

Managing Stage Fright through Effective Presentation Design

In this economy when firms must count on higher performance from speakers in short-list interviews, technical professionals are finding it increasingly difficult to manage the stage fright that comes with this industry-required ritual. Unfortunately, stage fright in a short-list presentation, or any high-stakes presentation for that matter, is normal and expected, even for those of us who present regularly. Due to the importance of the outcome and the challenge of the assignment, it's perfectly logical to experience some level of fear. And for some, this fear can become debilitating.



Early in my career, I ascribed to the common misconception that stage fright is “stage energy” and can make a speaker livelier and more engaging. As I get older, more experienced, and perhaps more jaded, I think stage fright, no matter how we package it, is never a good thing. Stage fright results in a full compliment of really nasty psychological and physiological outcomes, none of which do great things for a speaker’s content or delivery. Particularly among technical professionals, managing stage fright is unfortunately not as simple as deep breathing (though that helps), positive self talk, or using planned movement.

Managing stage fright starts with how technical professionals prepare for presentations, not in terms of the time they devote to the process, but more broadly in the entire methodology many use to get ready. From a content standpoint, many speakers develop content by starting at the introduction and writing until they reach the conclusion. I’ve described this to many as the “Snoopy Effect.” As Peanuts’ fans will attest, Snoopy has been writing a novel for the past 70 years. Despite having conquered the typing challenge (on a manual typewriter no less!), Snoopy still can’t get past the introduction, “It was a dark and stormy night...” Despite the compelling nature of the introduction, that dog can’t write beyond his first three lines because simply, he doesn’t know what happens next.

Unlike Snoopy, presenters need to work from the inside of their presentation out vs. starting at the beginning and working to the end. In other words, if I have purpose for speaking (and every good speaker has one), what are the key content blocks that will support the purpose? By developing content blocks of information, and then organizing them in a logical manner, a speaker can create a roadmap for the presentation. In addition to the benefits of clearer organization, speakers can learn the stopping points along the “road” from introduction to conclusion. For many professionals, stage fright means fear of “forgetting what I’m going to say next.” As a result, having a clear roadmap can be priceless. For example: If my purpose is to clarify my team’s unique process for public involvement, I might employ a simple topical outline with three topics in chronological order.

1. We engage our entire team in the identification of stakeholders.
2. We will use social media to engage difficult to reach stakeholders and bring them in to the project "conversation."
3. We will document all stakeholder processes to provide a clear record of decisions to guide the project.

Note that this outline focuses on three critical areas of public involvement (bolded text) in a three-part outline that a speaker can further develop. More importantly from a stage fright management standpoint, the speaker knows s/he has three main points or stopping points in the presentation and is able to “chunk” the presentation into three smaller units, making each easier to remember and easier to present.

What if I now took this outline and created an organized “content matrix”? This might enable a nervous speaker to have an even clearer roadmap for moving through the content of the presentation.

For example, “unpacking” just the first of the three points from my outline:

WHAT we are going to do:	WHY it's important	HOW we are going to do it	PROOF that we can do it
Stakeholder identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Multiple and diverse stakeholder groups• Risk from missing one key stakeholder group (Use City of XX example)	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Engage our entire team-lots of community relationships2. Work with client organization to find common groups3. Use existing groups to identify others4. Reach out using a variety of venues	City of XX Master Planning Process Same project type with similar schedule Same project team XX Public meeting story

Now the presentation gets much easier to develop – and much easier to present. Using both the Y axis of the matrix (flow of the presentation from beginning to end) and the X axis (the flow of each sub point in the presentation), speakers can learn the pattern of the presentation and can be more comfortable as they move through the content. Plus, they can speak more conversationally because they aren't learning lines; they are learning logically sequenced blocks of content that can be delivered more extemporaneously.

Content design alone can't eliminate stage fright, but it's an important first step for most technically oriented speakers. By effectively mapping content, speakers gain control of their presentations and reduce the risk of forgetting important points or going off-track. By taking the fear of forgetting off the table, these speakers are better able to focus on a more engaging delivery during the actual presentation. Next week I'll write about managing stage fright through more effective rehearsal and delivery. However, for me and my teams, managing stage fright starts well before the first rehearsal with content that makes logical sense and is easy to follow.