to accomplish this.

Even if you can’t tell a joke worth a dime and always ruin a punch line, you, too, can bring a sense of humor to your speech, presentation, or Q&A and connect with your audience. You won’t have to put on funny hats or juggle bowling balls to get a laugh. Consider the great public speakers I’ve mentioned in this chapter. They can succeed in drawing a laugh out of us without trying to be Robin Williams. The secret to drawing laughs is to learn and practice the principles of good storytelling, which I’ll cover in greater detail in part 2. These speakers enliven their words with anecdotes and stories drawn from their own experiences, which elicit chuckles of recognition from us because we can relate to them. In other words, good speakers engage us in sharing a laugh with them (often at their own expense).

Myth #5: “Everything You Say Must Be Important.”

Who among us speaks pearls of wisdom all the time? Even philosophers take a verbal vacation once in a while. But a lot of what you have to say is very important—particularly if you are selling yourself or your company, or sharing your expertise or an idea.

I’ve found that people who accept this myth and believe that what they have to say is unimportant were typically brought up with the axiom “Children should be seen and not heard.” Dispelling this myth is usually sufficient to release its hold.

Myth #6: “My Nervousness Is Worse than Anybody Else’s.”

If this were true, then fear of snakes would rank higher on the list of people’s phobias than fear of public speaking!

Nevertheless, I understand where people who have this attitude are coming from. In many ways it mirrors the psychology of a soldier who thinks that he’s the only one who is scared of going into battle, and is worried that he might be branded a coward if his fear were exposed.

I’ve experienced cases of nerves at many different stages of my professional life, and I closely guarded that secret for years, fearing that if it were found out, I might not get the job—or, worse, be seen as someone with “issues.”

It wasn’t until I began coaching people, particularly corporate executives, to speak freely that I found out how truly unremarkable my own bouts of nervousness were. These highly accomplished, successful people were concealing the same secret and suffering the same way I was.

Some people are better able to hide their feelings of anxiety than others, or at least they have learned how to channel their nervousness and manage it so that it won’t get the best of them

(this is me). But in order to do that you must first admit that the problem exists and not adopt the attitude that you're a lone sufferer who must always keep your anxiety under wraps.

At one point in my career I was hired to coach a group of executives to appear on a television station. Their company had created an in-house state-of-the-art studio to produce business news and information programs for broadcast throughout corporate headquarters to employees during the course of the business day. The executives were to be the on-camera talent, or news anchors.

Each admitted to me the state of panic he or she was in. And why wouldn't they feel panicky? "Anchor person" was never a part of their job description. It was like being a cameraperson who is suddenly thrust into the spotlight to fill in for Tom Brokaw.

One of these executives, a woman, told me —insisted, rather— that time was at a premium in her particular job, and so I was to teach her everything she needed to know in one session. Initially, I was taken aback. But then I realized what was actually going on with her. She was used to coping with time sheets and management reports. Now, she was coping with a serious case of performance anxiety and didn't know how to handle it. To make matters worse, she expected herself to be able to just get through it.

I suspected she felt that if her colleagues knew she was so beside herself with anxiety, they would lose respect for her as that tough cookie she'd always presented herself as being, and declare her a fraud. In truth, her nervous feelings were no different from, and no worse than, those of her fellow anchors-in-training.

Myth #7: "It's Too Daunting and Overwhelming a Task."

Remember when you learned how to ride a bike? In my case, as I watched the older kids on my block zooming up and down the street, I kept thinking, "How will I *ever* be able to do that?"

Then one day my father took me outside and walked me through the process of balancing myself, working the handlebars,

the pedals, the brakes, and so on step by step—and before I knew it, I was riding up and down that street with the older kids, too, having the time of my life.

I couldn't believe how quickly I'd accomplished this and how natural riding a bike felt to me now. I no longer had to think about how to do it; I just did it! I climbed on, and off I went.

Public speaking is similar. Suddenly you're told you have to give a presentation to senior management or deliver a speech to the Rotary club. Your brain goes into overdrive. You feel overwhelmed. You think, "It's impossible!" and you begin to panic. Pretty soon, you just want to go home, dive into bed, and pull the covers over your head. I've been there myself many times.

If that scenario sounds familiar to you, take solace in the fact that public speaking in all its varieties—from speaking before the board to the all-important job interview—is no more difficult to learn than riding a bike. All you need is a system—a place to start and a process to follow.

Part 2 of this book provides you with the basics, as well as some more advanced tips for taking it up a notch. By applying the principles and adapting them to your own needs, you'll be up and riding in no time.

