

Glossophobia . . .

If you're afraid to speak in front of an audience, you aren't alone.

In an online interview with WebMD, assistant professor of communication studies Paul L. Witt of Texas Christian University says that for most people public speaking is "even scarier than rattlesnakes. The idea of making a presentation is the number one fear reported by people in the United States."

But, hey, anybody who starts a social enterprise or winds up leading one has to give speeches. It's just part of the package. And here's even worse news: Witt and his research team found that anxiety strikes almost every time we present our ideas in front of other people. It doesn't have to be a formal speech. "Any time people make verbal remarks that need to be clear and persuasive," he said, "we find widespread reports of stage fright and nervousness." It's called *glossophobia*, from the Greek *glōssa*, meaning tongue, and *phobos*, meaning fear or dread.

When I was in high school, I never suspected I'd become a public speaker. But, for some reason, I decided to take an elective course during the second half of my senior year. We called it "Speech" in those days . . . and it helped me begin coping with some of the natural fears I probably have in common with 99% of the people reading this essay.

I'll be back with some suggestions in a few moments, but first I'd like to lighten the mood a bit and share one of my favorite stories about how to deal with a bored audience. I've taken it directly from the Federal News Service transcript of a speech given by the well-known broadcaster Larry King (*inset photo*) at the National Press Club December 15, 1993. He's talking about an invitation he received to speak at a major convention when he was just starting his career as a local radio host in Miami . . .

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True story. Dick Gershstein called me up one day He was district attorney for years in Miami

He said to me, "Larry, I've got a big problem."

I said, "What?"

He said, "There's two conventions going on simultaneously in Miami -- two: the National District Attorney Association and the International Chiefs of Police. Both conventions, same time. They're both supposed to wind up Sunday afternoon. They've decided since they're both here at the same time they're going to have a dinner Sunday night combining the two conventions at the Fountainbleu."

And I said, "Well, what's your problem?"

He said, "Well, we had to cancel our 3 p.m. closing meeting and switch our speaker to that. I'm the chairman of the dinner and the speaker is Frank Sullivan. He's chairman of the Florida Crime Commission and he's the world's most boring speaker. I can't change him, I can't cancel him. Now I've got all these chiefs of police, I've got all these district attorneys, and I've the world's most boring speaker."

I said, "Well, how can I help you?"

He said, "Would you follow him? I don't want both conventions to end on a low note, and I know this guy's going to put them to sleep. So you follow him and give them a big -- you know."

I said, "But nobody knows me. I'm just a guy, I'm just doing a local radio show. I just started on television. Nobody in the audience knows me."

He said, "I'll give you a big buildup. I'll give you a big buildup."

So I go to this dinner. It may have been the first time I ever wore a tuxedo. I'm sitting on the dais. I'm staring out at this audience, like 2,000 people -- district attorneys, chiefs of police, some of them in uniform. I'm really nervous. Frank Sullivan gets up to speak -- chairman of the Florida Crime Commission -- the world's most boring speaker. (Laughter.) He had graphs. (Laughter.) He had charts. And he spoke in a monotone. The first person to go to sleep was his wife. (Laughter.) She went into the baked Alaska. Boom. He's talking against crime, right? He speaks for a half hour, they give him a little tepid applause, and you could tell they're ready to get out of there. They were bored. Everyone was bored. They're all standing up.

Now here comes my introduction. Gershstein runs to the microphone and says, "Before you leave, my good friend Larry King." (Laughter.)

So I stand up. I'm faced with this enormous dilemma. Nobody knows me. They just heard the most boring speaker. They're all anxious to go home.

These are heavy hitters. It's the end of a big convention. I run to the microphone, and here's all I said: "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm in broadcasting, and in broadcasting we have a fairness doctrine, an equal time code. It's something I believe in from the bottom of my heart. We have just heard Frank Sullivan speak against crime. In accordance with fairness and equal time, I am here to speak on behalf of crime." (Laughter.)

It was unbelievable. You could have heard a pin drop. (Laughter.) They sat down. I had their immediate attention. Now I've got to think of something to say. So I said, "How many people in this room would like to live in Butte, Montana?" Not one hand went up. I said, "Butte, Montana, has the lowest crime rate per capita in the Western world. There were no crimes in Butte, Montana, last year. Nobody wants to go there." (Laughter.)

"What are the top five tourist cities in America? New York, Chicago, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, Miami. Crime is a tourist attraction." (Laughter.) "People go where crime is." (Laughter.) Sullivan's wife wakes up. (Laughter.)

Then I said, "And another thing." This was the crowner. I said, "Another thing. If we listened to Mr. Sullivan, if we follow his graphs and charts, if we do everything he said, we will wipe out crime in America. And what's the result? Everyone in this room is out of work." (Laughter.)

The police chief of Louisville jumped up and said, "What can we do to help?" (Laughter.)

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My old friend Chet Burger (*inset photo*) once gave me the best advice I've ever received about speaking to an audience: "They *want* you to succeed!"

