

speaker's notes

You don't have to be perfect to be effective as a speaker



By monica l. wofford

We've all seen speakers who give the perfect presentation, complete with perfect gestures, perfect timing and perfect hair. And we think to ourselves, "I want to be like that person." In fact, we spend time and money working on ourselves or with presentation coaches who promise to teach the gestures and speaking skills that will turn us all into super-speakers.

But there is a problem with trying to be a super-speaker. Even if you seem to do everything perfectly, trying to lead the audience to believe you're the picture of perfection may backfire; people know perfection is unobtain-

how frustrating the situation is, laugh a little and then deal with it.

Presenters who maintain a sense of humor and control can learn to laugh instead of panic. There is actually an advantage to this kind of levity; People in the audience usually learn better when they are relaxed and laughing. They are also much more likely to listen to you when they believe you are one of them. And a brief chuckle may also relax you the speaker as well.

Be natural

You can only be you, and that adage is never more true than when you're

ment before you speak. Listen to a favorite song before a presentation. I know one speaker who cackles like a chicken onstage before anyone arrives so that he knows nothing more embarrassing could possibly happen during the upcoming event.

Get to know the audience

Take the time to meet audience members before the presentation. Go up to individuals, talk with them and shake hands. That touch alone will create a great connection. By meeting people, you will also increase your comfort level. The meet-and-greet period helps you become more of a real person to those who will watch you present.

Audiences don't need you to be perfect, they just need you to be real and honest. They want new knowledge, skills, perspectives and ways to achieve the dreams they have — and they want to hear these from someone they can relate to. A perfect super-speaker may be able to leap tall audiences in a single bound, but the *best* speakers do not want to leap over the heads of their audiences. They want to connect with their hearts and minds. **E**

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able. And most people would rather spend their time making connections with people who are not slick, smooth and perfect, but who are real, just like them.

So don't be alarmed if after a "perfect presentation" the audience fails to be as impressed as you are with yourself. I'm not saying you shouldn't try to do your best at the podium. But remember the saying "nobody's perfect." Your audience expects humanity and imperfections, not a flawless super-speaker. Keeping that in mind, here are my favorite "nobody's perfect" tips to follow while presenting.

Learn to laugh at yourself

No amount of preparation will eliminate the human propensity to goof up. You will still trip over the carpet. The microphone will at some time fall over. The projector may smoke, the computer may crash, but no matter

speaking in front of a group. Many presenters become tense and use gestures and a speaking style that they normally would not use in conversation. An audience can tell when you are trying to emulate someone else rather than just being you.

When you are in a one-on-one conversation, pay attention to your gestures and speaking patterns. This is the real you, and it's these nuances you should take to the podium. Use your own style of conversational speaking and movement, as opposed to someone else's. Talk to an audience as you would an individual, looking into their eyes and faces, not at their foreheads. When audience members can sense you are being you, they are more likely to respect you as the speaker and take your advice.

Sometimes a tense situation in front of a large audience forces you to be "unnatural." Some presenters have personal techniques that help them become more comfortable when facing difficult presentations. Know the environment, the room and equip-

Wanted: speaking techniques

We're always looking for submissions to Speaker's Notes. Send them to Julie Hill, Managing Editor, Presentations, 50 S. Ninth St., Minneapolis, MN 55402; fax 612.333.6526; jhill@presentations.com. (Writers guidelines are available upon request.) Please include a color photograph, preferably a head shot.