

**THE TRUTH
ABOUT**

CONFIDENT PRESENTING

“Focus on
what can go
right and win
them over....”

James O'Rourke

Author of the worldwide best-selling textbook *Management Communication*, 3e

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Harvard Business School professor John Kotter studied a number of successful general managers over a five-year period and found that they spend most of their time with other people, including subordinates, their bosses, and numerous people from outside the organization. His study found that the average manager spends just 25 percent of his time working alone. Most of that time with others, Kotter found, was spent talking and listening—and a sizable fraction was spent presenting ideas and actions to others.

Similarly, management consultant Dierdre Borden found that successful managers spend about 75 percent of their time in verbal interaction with others: on the telephone, face-to-face, in meetings, and in presentations to large and small groups. The fact is, most information in contemporary business and social settings is passed orally, and our most important ideas are frequently formalized in presentations to clients, customers, shareholders, superiors, and key decision makers.

You can't avoid it. At some point soon in your career, you're going to be asked to give a presentation. The problem is that most people are genuinely apprehensive about doing that. We can compose a memo, letter, report, or e-mail in the quiet and comfort of our home or office, but standing in front of a group to offer our thoughts—or to motivate them to action—is simply frightening to many people.

Like it or not, during a presentation you're being evaluated by everyone in the audience. You're being sized up, critiqued, and assessed. For those 15 or 20 minutes, your value to the organization, your career...your future are on the line. No wonder people get nervous.

I've been teaching public speaking to business school students, government and military officials, and professionals in all lines of work for more than 35 years, and I've learned one simple truth about public speaking: It's not easy, but it's certainly doable. I've helped people overcome fears, anxieties, and apprehensions of all sorts and watched them go on to wow an audience with their presentation skills. If they can do it, so can you.

This book, simple and compact as it is, can do three things for you. First, it can help you to diagnose your current speaking abilities.

It can help you size up your skill levels and get some sense of whether you're "ready for prime time." Second, it shows you the standards of the North American marketplace. Point-by-point, you find the expectations of the business and professional world. Finally, this book gives you the toolkit you need to prepare, improve, and present. It's all here, neatly tucked into 51 Truths.


The most important truth to be learned, however, is this: Great presenters weren't born that way. They became great by focusing on their message, the needs of the audience, the pattern of organization, and the details of presenting. Persistence, dedication, and a little practice can go a long way toward making you a top-notch public speaker. The details are straight ahead.



TRUTH

1

Public speaking is not easy,
but it's certainly doable

 If you've ever had to make a presentation, you know the anxiety that comes with speaking in public. Even experienced speakers can feel flustered, sweaty, anxious, and apprehensive. That's a perfectly natural reaction to a seemingly threatening situation. And when you know you're being evaluated, you feel even more threatened. Your perception of a threat causes you to release adrenal fluids, dilate your pupils, tense your muscles, and provokes a "fight or flight" response. You understand the consequences of not doing well, of failing to impress an audience, or not coming through for a client when it really matters. You know all too well what can go wrong.

Good public speakers tend to focus on what can go right. They concentrate on the positive aspects of their message and how it can benefit their audience. Once they detect a positive response from their listeners, that perception serves to reinforce a sense of self-confidence, reassurance, and belief that they can do this.

The fact is, public speaking is a *learned* skill. It's not something you're born with or that comes naturally. You're certainly born with the propensity to speak and gesture, but given the short range of the human voice, those skills are clearly intended for interpersonal or small-group settings. Speaking to a larger audience is a skill that must be learned, rehearsed, and reinforced through repeated opportunities.

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Keep this in mind: Very few small children are great public speakers. So how do young managers (and others) get to be so good at presenting complex information to an audience that has little interest or motivation in learning? More to the point, how do they get the audience to act on the message being shared? The answer, in part, lies in the response to the classic New York pedestrian's question, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?" The response? "Practice, practice, practice."

People with very little natural ability have become exceptional public speakers by the time they reach their twenties and thirties. Great orators, politicians, and business leaders develop professional speaking skills by analyzing both their audience and their purpose for speaking. They prepare meticulously and seek out opportunities to present; then they learn what is effective from the audiences' feedback.

Every speaker who is honest with you will admit to being anxious or nervous before a presentation. Entertainers and comedians like the late Johnny Carson and David Letterman have talked at length about the anxiety that accompanies a walk onto the stage to perform. There is a subtle difference between them and most speakers-in-training. Experienced presenters use that sense of apprehension to their advantage: They review their notes, they think about what the audience expects of them, they rehearse their opening lines, and they internalize the essence of their message. They are, in a word, prepared.

Great speakers may seem to perform with an ease that makes it all look effortless, but the most honest of them will tell you that it didn't come easily. It requires dedication, discipline, and a commitment to improve. You can do the same. The moment to begin is now. 