

Developing “presence” when giving presentations

Personal presence depends on the practice of surprisingly simple yet fundamental skills. This physiology of confidence stems from the ability to manage a number of physical landmarks, including your centre of gravity, your peripheral vision, and your sense of personal space, all of which combine to give you the ideal state of “alive relaxation”.

The singer and the song

There are two aspects to any presentation. The "singer" and the "song". What you say and how you say it. Research suggests that people pay relatively less attention to "what" you say (as little as 7%) and more to how you say it (as much as 93%). This "93% factor" is composed largely of the presenter's visual impact - posture, movement, gesture etc.- and the presenter's voice - tone, pitch, flexibility and volume.

Even acknowledged experts in their fields lose their audiences attention through poor vocal and self-presentation. Poor self-presentation includes anything from a nervous and jarring delivery to a boring, monotone delivery. This is accompanied by a matching style of body language, which rapidly communicates the discomfort of the speaker to the group or audience.

Other speakers have an enviable ability to maintain a state of "alive relaxation" during their presentations. This is communicated to the participants through the way the speaker stands and moves; also through the flexibility and tone of the speaker's voice. This, in turn, increases the audience's attention levels and ensures that the presenter actually manages to get the message across.

The physiology of confidence

For many people the "93% factor" can seem to be frustratingly out of personal control. Developing this quality of alive relaxation during self-presentation is not as elusive a business as it may appear to be at first. The exercises that follow are similar to those that an actor would use to prepare voice and body for going on stage.

Your "elastic suit" and its effect on your voice and movement

From your sitting bones up to the top of your head, your skeleton is like a large cylinder or tube. This is the central core of your body and of your speaking instrument. Your skeleton is covered in sheets of muscle, which wrap around it in a series of interesting patterns - spirals, diagonals etc.- to make a perfectly tailored "elastic suit".

The "elastic" of your individual muscles has two qualities - it can either contract and shorten or it can release and lengthen. Together these two qualities, contraction and release, enable you to move around with ease and efficiency. BUT.. because of habit and the lifestyles that we lead nowadays, most of us are using far too much muscular contraction.

Medical authorities, alternative and mainstream, warn us about the dangerous effects of prolonged muscular tension. On a mechanical and postural level this misdirected muscular tension has a distorting effect, causing - to a greater or lesser degree - a tendency to shorten, narrow and twist natural skeletal alignment.

The "elastic suit", which was such a perfect and roomy fit when we were young children, becomes too short, too narrow and restrictive of our movement. This all has a correspondingly restrictive effect on the voice - inaudibility, shakiness, high pitch, harsh, grating tone, etc.

With a little time and understanding, the body, voice and stage experiments detailed in this article will help you to "re-tailor" your elastic suit into a more spacious, freer and altogether better fit. This will encourage a freer, more confident, competent and dynamic use of your voice and body, helping to give you that elusive "presence"

Liberating your body and your voice - in rehearsal!

Experiment 1) Vocalising from restriction

Think of a time when you were feeling a bit pressured and restricted. Remember this as fully as possible... what you were seeing around you, what you were hearing and also what you were feeling... Stay fully in this state for a while longer.

Now look around the room, does it look any less bright or any less friendly than before? Now walk around the room. Do you feel taller or shorter? Do you feel wider or narrower? What size does your "personal space" seem to be (indicate with your hands)? Is your walking lighter or heavier?

Vocalise an aahh sound. How easy or difficult was it to vocalise?

Experiment 2) Vocalising from ease

Move around the room and stretch to dissipate the effects of the last experiment.

Remember a time when you felt "on top of the world". Recall and relive this experience... what you were seeing, hearing and feeling.... stay fully in this state a while longer and allow yourself to take two or three easy, deep breaths with the emphasis on the out breath. Allow this feeling to spread through your entire body.....

Look around the room again. Is it any brighter or friendlier now? Walk around the room. Do you feel shorter or taller? Narrower or wider? How large is your "personal space" now? Is your walking heavier or lighter?

Vocalise an aahh sound. Notice how your voice feels and sounds different from the first experiment.

You have just taken the first step in freeing your body and liberating your voice!

Mind/muscle relationship

One of the principles that the preceding exercise demonstrates is that, as far as our muscles are concerned, the difference between thinking about an event and actually doing it is only one of degree. This fact can be used in your favour when preparing yourself for giving a presentation.

