

Gaining confidence in public speaking

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN

Speaking in public helps you gain important leadership skills.

EVA, a professional practice coordinator, and her team of clinical educators are thrilled to learn that their abstract on an iLead in Nursing initiative (Innovation in LEadership and ADministration in Nursing and Health Care Systems) has been accepted for a concurrent session presentation at the ANCC Pathway to Excellence Conference®. Eva will co-present for 1 hour along with one of her team members.

Initially, Eva is excited to be representing her hospital, which recently achieved the Pathway to Excellence® designation. But as the conference date nears, her excitement quickly turns to fear and anxiety. She even starts to wonder why she volunteered to give a presentation. Her speaking experience has been limited to presentations to small groups of colleagues whom she knows well; a national presentation to strangers is an entirely different forum. She knows she needs to gain more confidence—quickly—in her public speaking.

Eva isn't alone in her anxiety about public speaking. Many people suffer from glossophobia (fear of public speaking), which usually stems from fear of failure.

But public speaking is an important leadership skill—one you can learn and become confident in. For Eva and her team, presenting at a national conference is an opportunity to gain recognition for a successful initiative that other organizations might want to replicate.

Preparing a high-impact presentation

Preparation is the key to gaining confidence in public speaking. In his book *Presentation Skills Masterclass: Want to Be a Better Business Presenter?*, internationally known speaker and coach Michael Jackson writes, “Perfect presentations are the product of good preparation and practice. Even the most charismatic people need to do this. Winging it is not an option.”

Fortunately, Eva is passionate and knowledgeable about her topic, which will make it easier for her to



give a high-impact presentation. As she prepares, she should focus on the following guidelines.

Know your target audience

When planning your presentation, learn as much as you can about the target audience for your presentation. Remember—when it comes to presentations, one size never fits all. Ask yourself: How much background on my topic is the audience likely to have? What's their motivation for attending my session? Eva knows the audience at the Pathway conference will be nurses, many of them in leadership roles. They're likely to be interested not just in her initiative and outcomes, but also in how they can use the information she provides in their own setting.

Follow conference presentation guidelines

Most conferences provide specific guidelines on presentation length, time allotted for audience questions, and audiovisual equipment provided onsite. Before being chosen as a presenter, Eva submitted an abstract of her presentation; when preparing her presentation, she should keep in mind that she needs to meet the objec-

Advice from the experts

Here are additional tips from experts to help you become a more confident speaker.

- Check out the presentation space in advance, including the podium, screen, and microphone placement. Decide where to stand when giving the presentation.
- Arrive early for your presentation so you can prepare adequately. Make sure you know how to use the audiovisual equipment.
- Introduce yourself to audience members who arrive early. Making connections with them can calm your nerves.
- Smile often and maintain eye contact with the audience.
- Don't feel obligated to stand behind the podium. Moving can help you release nervous energy.
- Build in a few audience polling questions and ask for a show of hands.
- Pace your presentation—not too fast or too slow. Keep an eye on the time by using a podium clock or your watch (put it on the podium).
- End on time, even if this means skipping some of your slides.
- At the end of your presentation, thank your audience for attending.

Getting ready for the big day

There's no substitute for practice. Every time you rehearse your presentation, you build your confidence level and are less likely to forget key points on the big day. You'll want to have brief notes to refer to during your presentation. Also, time your talk so you don't go over your time limit.

Conduct a dress rehearsal by giving your presentation to a few peers; ask for feedback. If you have a tendency to use filler phrases (“you know”) or have distracting nonverbal habits (such as tapping your fingers on the podium), work hard to eliminate these.

You can find good ideas about polishing your own presentation by watching the pros in action. For creative ideas,

tives listed in her abstract because that's what will appear in the conference program. By starting with the end in mind, she'll find it easier to establish clear goals to guide her as she develops her presentation.

Know the due dates for conference materials

Speakers usually are asked to submit their conference materials, including handouts, references, and PowerPoint® presentations, well in advance of the conference. Create your preparation timeline with those due dates in mind.

Prepare succinct PowerPoint slides

Use PowerPoint slides only as visual aids—and don't cram them with too many bullet points. Be aware that audiences lose interest quickly when speakers read their slides verbatim. Also, consider researching experts' recommendations relative to font size, slide backgrounds, and the number of slides to use for your allotted time. Be sure to proofread your slides for spelling, grammar, and content errors before you submit them.

If you're thinking of embedding videos into your slides, know that this can be challenging for novice presenters, especially if Internet connectivity in conference session rooms isn't reliable. You may end up wasting valuable presentation time trying to get connected.

Use good stories to illustrate key points

Your ultimate goal is to engage the audience. Using stories can be a powerful tool to help you make key points. Although stories aren't appropriate in every presentation, they might be in Eva's case. She could choose one or two stories to illustrate the impact her initiative has had on staff.

view a few high-impact TED talks (www.ted.com), such as Simon Sinek's “How great leaders inspire action” or Brené Brown's “The power of vulnerability.” Many of these short talks (20 minutes or less) have been seen by millions.

Carry a copy of your PowerPoint presentation on a flash drive and email it to yourself at the conference address—whether or not you've sent it to conference organizers in advance. Presentations sometimes get lost and a flash drive may not work. Carrying a hard copy of your presentation is a good idea, in the unlikely but possible event that the technology fails. Also take a copy of your speaker introduction document with you in case the program facilitator doesn't have it. If you'll use your own laptop computer, don't forget power cords and any connections you'll need for projectors.

Finally, dress for success. Appearance is an important part of building your confidence. Business attire usually is the best choice for presentations. Choose an outfit that makes you feel good about yourself.

Presenting like a pro

Even experienced speakers can feel nervous on presentation day. In her book *Presence: Bringing Your Boldest Self to Your Biggest Challenges*, Amy Cuddy recommends acting confident even if you're not. She describes this as “faking it till you become it.” To do this, visualize success and imagine yourself giving a great presentation. Remember—your audience wants you to succeed. Never apologize or say you're nervous. If you skip some of your content, just move back and cover it. (See *Advice from the experts*.)

Questions and answers

Usually, presentations have time built in for questions and answers. The main challenge is what to do if no

one has a question. To avoid this, tell the audience at the beginning of your presentation that you'll be able to take questions at the end. Let them know you're interested in their thoughts and questions, and advise them to write these down to ask you later. For instance, Eva might ask the audience whether anyone has tried a similar initiative.

Postmortem analysis

After the presentation, reflect on what went well and what you might have done differently. If attendees formally evaluated your presentation, ask for a summary of their evaluations and read all of their feedback carefully. Don't be disappointed if you didn't meet everyone's expectations and some of your reviews are negative. Consider all constructive feedback as a gift and an opportunity for improvement.

Banish your fears

When asked to present, don't let fear of public speaking come between you and an exciting oppor-

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tunity. Instead, accept the challenge. Speaking in public forces you out of your comfort zone, but helps you gain important leadership skills and can bring more influence with colleagues. With preparation and practice, you can become a confident speaker. For professional assistance and a supportive environment for practicing, consider joining Toastmasters International (www.toastmasters.org) or attending a Dale Carnegie course (www.dalecarnegie.com) on public speaking mastery. ★

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Selected references

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