Myth #8: "You Have to Be Outgoing to Engage an Audience."

One of my clients works as a researcher in the financial sector. He's a behind-the-scenes-type guy who gathers information to help improve his company's marketing position. Typically, he shares his findings with top senior-level management, either one on one or in small meetings. But now he was being asked to present his research to the bank's sales force at an upcoming conference, and he was completely rattled.

"I'm no rah-rah sales guy," he told me. "I'm not even extroverted." He was right.

I made the point that he didn't have to be outgoing; he had to be relevant. That is to say, he didn't need a personality makeover in the image of a Tony Robbins to grab and hold his audience. What he needed was to understand his audience's perspective so that he'd present his information in a way that would be of value *to that audience*. Accomplish this, I told him, and all else would follow; he would become more energized in his delivery because his audience would actually be listening to him.

I've seen great speakers and presenters with a forceful delivery style leave audiences shaking their heads wondering, "What does all that mean for me?" I've also seen people with mediocre, even sleep-inducing, speaking styles wow an audience because of the content of their words and the relevance of their opinions. Former secretary of state Henry Kissinger comes to mind. There's no speaker in the world whose delivery style is so deadly. It's like watching the paint dry. But we listen to Kissinger because of the relevance of his opinions on the national and international scene; we want to hear what he has to say.

After making this point to my client, I set about working with him to improve his mechanics, such as watching the flow of his presentation and limiting the amount of detail he would include in his message so that it would be easier for his audience of sales folks (not analysts like himself) to digest and take away. And on the big day, he did very, very well.

Myth #9: "It's All Over if You Make a Mistake."

There will be times in your personal and professional life when you'll lose your place in a speech or presentation and won't know where to go next. Or, your mind will suddenly go on vacation in the middle of a Q&A session, and you won't know what to say. In chapter 6, I'll delve into the reasons why such mishaps occur and how to plan for them so you'll bounce back with aplomb without anyone (but you) being the wiser. For now, just keep in mind that

everybody makes a slipup in a public address or Q&A now and then, or even more frequently. They range from experienced speakers like the president of the United States giving the State of the Union address, to college grads going for their first important job interview.

Disregard the prevailing attitude that the only alternative is public humiliation and death. Stay calm. Don't panic. And remember this: if you don't make a big deal out of it, no one else will either.



By now you should have a clearer perspective on why these myths stand in our way, preventing us from being effective communicators, and why they are simply not true.

Once you recognize you have adopted erroneous beliefs, you should begin to experience immediate relief. These false notions we pick up along the way must be dispelled because, however we adopted these concepts, whether having read them somewhere or heard them in passing, these are false myths that have shaped our current perceptions and are not reality.

You may have other myths of your own, and I invite you to question your concepts and determine if they are fact or fiction.

Now let's turn to the second category of surface obstacles that get in our way, the skill-related roadblocks, which are also easy to fix.

Skill-related Roadblocks

Unlike myths, these surface obstacles are real. But it's their very reality that makes them almost as easy to overcome as myths. You see, they stem from problems that are easily recognizable—in this case, lack of a particular skill (or set of skills). The easy solution,

therefore, is to acquire that skill or skills. Of course, this solution takes a bit more effort to execute than simply dispelling a myth, but the actions required are concrete and easily mastered (depending, of course, upon how much time and effort you devote—because, as with acquiring any skill, you will get out of it only what you put in).

Lack of Communication/Presentation Skills

Ever heard of “The Peter Principle”? It was named after the late Dr. Laurence J. Peter, a teacher of business at the University of Southern California. Fundamentally, Dr. Peter’s principle comes down to this: whenever someone in an organization, public or private, becomes extremely proficient at his or her job, the odds are that person will get promoted to a bigger job with different responsibilities demanding skills and expertise the person does not have. In other words, Dr. Peter says, sooner or later, everyone gets raised to his or her level of incompetence (i.e., lack of proficiency).

Dr. Peter’s theorem is truer today than ever as companies increasingly require workers to do more with less and to multi-task in different, often highly divergent, areas of the business because of the constraints of downsizing and stiff global competition. As a result, a financial whiz whose expertise is numbers and not people may suddenly be upped to CEO. An efficient factory floor worker may be thrust into the role of manager. Or a secretary may have to take on the responsibilities of a customer relations representative. As a consequence, each will suddenly have to communicate on a different level to a broader, potentially unfamiliar audience, via speeches, presentations, sales pitches, video demonstrations, conference calls, and so on. Since they haven’t been taught the required skills or had a process for developing these skills on their own, their performance more often than not falls well below their employers’ expectations. Their public words

lack persuasiveness and credibility. Their self-confidence erodes. And so they do what comes naturally: they get nervous (rightfully so) and develop their own particular case of fear and loathing at the podium.

