

Stage Presence

By Norman M. Goldfarb

Stage presence is the ability to command the attention of an audience. To command their attention, you must gain their trust. They have to believe, perhaps unconsciously, that you will inform or entertain them, and preferably both. With this trust in place, they will put their minds in your hands. Their distractions will melt away, leaving you with their complete attention. Once you have their trust and attention, any false note may cause them to question their decision to trust you.

Stage presence is a valuable attribute with audiences of all sizes, from auditoriums, to meeting rooms, to a single person across the table. Different audiences require different techniques, but the core elements are the same.

There are four main contributors to stage presence: authenticity, vocalization, animation and engagement.

Authenticity

Authenticity is the most important ingredient of stage presence. If the audience perceives that you are "acting" rather than "just being yourself," they will not trust you. This perception will cause them to think about what you are hiding and why, rather than about the content of your presentation. It is very hard to fool an audience into thinking you are someone you are not. Their doubt and confusion may be unconscious, but it will still be a serious problem.

It is a lot easier to be yourself than to pretend to be someone else. The good news is that, almost certainly, you are good enough. The question is thus: Who are you? Are you experienced, expert, friendly, confident, professional, passionate, enthusiastic, poised, energetic, serious, humorous, sincere? You can build a stage presence on any of these attributes. Choose one or more of them and then act the part of you. These attributes are the foundation of your stage presence. Over time, you can evolve into someone else (yourself but better), but probably not today.

Vocalization

Your manner of speaking helps communicate who you are and maintains your audience's interest. Major components of vocalization include:

- **Style.** A straightforward, conversational style conveys authenticity and helps your audience relate to you. A style that is too formal or too casual erects a barrier between you and your audience.
- **Fluency.** Long pauses, gaps, repeats, broken sentences, "uhms," etc., distract your audience, make it harder for them to understand what you are saying, and make them question your command of the material.
- **Clarity.** To communicate with an audience, express your ideas clearly. Do not make them decipher what you are trying to say. Speak in short, simple sentences that string together in a logical flow.
- **Volume.** Speak loudly enough for the audience to hear you. Modulate volume to accentuate important points and convey excitement.

- **Pace.** Most speakers talk too fast. Speak slowly enough for the audience to follow what you are saying, but not so slow as to put them to sleep. Modulate your pace to accentuate important points and convey excitement.
- **Tone.** Your tone should be positive and confident. It can also be serious, humorous, enthusiastic, etc. It should not communicate annoying characteristics such as arrogance, sarcasm, hostility or lack of respect for your audience. You can command the attention of an audience with a problematic tone, but you probably cannot achieve your objectives.
- **Resonance.** Resonance refers to clean sound waves uncluttered with dissonance. To hear dissonance, pretend you are a small, upset child complaining to your parent. To hear resonance, pretend you are a parent reassuring your small child. Opera singers' voices carry because of resonance. The principal techniques are to relax your vocal cords and use a lot of air by speaking "from your belly" (using your diaphragm). Resonant voices convey confidence; dissonant voices convey anxiety. Warm up to relax your voice before starting.

Animation

If you stand like a statue behind the lectern, your audience will treat you like a statue. They will take a quick look and then move on to something more interesting, such as daydreaming. By moving your head, hands and body, you convey energy, amplify your words, and maintain the interest of your audience.

To appear natural, your body language must be consistent with your words and – especially – your thoughts. Natural body language is hard to fake, but easy to learn with practice. It requires muscle memory: your muscles must know what to do without you consciously managing them. With well-trained muscles, you can concentrate on your words, and let your motions be spontaneous. Your audience will detect any non-spontaneous motions and question their trust in you.

You have five elements to work with:

- **Position.** It matters where you stand on the stage, especially your relationship to the lectern, microphone, screen (if you are using slides), and audience. If possible, do not hide behind the lectern where your audience cannot see you. What they cannot see, they cannot trust. Adjust the microphone to a comfortable height or, better yet, use a lavalier ("lav") microphone that attaches to your shirt or lapel. Stand as close to your audience as you can without falling off the stage. Stand as close to your slides as you can without blocking your audience's view of them. Do not make them wag their heads back and forth between you and your slides. Spend time on the stage before your presentation to become comfortable with the physical environment and the system for controlling the slides.
- **Posture.** Before you start moving, you need a solid platform. Your posture should be ready for action: balanced, alert and upright. If possible, stand rather than sit to free your entire body for action.
- **Facial expressions.** Your facial expressions will reflect your attitude, whether you like it or not. Your face should express confidence, a positive attitude, and openness to the audience. Your audience will detect anything discordant and question their trust in you. Practice may be required to amplify your expressions so they will be visible from the back of a large room.
- **Gestures.** Hand and arm motions are very powerful communicators. If your arms dangle limply from your shoulders, they convey lethargy and passivity. Move them about to convey energy and confidence. Modulate your gestures to

accentuate important points. Bigger rooms require bigger gestures. Practice may be required to amplify your gestures so they will be visible from the back of a large room. Prepare by stretching your neck, shoulders and arms.

