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The Vital Importance of the Elevator Speech

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The first issue most of our students face when walking into a Public Speaking course is fear. One student put it perfectly: “I was in a seminar course and the professor said, ‘Why don’t we just stand up by our chairs and tell each other something about our lives and what we have been doing at Bridgewater and beyond.’ Then she looked at me and said, ‘Excuse me, you’re on. Tell us something about yourself.’ All of a sudden I felt my heart starting to race, my legs beginning to feel like Jell-o, and my stomach getting tied up in knots. I noticed I was not breathing correctly and was beginning to feel light-headed. I was panic-stricken and left the class.” I told the student that my “7 Ps of Speech Anxiety Reduction” would help him; seven positive adjustments that help students gain control over their anxiety reactions by focusing on their “psychological preparation” before their actual “physical preparation” for the speech.

That student was not alone. Many of our students are poorly equipped to handle the stress and challenge of public speaking, and unprepared when asked the most fundamental job interview question: “Can you tell me about yourself?” That question is an invitation for the “Elevator Speech.” The “Elevator Speech” is a short, firm statement that declares who we are, and what we are all about. We might call it our raison d’être statement. Who are you and what are you all about? is perhaps the toughest question any of us could be asked. It is a question we are asked almost every day, both professionally and socially, sometimes overtly, but often in subtle ways.

Where does the name “Elevator Speech” come from? It comes from a hypothetical situation. You enter an elevator and a prominent person in your field enters and says hello. You are going from the first floor to the 100th floor and you are dying to share your background with this person. You have only a couple of minutes and the person says: “Tell me a little about yourself.” What do you say? Do you have a “core” message prepared? Do you know it perfectly? You should, I tell my students. It is your principal marketing tool, your introduction speech, and it should make others want to learn more about you. As a client of mine, a prominent businesswoman from Boston, said to me: “It must be perfect; make sure your students can deliver that Elevator Speech.”

The Vital Importance of the Elevator Speech

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I have worked with thousands of students and clients on their speech communication and public-speaking challenges over 30 years. It is something that I never imagined for myself. I am a former laliophobic and stutterer, and someone who suffered with severe reticence. Walking into a classroom and teaching Public Speaking was the last thing that I envisioned for myself. I first began to address my fears in graduate school, when my Speech Pedagogy professor, Dr Ken Brown, assigned me the topic of speech anxiety reduction. “Mr Burns,” he said, “you need to help yourself, but you also need to help your future students.” I have vigorously pursued that subject ever since.
Speech and flawlessly. I have hired students right out of universities who have nailed that speech.

The basic philosophy of the Elevator Speech is very simple: if you can speak well about who you are, what you do and what you know, then others will come to you, trust you, want to interact with you, perhaps hire you, and even “share” you with others. The Elevator Speech forces us to consider the “3 Vs of Message Impact”: first, the Visual—what others see coming from us when we speak, our nonverbal agenda; second, the Vocal—what others hear coming from us, all the sounds we produce or fail to produce, including tone, amplitude, force, and inflection; and finally, the Verbal—the words we use to clothe our messages in meaning, to connect to our audience, and to resonate with others.

I tell my students that an effective Elevator Speech will do three things. First, it will help them define themselves for others, today and for the future. In addition, the Elevator Speech helps them become advocates for their major fields of study, as well as for themselves. They are not only defining their interests, but explaining, elaborating, persuading and promoting. Finally, the Elevator Speech teaches our students how to quickly pitch themselves and their knowledge, expertise and experience. They become their own best sales persons and apply persuasive strategies. They makes themselves relevant to future employers.

Once set to memory, the Elevator Speech puts students at ease. They can talk about themselves freely and often quite spontaneously. When students have a ready answer to the invitation to “Tell me about yourself,” their speech anxiety decreases, their confidence increases, and future doors begin to open.

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The 7 Ps of Speech Anxiety Reduction by Robert E. Burns

“Fears are learned, and if they be learned, they can be unlearned!” Karl Menninger (1893-1990)

1. Positive Perception: Start seeing public speaking and oral communication challenges as opportunities to “build a bridge” to others, as opportunities to connect.

2. Positive Thinking: There is power in thinking. We should monitor our thinking to determine if our thoughts are positive or negative. Negative thoughts are defeating and keep us from growing as speakers.

3. Positive Self-Talk: Use positive self-affirmations (i.e. “I am fully prepared and this audience needs me to share my insights, knowledge, research, and experience”).

4. Positive Visualization: Use the power of imagination to “daydream” positively about a presentation. Mentally rehearse. Make up a positive visualization script by writing down specifically how to deliver the message and what you see and feel.

5. Positive Breathing: Breathe from the belly instead of from the chest. Positive breathing allows control of stress reactions. Take two slow deep breaths before speaking and exhale slowly. Great singers—as well as woodwind and brass instruments players—breathe from their “tummies.”

6. Positive Preparation: Do a thorough audience analysis and prepare the topic meticulously, with a well-articulated thesis and good research. Good preparation decreases stress reactions. Know what you are going to say and anticipate questions from the audience.

7. Positive Behavior. Do not let your feelings dictate your behavior. Let your behavior dictate your feelings. Look upon a speech as a performance. Take the positive visualization script and act it out as you have positively visualized. As the famous American psychologist William James (1842-1910) put it, “to feel brave, act as if [you] were brave, use all of [your] will to that end, and a courage fit will very likely replace the fit of fear.”

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