Fortunately, fear of public speaking due to lack of skill is among the difficulties easiest to overcome. All you have to do is acquire the skill(s) you lack, then work on it, adapting it to your own style, until it becomes almost second nature to you.

I learned a lot about this fear during my years as an aspiring actress auditioning for parts on Broadway. It was a heady time, coming to New York City and auditioning for parts on the legendary stages where the likes of *A Chorus Line*, *Evita*, and *42nd Street* were playing. That was my dream—to be on those stages—all the while I was a little girl growing up in Syracuse, New York. And now, here I was.

One particular audition still stands out. I was one of five actresses called back for this particular role. At first I was very excited to be called back, but as the auditions became progressively harder and more demanding, my excitement turned to fear.

At the first audition, I was asked to demonstrate my singing skills, and that went rather well. At the second audition, I had to act, and that too went well. But now I was being called back to show how skillfully I could dance, and to be honest, my dancing skills were . . . well, a bit light. In the world of the theater, there's a category for people like me: we're known as singers who move well.

I could dance, but I wasn't a trained dancer of the type you would find in the cast of *A Chorus Line* or *Chicago*, those tall gazelles who could touch their heels to the top of their heads and twist themselves into pretzels. I could touch my toes.

Well, at this final audition, the five of us were lined up onstage, and a tall—I do mean *tall* (as in six feet, seven inches)—man stepped before us. He was the show's choreographer and director, Tommy Tune. I thought I would faint, because I could only imag-

ine what we were going to be asked to do by such a legendary taskmaster. Maybe I could hide behind one of the gazelles, I thought, and no one would notice!

There was no way out of this one. In a very soft voice with a slight Texas twang, he instructed us that when he gave us the cue, we were each to make our way across the stage, one after the other, doing what is known in dance circles as a grand jeté.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with a grand jeté (as was I), let me see if I can describe it to you. You leap several times with your legs spread wide like an open pair of scissors, landing gracefully on your feet, Baryshnikov style, each time until you've made your way successfully across the stage. As far as I was concerned, the choreographer's instructions might as well have been, "Speak your lines in Chinese, then fly."

I distinctly remember one of the fifteen producers watching the audition turn to another and whisper, "Keep your eye on the little one [me]; she's good." And my thoughts were, "No, please, *don't* keep your eyes on the little one; keep them on the big ones, the gazelles!" I felt like I was in a Woody Allen movie, and here comes the scene: Lights . . . Action . . . *Splat!*

I was going to be humiliated, and there was nothing I could do about it. But it was too late to back out now.

"Okay, ladies, begin," said Tommy Tune. One by one, the gazelles made their way across the floor, leaping—*flying*—through the air. Then it was my turn.

My mind and heart were racing. I had to do something. But what? On the spot, I came up with a brand-new form of grand jeté. There would be no leaps, no spread-eagle jumps, not even any little bunny hops from me. I sidestepped my way across the stage, like a crab on Prozac, arms flailing, desperately trying to smile through clenched teeth until I finally reached the far side of the stage (I knew I'd reached it because I practically crashed into the wall).

Well, you could have heard a pin drop. I looked out and saw fif-

teen horrified faces looking back at me with their mouths open, and one very tall shocked Texan in front of me, who then proceeded to politely give me the classic showbiz dismissal of: “Thank you. *Nexxxxxxt!*”

What I learned from this incident was invaluable; it determined me never to be caught in a fix like that again. Although I had no ambition to become a professional dancer, I knew I needed to go back and take as much dance training as I could so that I would be able to at least get by. This was the big league, and if I wanted to be successful, I had to learn how to play the game. So, I took dance classes every day, sometimes several each day, to become proficient enough so that the next time I auditioned for a part that required me to appear dancerlike, I would get the job!

Language Barriers

If you are not yet fluent in the language of your prospective audience, or if you have a distinctive accent from growing up in a different part of the country or a foreign land, it’s natural to feel a bit self-conscious and, thus, develop a case of the jitters.

