Calming qualms about public speaking

The awful moment strikes at different times for different people.

For some it’s at the moment they stand and look their audience in the eye. The palms sweat, the heart pounds and clear thought evaporates. For others the symptoms attack upon arrival at the venue. And for others just being told a presentation is required is enough to set the adrenaline surging and the pulse racing.

Anxiety is a reality for just about anyone who has to speak in front of a group. Even the great actor Sir Laurence Olivier is said to have suffered from performance anxiety. Yet he observed that the day he walked on stage without feeling a knot in his stomach was the day he would give it away, because he knew the value of the tension, the excitement that naturally comes when we are aware others are listening to and watching us.

We can’t make the “butterflies” in our stomach fly away, but we can get them flying in formation.

Experience and research shows that there are three key strategies for managing anxiety in public speaking; the first two of which are preparation and focus. And here’s the strategy: the two work together. Proper preparation helps us shift our focus from our performance—our concerns about what people will observe and think about us—to our message—the heart and purpose of what we’re there to share with them. Shifting from a performance focus to a message focus means shifting from the thought that everyone’s there to watch us to the truth that we and our audience have something important to share in, to consider, to talk about. The better we prepare, the better we’re able to focus ourselves and our audience on the importance and the value of our message. We’ve all enjoyed speakers who, though they may not have been thoroughly polished presenters, had something to say that they clearly understood and believed in.

The third key to managing anxiety? Practice.

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