

## **Ready to Rock the Podium:**

### **What questions to ask when you're in charge of delivering answers**

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Me - Speak?? That's the usual response when we are asked to say a few words. We become self-conscious, concerned that somehow we won't be able to translate all that we have to say on the subject into something meaningful for our audience. With so many fitness professionals stepping into the spotlight to give lectures, educate their team, or even appear on television, how can we put our best foot forward?

Fortunately the answer is within reach.

### **What it takes to get from page to stage**

The process of preparation to performance is driven by vision and intention. If either is lacking, the result we create will be lacking too. The process is simple - we just have to ask ourselves the right questions.

According to countless audience members I have asked over the years, people associate a great presentation with the audience's *experience* being positive—did they connect with the subject and the speaker? Being a knowledgeable presenter with a lot of content does not guarantee that people will be *interested*. Great content needs to be packaged and delivered as a relevant and engaging experience that is appropriate for the audience. More about that in a moment. First, let's start with the often underutilized and overlooked "equipment" we presenters have to work with --- ourselves!

### **Starting with Art instead of Science**

I came to fitness by way of the performing arts; spending many years in acting studios and on stages in front of audiences of all sizes. Through my training and experience (including many **very** embarrassing moments!), I learned that my entire self is my Instrument (from everything going on in my head and heart to every part of my body—including breath and voice). My ability to express and the nature of that expression are the result of utilizing my Instrument proficiently; the same way athletes master a sport. That proficiency was and is the most important and versatile tool I can use for success in any profession and for any endeavor. Bottom line: we each have an Instrument; we just have to learn how to play it and practice!

### **From Art to Nuts and Bolts**

When we look to solve the mystery of what it takes to give a great presentation, we must address 3 primary areas:

1. Preparation
2. Anxiety management
3. Relating to the audience

Sound familiar? Our ability to execute a plan for these 3 areas seem like they would hold the key. But is that where we start? Believe it or not, the solution to excellence lays in how we respond to even more fundamental, key questions which guide us in answering the ones we've just mentioned. And the secret is knowing what those key questions are.

### **The missing piece**

#### **3 Questions we need to ask...and answer first!**

1. What is my role as the Speaker?
2. What is the purpose and context of my presentation?
3. How do I stay out of my own way and do my best (instead of the more common, "How do I look good doing this?")?

By answering these questions, we automatically have a giant head start on all the other questions we need to answer and the preparation as a whole.

### Breaking it Down

Let's take these questions and how to answer them one at a time. By the end, we'll have a plan for the next speaking opportunity. Remember that part awhile back about vision and intention? Well now is the time to tap into them both!

### What is my role?

"The expert?" Yes, maybe. Probably. But more than anything, the moment we step into the spotlight, our role is to *guide the experience* of everyone in the room. We are the Host. The Guide. Our time in front of an audience is not about showing everyone how smart we are, or how much we deserve to be front and center teaching others. We are in a position of influence: we have prepared an experience *for them* and we are there to *lead* them through it.

### What's my mission?

That is actually *good news* because it means that our speaking is not really about us; it is about our audience. We are there to serve through leadership. This role and mission, give us many more important (and interesting) things to focus on than, "Do I look stupid?" If our unconscious intention is to justify our being the speaker or to lower the expectations of the room so people will be less critical, it will come through in what we do. As we go through the next two questions, we'll see more of how our newly defined role and mission work for us.

### What is the purpose and context of my presentation?

Are we speaking to educate? To motivate? Encourage new thought? Persuade action to change behavior patterns or lifestyle choices? Our role and mission go to work for us, putting the audience first. It's easy to forget that public speaking is still a **two-way communication** because the audience may not talk much. But they are still a vital part of the conversation; our presentation is not just about what we are bringing to them. Talking *at* the audience leaves them out. It is like dancing without a partner. The audience must participate and connecting with them is essential. Without our audience we are sharing our message to four walls!

### How do I stay out of my own way and do my best (aka "How do I look like a seasoned pro")?

One crucial element is the willingness to risk looking silly or ineffective. That's right; in order to shine, we need to let go of the intention to look good. When we take the focus off ourselves, there's room for the intention to be centered on the type of exchange we want to have with our audience and everything we think and do can move toward that outcome.

Next, we want to discover personal areas of resistance that come up when facing the opportunity to speak. Do we sabotage our preparation by not planning ahead? Fill ourselves with a negative self-talk? Obsess that we do not know enough or are not as good a speaker as someone else? What are the perceptions, beliefs and habits that are get in our way? Ask these questions in the heat of the moment. They help us identify how our focus drifts away from our intention as we defined it just a few paragraphs ago: the optimal experience of the audience.

### Connection Keys

1. **Think about how** our presentation can best add to our audience's lives. If we know who we are talking to, what matters to them and what they need to make our message matter, we are light years ahead.
2. **Consider the Givens** such as the location, the size of the room and crowd, the time of day and placement in the audience's schedule.
3. **Make appropriate choices** about the type of content, the amount and the format most inviting to our prospective audience. Always ask, "What experience do I want to deliver?" Then tailor it given what you know about the event.
4. **Choose to include!** Treat them as a partner. Audience participation exercises elicit audience investment.

