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PRESENTATIONS

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Public speaking is so stressful for so many people that it is routinely used as a stress manipulation in psychological studies. Tell undergrads they have 10 minutes to prepare a speech that will be evaluated by experts, and their levels of the stress hormone cortisol shoot through the roof.

Yet success in many roles requires speaking in public. In addition to presenting in my classes, I typically give a talk per week in front of groups. People ask me if speaking gets me nervous. It does not. And I give a lot of credit to my fascination with stand-up comedy. While I'm not a comedian

myself, I've been a fan of comedians and their process for a long time, and I think there are three lessons that anyone can learn from them about public speaking.

It's OK to Die

Why exactly is public speaking so nerve-wracking? One main reason: It's a social risk. If you give a bad talk (or trip on your way up to the stage), you worry that the stench of that talk will stick to you for the rest of your life. Your reputation will suffer, and that can have lasting consequences.

Death is a frequent metaphor for comedians. When they have a great set, they killed. When they have a terrible set, they died on stage. Every comedian I have ever met or read about has died. Often. And they have lived to tell the tale. And many have gone on to have successful careers.

You are much more concerned about the consequences of a bad talk than anyone else is. A lot of research suggests that we have an egocentric bias about the things we do. Other people are simply much less concerned about you (and notice a lot less about you) than you think they are. Your audience will forget most of your talk soon after you give it (whether it is good or bad).

Once you realize that the downside of speaking is really not so bad, it gets easier to give talks. Also, stress decreases your working memory capacity — the amount of memory you have available for critical thinking in the moment. When you're less stressed about speaking, you also think more clearly, which helps you to be more spontaneous and to answer questions more effectively.

Work It Out on the Road

Once you start giving public talks, you're likely to speak on the same topic several times. In this way, you're like a comedian working out a new bit. Comedians will come up with something and practice it, and then try it in front of an audience. In subsequent performances, they emphasize and embellish the parts that are working and lose the parts that aren't. Once they have performed a routine several times, they have a pretty good sense of where the reactions are going to be.

You can do the same. Take advantage of opportunities to give several talks on the same topic. Watch the audience closely. You can tell when they are paying attention and when they are mentally somewhere else. And try to get some feedback from the people who hear you to figure out what resonated.

Then take some notes — don't rely on your memory. Highlight the elements that people seem to like. Reorganize sections of the talk that sent the audience to their cell phones or daydreaming of the next coffee break. Your talks should get better over time not only because you are more practiced at giving them but also because you have edited them based on feedback.

Remember the Role of Three

In my book *Smart Thinking*, I talk about the observation that people remember roughly three things about any experience they have. This idea has a direct parallel in comedy. Jeff Loewenstein and Chip

Heath have written about what they call the repetition-break plot structure, which is common in jokes and stories. Essentially, you tell a story, then repeat it, and then on the third pass you change it in a memorable way. This is the structure of many jokes that start with "Three guys walk into a bar…"

This structure works well for two reasons. First, it's easy to remember three elements. Second, the comparison of the first element with the second sets up a schema that creates a set of expectations. When you break that expectation the third time through, you create something memorable, surprising, and (sometimes) humorous.

When preparing your talks, figure out the three things you want people to remember, and focus on them. Find ways to make comparisons among the elements you are presenting to help your audience generate expectations. Resist the temptation to add more content. Less is more.

And one bonus lesson here. Comedians often use *callbacks* to generate humor. In a callback, they refer to a joke they told previously in the set. Callbacks can be funny, but they also enhance memory.

Your brain wants to forget most of what it encounters. (After all, you engage with a lot of different things each day. You don't necessarily need to remember everything.) One way your brain decides what to remember is to judge whether you will need that information later. A good indication that you will need information in the future is that you've already had to remember it at least once after your first encounter with it. By calling back throughout the talk to a point you made earlier, you are giving your audience cues about the information they should remember later.

If you treat talks like stand-up comedy, you won't instantly be a stress-free presenter. But you're likely to dread it less and less as you realize that you got through another talk without the world ending. And hopefully, one day, you might even realize that you're more excited than worried about the prospect of getting up in front of a group.

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