Developing confidence - keeping your centre of gravity

These exercises are best done with a partner initially - but if you cannot find a partner to work with immediately, do not let that deter you from experimenting with them. The experiments are done with your eyes open and your weight distributed easily between the feet.

Attention in your forehead

Stand beside your partner, facing in the same direction, almost shoulder to shoulder. Ask your partner to put their attention on their forehead. Assist them by very gently touching them in the centre of their forehead. Now press your partner in the middle of their chest with sufficient pressure to make them take a step backwards to regain balance. This pressure should build up smoothly, last about three seconds and go in a straight line - parallel to the floor - directly towards their backbone. This "test" on their front can then be followed up with another test between their shoulder blades going directly forwards.

Your partner will probably lose balance and have to take a step forwards or backwards to regain their balance.

Attention in your anatomical centre of gravity

Now ask your partner to put their attention in their anatomical centre of gravity - between the navel and the pubic bone. Tap them just below the navel to give them a sense of the territory. Test by pressing on the front of their chest for three seconds directly back towards their backbone. Pause for a moment and test them by pressing between their shoulder blades straight forwards towards their breastbone.

Most people will find that they are now much more stable and retain their balance more easily.

Follow this test by pressing on your partners shoulder in the direction of their opposite shoulder. Repeat from the other side.

Repeat the whole experiment to make sure that you were not simply taken by surprise during the first step. Now change roles with your partner.

Variations

a) Point to your partner's centre of gravity and say "keep centre of gravity" to them. Perform the basic tests by gently pressing on the front of the chest, between their shoulder blades and on each of their shoulders for about three seconds each - with a little gap between each test.

Your partner will probably be even more stable and confident this time

b) Point to your partner's forehead and say "lose centre of gravity". Perform the basic tests. Your partner is less likely to be confidently balanced. Discontinue testing as soon as you sense that your partner is losing co-ordination.

c) Always end up any experiment with your partner in a co-ordinated and confident state.

d) Without pointing this time simply use the words "keep centre of gravity" and then "lose centre of gravity" and test after each. As always, make sure that your partner finishes in a co-ordinated state. Swap roles with your partner.

Commentary

This series of experiments will give you a direct experience of the physiology of confidence. It finishes off by having you link a set of words - "keep centre of gravity"- with the experience of keeping your centre. Simply repeating these words internally will start to take you into a state of enhanced mind / body co-ordination whether in a presentation or any other situation.

Larger than life - "owning" your presentation space

Experienced presenters are able to extend their field of personal space to include the whole space in which they are presenting. Witness the fact that members of the public are surprised when they meet famous people face to face and find that they are not as tall or large as they expected them to be. These people have the ability to switch on or off this "larger than life" quality at will....

Experiment

Stand in the middle of a room in which you feel comfortable. Remember your centre of gravity. Feel your feet on the floor. Extend your hands out to your sides and open up your field of vision. Imagine that your arms and hands are extending to the point where you can easily touch the walls of the room in any direction. Say to yourself "I fully occupy this room. This is my room".

Establishing peripheral vision

Stand at one end of a room. Raise your hands up at arms length in front of your face and point your index fingers up to the ceiling. Continue looking straight ahead and move your fingers out to your sides. Notice at what point your fingers disappear from the edges of your vision. Move your fingers in and out of the edges of your vision a few times. Bring your hands back down to your sides. Continue to notice not only the width of your visual field but also its height and depth.

Expand your visual field prior to giving a presentation. Take in much more of your audience with one broad sweep of your eyes.

Orientating to your presentation room

To increase orientation, get to your presentation room early. Familiarise yourself with the dimensions of the room. Stand with your back to each wall in turn and notice what the room looks like from the different perspectives. Stand on the spot from which you will be speaking and scan the room from this viewpoint. Take a moment to recall a time of pleasant anticipation - what you see, hear and feel. Allow this sense of pleasant anticipation to remain with you as you look out to the back of the room and open up your field of peripheral vision. If possible do a few gentle vocalisations - some aahs... and some mmmss..

Gently cast your eyes to the furthest chair on your left and then to the furthest chair on your right and then the centre.

If you cannot get to the venue early you can visualise the above procedure with great success - many meeting rooms and venues bear similar characteristics to each other.

Treat every presentation you give as a learning opportunity. Your presence will grow from practising the physiology of alive relaxation, and feeling the confidence of being able to sing a well-rehearsed and appealing song!

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