Your nervousness is a well-founded reaction, because audiences do size up a speaker’s intelligence, background, and level of education by observing his or her command of the language. Think of the public perception of President Bush’s smarts underlying many of the jokes we get from David Letterman and Jay Leno about the president’s difficulties with the English language. It’s human nature to make such judgments, justified or not.

The important thing is to understand, and to believe, that you are doing your best at the time — and to acknowledge the certainty that you will get even better if you keep working at it. Don’t fall into the trap of becoming so self-critical that you make yourself feel that no matter what you do, a language barrier will always be there.

For example, I have a client who is Chinese. He came to one of

my seminars because he felt his heavy accent was holding him back from his goal of becoming a lecturer on the public speaking circuit, like me. I gave him my professional opinion that his heavy accent was not the overriding obstacle; it was his speed of delivery. He spoke too quickly (as do most speakers when they are nervous, whether they have a language barrier or not). This made him difficult to understand.

If he could learn to tell himself to slow down and pronounce his words clearly, I told him he would become more self-confident and begin to feel better about his voice and accent, which were unique and distinctive.

Poor Grammar

Several clients of mine who are otherwise smart, dynamic, and extremely talented people demonstrate a fear of falling short of their professional goals because they are self-conscious over their habit of using poor grammar.

I use the word *habit* here because these people happen to be educated and, in some instances, very strong communicators, except they get lazy with grammar when they speak. We live in a society that celebrates “relaxed and natural” in all things, including communicating. In trying to achieve this relaxed and natural style as speakers, however, we sometimes fail to recognize the distinction between casual and improper. There is such a thing as being too relaxed, especially in the use of words, and too colloquial.

On the other hand, some people may use improper words in a public speaking situation because their grammar is weak through lack of education.

In either case, nothing erodes your credibility faster than uncertainty over your use of words. Fortunately, poor grammar is an easy obstacle to overcome. You can take an English course at a local college, take an online course in grammar, or pick up a self-

help book on improving your grammar (many good ones are available).

Bad Past Experiences (Logistical)

Some people I work with become agitated at the prospect of giving a speech, making a presentation, or being interviewed for a job or for college because they had a bad past experience of a logistical (as opposed to emotional—see chapter 4 for the distinction) nature and are concerned next time will be a case of *déjà vu*.

For example, maybe the microphone went dead just as you were about to launch into your speech, and the few minutes you spent waiting until—and praying for—the technician to hurry up and kick the microphone back to life again seemed like an eternity.

Or, maybe you tripped on your way to the lectern, and the unnumbered pages of your presentation went flying every which way, forcing you to scramble to retrieve them and, worse, have to make sense out of them again. I even saw a beginner speaker lose his place, not in his presentation but on the stage where he was giving it, and fall into the orchestra pit! That, of course, is an extreme example of a bad past experience, and a rare exception to the typical mishaps that occur, but it's the exception that proves the rule: Stuff happens. And some people can rebound quickly from that stuff and move on, while others panic and become paralyzed. Let's face it, if you've had a bad experience like this once, you can't help but worry at least a little bit that it will happen the next time. There is reality to what you fear; it did happen before. Your fear is justified, but it need not be fueled over and over again until it becomes magnified.

Bad past experiences of this kind drive home the important lesson that there are certain things, like microphones going bad and dropping your prepared text all over the floor, that are unex-

pected and, therefore, out of your control. But these experiences also drive home another equally, perhaps even more, important message about what *is* in your control. As the saying goes, “Forewarned is forearmed.” Past experiences, bad or good, can be great teachers of how to go about achieving a different result next time.

The Good News

The good news about these surface obstacles is that they are just that. They are *surface* issues that are easily addressed—and, in the case of myths, released just by identifying them as such.

So, while you may have been thinking you had an incurable disease, now you have discovered you have only a minor skin irritation, and there is a simple procedure to remove it. You realize you are not suffering from a serious condition, and relief can be immediate, or is not far off.

In the next chapter, however, we are going to dig deeper to reveal the major issues fueling our stage fright, creating obstacles that are more difficult to remove because they are buried beneath the surface.

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Ivy Naistadt has been helping business professionals and others communicate more effectively through seminars and one-on-one consultations for 15 years. Her diverse client list includes senior management from such leading corporations as The New York Times, IBM, Kodak, Hershey, and Pitney Bowes as well as universities and private schools throughout the Northeast. A member of the National Speaker's Association and American Society for Training and Development, she lives in New York.

Credits

Designed by Joy O'Meara

While all of the case study examples provided herein are true, I have changed the names and some of the factual background in order to protect the privacy of those involved.

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