In other words, the audience members are on your side. They want to be entertained and informed. They don't *want* you to be a bad speaker. They are *not* the enemy. And, because there are so many boring speakers out there (like Frank Sullivan!), there are some relatively simple ways to get the audience on your side and keep them there.

Chet began as a page boy with CBS News in 1941, worked his way up to National Manager of CBS Television News in 1955, and later became one of the founders of the modern public relations industry. He passed away in 2011 at the age of 90. I met him during my corporate years in the early '80s, when I started appearing in public more and more often. By then he'd been a public speaker himself for more than 30 years.

One of his mantras about speech-making was "have fun!" (I can hear many of you muttering, "Yeah, right . . .").

But he also emphasized something that became a touchstone for the rest of my public speaking career: "Be yourself!" he urged me. "Let the audience see the real you, let them make that connection."

Ever since, I've tried to reveal myself to my audiences and create partnerships with them, and I'd like to share with you a few of the ways I've attempted to do so:

- I make it a habit to take a few minutes before every speech to wander around the room, meet some of the attendees, chat with them a bit. If my audience is relatively small, about 50 or fewer, I try to shake hands with each person, ask where they're from, tell them I'm happy they've come, and, if they say something nice about me (such as, "I've been reading your stuff for a long time and I've really been looking forward to hearing you speak"), I'll often say something self-deprecating (such as, "Oh, boy, the pressure's on now"). The whole process creates a friendly atmosphere before I even begin the speech -- and there's comfort finding a familiar face out there as my talk progresses.

If the audience is bigger, and I've spoken to groups as large as 2,000, I'll still introduce myself to 50 or 60 people sitting in different parts of the room so I'll always have "friendly" faces to focus on during my speech regardless of where I happen to look.

- I usually begin my talks by giving the audience members a deeper dive into my personal background -- I've found they like to see a *person* at the front of the room, not an "expert." The



individual introducing me has usually ticked off a list of my professional qualifications, but I still take a few moments to give the audience a sense of where I'm coming from, including a photo of me on a fishing trip in 1964 and a sardonic claim that I have a graduate degree that's proven invaluable for my career in social enterprise (an M.A. in comparative literature, with an emphasis on ancient and modern drama).

- Many speakers are leery of showing the audience their vulnerability, but I've never had much choice in the matter. Some of the personal stories I tell, such as my life-altering visit to Dachau at the age of 22 in 1967, frequently leave me shaken and fighting back tears. But my audiences always stay with me and it brings us closer together.
- I almost never speak from a podium. There's something powerful about closing the distance between the audience and myself. I use a cordless, clip-on microphone and meander around the front of the room. During longer presentations I'll even walk into the audience.
- Because I'm not behind the podium, body language becomes an important part of my arsenal. It's not planned -- I just let my natural instincts flow. I'll fling my arms around, point, throw back my head, lean forward, hunch down, turn my back, roll my eyes. Over the years, I've come to realize I'm doing more than making a speech -- I'm actually giving a performance.



Of course, there's always a danger of moving around the room too often or using too much body language, both of which make it hard for people to focus, and I have to guard against those mistakes by constantly monitoring audience reactions.



The use of body language as a way of connecting with an audience became especially clear to me while I was speaking to groups of Chinese government officials at Oxford in 2006: We were using sequential translation, so I would talk for two or three sentences and then wait while the translator did her work. I realized halfway through the first day I was using even more exaggerated body language than usual and wondered why -- finally realizing what I'd been doing unconsciously was giving the audience members a series of visual hooks to hold onto while the translator was talking.

- I try never to use notes when I'm giving a speech -- and I never use a script (lord, the hours I've wasted in audiences while speakers read their speeches!). Sometimes needing to have notes is unavoidable, though, such as the day I arrived at a venue to discover I'd been given the wrong information about the audience and the speech I'd prepared, with slides, was useless -- I spent about 15 minutes outlining a new speech on a single sheet of paper, ash-canned the slides, and used the outline to keep me on track. I've also had some embarrassing experiences with my notes falling off the podium or fluttering out of my hands to the floor, so I try to minimize the occasions when that could happen.
- Pacing and timbre are skills I've had to work on a lot over the years. Using pauses, speaking more quickly or slowly, and raising or lowering my voice are all ways to stay on the same page

with the audience. I never cease experimenting. For example, I usually deliver my speeches in an upbeat, rapid, resonant voice, but I also recall an afternoon when I spoke to more than 200 people in an after-lunch venue and delivered the entire speech in a quiet voice without much physical movement (and, on this occasion, from behind a podium). It was almost as if I'd bewitched the audience, because everybody stayed riveted and silent throughout except for those moments when they reacted viscerally to something I was saying. It felt as if I were speaking in a church on a somber occasion -- and it was one of the most effective speeches I've ever given.

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Public speaking doesn't come easily. I cringe when I recall some of my early presentations. And none of the suggestions I've offered will give you a guaranteed way to overcome glossophobia. Every speaker is different. Every speech you give is different. Every audience is different.

So of course you're nervous! Who isn't? But don't waste that adrenaline: Use it! Face your fears. Challenge yourself.

And remember: The audience is NOT the enemy . . .