- **Roaming.** If you have a lav microphone and a remote-control for your slides, by all means move around the stage, and even into the audience. It is a great way to communicate confidence, energy and openness to the audience. Be careful not to play favorites.

Engagement

All of the above methods automatically help engage your audience, with no extra effort required on your part. Here are six additional methods:

- **Acknowledgement and respect.** One of the first steps in engaging your audience is to recognize their presence. Thank them for their time and attention. Tell them what to expect from your talk and then gain their trust by delivering it. Communicate interest in the relationship through your words and actions. You accomplish your objectives by meeting their needs. You want their respect, and they want yours.
- **Affinity.** Your audience wants you to be just like them, except you know more about something than they do (for a short while). For example, presidential candidates that travel in limousines and private jets want their constituents to see them as regular folk: "We're all in this together."
- **Proximity.** It is difficult to engage an audience that is sitting in the back of a room – the physical distance makes them feel standoffish. If you cannot fill up the room, ask the support staff to block off the rows at the back. In any size room, move the lectern to the front of the stage or stand close to (or in) the audience without a lectern.
- **Attitude.** Communicate a positive, friendly attitude. Nobody wants your gloomy outlook on life to rub off on them. People like people who like them.
- **Eye contact.** Make eye contact with your audience. If you do not look them directly in the eye, you will appear shifty and untrustworthy. With a large audience, looking everyone directly in the eye is impractical. However, there is a simple technique: Look some of the people directly in the eye. People near those people will think you are looking directly at them. Move your eyes to someone new as often as practical. Like other forms of animation, practice this technique in advance until it is engraved in your muscle memory. You do not need to be in front of an audience to practice; any group of people will do, and they do not even need to know you are there.
- **Humor.** Humor is a great way to engage your audience. Some people are good at telling funny, pertinent jokes, but it is much easier to gently point out the humor in something or slip in an amusing comment. When you engage in gentle humor, you are sharing a common positive feeling with your audience. Wit, on the other hand, has an edge. Wit often involves negativity and criticism. Your audience may not want to be a party to your criticism, especially if they are the butt of your joke. Any criticism will make your audience wonder if they will be your next victim.

Anxiety

Anxiety is the mortal enemy of stage presence. Anxiety makes most of the above techniques look forced and manipulative, causing your audience to lose trust. Anxiety

creates a loss of mental balance. It is easily detected by symptoms such as stress in your voice and awkward movements. If you have ever skied, sailed a small boat, or jumped waves, you know the importance of balance. When your mind is balanced, you are "centered." Great athletes experience an advanced form of centering when they are "in the zone"; their minds and bodies are balanced, working in harmony. Their awareness of the environment expands, but does not distract them from the focus of their efforts.

Anxiety has four primary sources:

- **Trying to be someone else.** Discussed above.
- **Lack of confidence.** There is nothing like experience and practice to give yourself confidence. Whether or not you have experience, make sure you are comfortable with your material and the room. If you are willing to make the effort, most audiences are willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. Most members of your audience want you to succeed so they do not feel like fools for letting you waste their time. Trust your audience, and they will trust you.
- **Personal baggage.** Personal baggage includes distractions such as a rude waiter at lunch, arriving late, or a spot on your shirt; the opportunities are endless. Before taking the stage, put any personal baggage out of your mind.
- **Multitasking:** It is hard enough to deliver an effective presentation without distractions such as looking for somebody specific in the audience or making plans for the Q&A session. If something is that important, pause for a few moments while you take care of it; your audience will wait.
- **The best laid plans...** Public speaking can be an adventure: the previous speaker runs long, the projector light burns out, someone asks an awkward question, your pants fall down. Just laugh at the misfortunes of life and go on with the show. The audience will respect your perseverance and good nature. Any barrier between you and the audience will disappear.

These sources of anxiety all distract you from focusing on the job ahead. Fortunately, the more you focus on your presentation, the more your anxiety will diminish. Before taking the stage, find a calm, quiet place in your mind. Clear your head of distractions. Review how you are going to start your presentation. Quickly visualize the rest of your presentation in a positive way. Give yourself some encouragement, and then take the stage. At worst, it will all be over in an hour or so. At best, you will have cast a spell over your audience with your stage presence.

Resources

"Live Long and Prosper: 16 Tips for Successful Public Speaking," Norman M. Goldfarb, Journal of Clinical Research Best Practices, October 2005

"A Checklist for Professional PowerPoint Slides," Norman M. Goldfarb, Journal of Clinical Research Best Practices, December 2007

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