

Public Speaking: Week One

Don't Define Yourself By What You Don't Do Well

Read, Reflect

Sometimes people are afraid of speaking in public because they think, “What will people think of me? Am I smart enough to talk about this? Are they judging me? What if I mess up and embarrass myself?”

In fact, 75 percent of people are so afraid of public speaking that they experience physical discomfort at the thought of it! But the good news is that public speaking—like music, art, or a sport—is a learned craft. Most people aren't born with natural speaking ability, but everyone can become a better and more confident speaker through practice.

While some people may have more talent in certain areas than others, it is detrimental to believe we are only capable of the things that come naturally to us. Mastering a foreign language or understanding math may be harder for one person than the next, but it does not mean that a person who struggles more or has to work harder is incapable of succeeding in these areas. There is a difference between a task that is difficult and a task that is impossible.

Dr. K. Anders Ericsson, one of the world's leading researchers in the field of expertise, asserted that exceptionally gifted people acquired their ability through deliberate, concentrated practice beyond their comfort zone. In their 1998 study entitled “Innate Talent: Reality or Myth?” researchers Michael J.A. Howe, Jane W. Davidson, and John A. Sloboda state that “high levels of accomplishment invariably require lengthy and intensive training, and even people who are not believed to have any special talent can reach, purely as a result of training, levels of achievement previously thought to be attainable by innately gifted individuals.” In other words, although a person may be naturally gifted in acting, singing, or speaking, the natural talent can only take them so far. The rest depends on “deliberate, concentrated practice.”

Sometimes I didn't know the answers to peoples' questions. Sometimes I embarrass myself. I have forgotten parts of my speeches, made mistakes, talked too fast, and missed qualifying for national competitions by one slot. What I lacked in perfection, however, I made up for in persistence. I kept trying . . . through competitions where I didn't medal and rounds where I didn't live up to my potential. By repeated efforts, I learned the truth of Dr. Ericsson's theory: that effort ultimately matters more than inborn talent. As writer Mary Ann Radmacher said, “Courage doesn't always roar.

Sometimes courage is the little voice at the end of the day that says ‘I’ll try again tomorrow.’”

Homework

Think about these questions and write your responses:

- 1.) How do you feel about the thought of public speaking? Are you scared? Excited? Indifferent?
- 2.) Studies have shown that peoples’ number one fear is public speaking—which means that most people are even more afraid of speaking in public than of dying! Why do you think public speaking is so scary to people?
- 3.) Do you think there’s any way to overcome that fear? If so, how? If not, why not?