



Discover your power of speech

For many, giving a presentation is a terrifying prospect, but talking to groups is becoming a necessity in today's working world, writes **Gareth Naughton**

Some people thrive on it, but for most of us, a trip to the dentist would be preferable to standing up in front of a group of people to deliver a speech or presentation.

However, in this highly competitive work environment, more and more of us who might once have settled happily into the shadows, are being forced into the light by managers who want to maximise their team's potential.

Standing up to speak in front of a group – whether it is a small group of three people at an interview, or 300 at a conference – can be incredibly daunting and, in some cases, fear holds people back.

Fear of failure

No one knows this better than **Dermot Goode**. As the founder of publicspeakingtraining.ie, Goode makes regular appearances on the airwaves as a health insurance expert for Cornmarket, but spent years turning down opportunities because they would mean having to speak in front of people.

"I had a bad experience in front of a group when I was younger and I had nobody to explain it to me in terms of what was going on. It leads to all kinds of irrational behaviour. I meet people who have let the public speaking fear overtake them and they have given into it. You can see the

effect it has had on them. Nobody should be in that situation. Everybody can do this regardless," said Goode.

Bad experiences, both in our personal and working life, can be sufficient to put people off public speaking for life, but there are also people who are naturally shy and simply don't want to be pushed into the limelight.

Then there are the people who were happy enough when they were part of the team and now suddenly find themselves in the role of leader or supervisor and having to address groups of people.

Some are so afraid that they are willing to let their career stagnate rather than push themselves forward, according to Goode.

"Now as well, there is huge competition in companies for promotions and appointments because there is just not that many of them. It is based lots of times on who is the most presentable – who communicates their message better. Sometimes, they are not the best people, but they are just the best guys on their feet," he said.

Preparation

Goode overcame his fear of public speaking by taking part in endless courses, and reading countless books, only some of which were useful. Coaching others on how to tackle their fear is his after-hours job now and his approach is to get back

to basics to explain where the fear is coming from before looking at techniques to overcome it. The key is to address the issue as early as you can before it becomes overbearing, he said.

"Most of us absolutely hate standing up in front of people because you cannot hide and most people do not prepare properly because they don't know how," he said.

"There are lots of things that people can take control of that they don't, they are complacent and then these things happen and they just get set back after setback.

"The more I can get someone up on their feet, getting used to those pretty awful sensations, the more they get used to the nerves and anticipation and they don't let it overcome them."

Tackling nerves

Former television presenter **Emma Ledden**, who now runs *Presenting To Sell* and recently launched *The Presentation Book*, said the fear that everyone experiences when speaking in public is natural.

"It is a very real feeling. I think it is a very real fear, based on that fear of embarrassing yourself – making a fool of yourself. It is based on the reality that we do judge each other, all of us, all the time," she said.

The nerves that arise from these fears are also perfectly natural. People have an expectation that they are not supposed to feel nervous, but that is wrong, said Ledden.

"It is okay to be nervous. The ideal is to get to a place where the adrenaline doesn't feel like a fear, it feels like excitement or energy. That is in your head because it is the same feeling – people can feel it as excitement or dread – and so you want to be able to manage your inner critic," she said.

Ledden believes in the old

adage: "fail to prepare, prepare to fail".

Preparation is everything, she said, and that does not just mean having your content ready, it means practising your presentation or speech repeatedly until you will be able to cope with the odd duff moment.

"It is just a matter of speaking it out loud a number of times to form a flow and then, even when you are nervous, because you have practised something it will come. Whether you present every day or you present twice a year, you really have to prepare your content but then you have to practise. That is the magic," she said.

Unless you are like Bill Clinton, you are not going to be capable of standing up and talking in front of a large group of people without some level of preparation.

"The polished, impactful presenters that I see prepare and rehearse," said Ledden, "I have yet to meet one who does it off the cuff – I am not saying that some don't, but I have yet to meet one. They don't necessarily tell everybody that they have put hours of work into it, but they have".

Be relatable

It is also important to bear in mind that you have an audience here and you don't want it to be as traumatic for them as it is for you. Too often, people let their nerves dominate how they present and the result is boring and benefits nobody.

Emotional engagement is critical, said executive coach James Sweetman of James Sweetman & Associates.

"If someone at the top of the room is just regurgitating facts, there is little hope that the audience will feel anything apart from bored, let alone have that positive, feel good factor that they need to feel in order to be positively influenced. Emotional engagement is critical. It means you have to speak to people's hearts as well as their heads," he said.

Many people forget that their job as a presenter is to be

of service to the audience – to inform, educate and advise.

"Many presenters get too caught up in how they are feeling, rather than focusing on relating well to the audience," he said.

"The audience are not interested in your nerves. They are only interested in 'what's in this for me'?"

"Rather than focusing on getting through it, a far better objective is to ask yourself something like 'how can I wow them?'"

Everyone could work on enhancing their presentation skills, Sweetman said. Some people have an innate ability to communicate well and influence others, but this, like any skill, is something that can be learned. Ultimately, a good presenter is someone giving the best of themselves.

"They are not trying to be someone they are not. Good presenters are authentic and well-prepared. Paradoxically, even spontaneity can be rehearsed. It is difficult for an audience to relate well, or be influenced by, a presenter who is acting a role at the top of the room," he said.



James Sweetman, Sweetman and Associates; right: Emma Ledden, Presenting to Sell