### Rocking without Knees Knocking

Introduce nerve management techniques right from start:

1. Recognize and address our barriers
2. Learn and use strategies for working through them
3. Chose to risk feeling foolish
4. Commit to the adventure in front of us and focus!

Have the upper hand on nerves, even if they return unexpectedly!

### Breaking Our Barriers

The more we know about our thoughts and behavior patterns, the more we can catch ourselves focusing our energies in self-defeating directions and *re-direct* to a more productive perspective and course of action. We may notice our behavior in midstream, or simply realize that we are becoming anxious. Generally, we get nervous because we do not feel prepared enough. Whether we feel that it is our material or ourselves that's unprepared, the belief that preparation is lacking unsettles us and sets up an obstacle to reaching our potential (and enjoying the experience!).

### Using the Breakdown to Build UP

Instead of starting with the PowerPoint design, go right to the heart of every presentation. That means knowing our role, the purpose and context of our presentation and taking all that into consideration when we are brainstorming, researching, creating, editing and practicing for our next speaking engagement.

For example:

**Role:** host/guide

**Mission:** increase comfort level and openness to perception changes so that by end of presentation, participants understand that healthy eating can be easy and affordable  
**Intention:** create friendly atmosphere where the audience feels welcome to ask questions and considers signing up for consultations and buying more organic produce

**Length of the event:** one hour

**Size of group:** 20-50 (walk-ins are welcome and attendance is voluntary)

**Group characteristics:** deconditioned senior citizens in otherwise moderately good health. Many have grandchildren. Most of what they have heard on this subject is from morning TV shows. They are used to lecture format with a Q & A at the end.

**Venue:** a small windowless room in a mid-sized town in Northeast, some access to organic food and public transportation

Knowing the above, what choices would you make about this presentation? Let's use the vital statistics above to create a very special outcome.

### Take it and run...for fun

Material preparation can be fun!

First, take all the content we are gathering and we organize the journey:

1. a beginning to get them on board
2. a body (the middle) full of information/learning experiences
3. a closing for them to put the information into context and take action

Use this as a blueprint for how the hour will unfold and map the transition of one section to the next. This process guides us on all our choices, from researching for information and resources to choosing a "look" for the event, which is really a theme. How much information will be comfortable for this audience to explore in one hour? What visual aids, wardrobe and seating arrangements suit the theme? Is this starting to sound like throwing a party? Good---because that's what we are doing! It can be any kind of party we choose. The sights, sounds, etc. are up to us and we choose for success!

As we progress, what we need to gather becomes clear—it could be statistics, a good story to illustrate a certain point, a slideshow designer, etc. We are led by our own vision! For our group of seniors, we can peak interest right at the opening by going around and polling the audience on

what they like to eat. Next, we can relay the bulk of our information, giving hypothetical examples about increasing their chances of staying off medications they are afraid they will someday need or anecdotes about snacks and grandchildren. Later we can make reviewing the highlights fun by using the information in a game that mimics one of the game show formats they recognize like, “To Tell the Truth” or “What’s My Line.”

### **What about me?**

As for preparing our Instrument, we need to give ourselves time to prepare, learn how to ground ourselves and warm-up our Instrument so that we can draw upon the expressive capabilities of our voice, breath and body language. We can plant reminders in our presentation to help cue us so we stay on subject and on time. And of course, we need to risk feeling foolish and commit to the adventure in front of us, whatever comes!

### **Our Plan**

Putting our best foot forward is a simple matter of answering the questions and following the steps to prepare self and content.

1. Learn about venue, subject, and self
2. Brainstorm
3. Gather info
4. Select audience inclusion components
5. Format and edit for structure, time and appropriateness
6. Practice!

Remember:

- Build “risk muscles” (improv classes are GREAT for this)
- Set the tone for success by envisioning who we are and what we are about to create
- Carry that vision out with a strong intention.
- Choose what empowers you and what will resonate with your audience
- Assume you will adjust as you go—both in the preparation and the performance
- Commit to and enjoy the ride: prepare your material and yourself with gusto.
- Focus on the mission and bring yourself back when you stray—it happens to everyone!

If you want to take your presenting to the next level, seek out a coach who both helps to take strategic risks and net improved results.

Whether we want to raise the consciousness of the local Chamber of Commerce, motivate our team to action or lead 5,000 convention attendees to new thought, if we remember our role, our audience, the purpose and context of the event and stay connected to our mission throughout the preparation and performance, we pave the way to excellence!

### **Getting Practice and Making Progress**

There are many ways to improve our skills and sharpen our instincts. The best include:

- Workshops
- Coaching
- Record and playback-audio or video
- Practical experience  
([www.toastmasters.com](http://www.toastmasters.com) is an excellent way to get regular practice )

Also ask trusted people who understand your intended audience for feedback.