

Wisconsin Park & Recreation Association

Career Center Tips: SQUASH Your Fear of Public Speaking



It is said that public speaking is the thing people fear the most, yet sooner or later most people will have to speak in front of a group at work. Whether training new employees, giving a presentation to management or even conducting an interview, being an effective speaker can help you get ahead at work, whether you are a recreation leader, park supervisor, aquatic specialist or therapeutic recreation specialist.

Consider this: At the end of a particular university course on public speaking, each student gives a speech and is evaluated by classmates. Some students do a lot of research for their speeches, while others focus less on the research and more on their delivery. Over the years the audiences have been consistent in their evaluations.

So, who do you think rates higher?

- A. A speaker with fabulous information and so-so delivery
- B. A speaker with fabulous delivery and so-so information

The answer is "B." Of course, the ideal situation is to have both fabulous information and fabulous delivery but, for many audiences, delivery is the most critical factor. Poor delivery can make the most interesting topic sound boring, while excellent delivery can make even a dull topic come alive.

Here are four traits of successful speakers, followed by a number of ways you can develop these traits.

Confidence:

Good speakers may sometimes feel nervous, but they try not to let it show. Speakers look and sound more confident when they make eye contact with the audience, move naturally, use audiovisual equipment effectively and speak fluidly (avoiding too many "uhs" and "ums").

Credibility:

This is an audience's perception of how believable a speaker is. To be credible, a speaker must be seen as someone who is knowledgeable about the topic. However, this does not mean someone who is a "know-it-all."

Enthusiasm:

Magnetic speakers are enthusiastic about their topic, and they share that fervor with their audience through variety and energy in their voice, gestures, and body movements. Other terms that can be applied to these speakers are "high energy" and "passionate."

Ease:

Natural speakers don't lecture, they are at ease. Even when speaking in front of an audience of hundreds, they speak as if they were having a conversation with a group of friends. Other terms that may be applied to these speakers are "real" or "down-to-earth."

Ways to Improve Your Skills

- As with any skill, one of the best ways to improve is by just doing it. With speaking, this means getting yourself in front of as many audiences as possible.
- When there are opportunities for informal speaking at work -- such as introducing a new employee, showing a resident a picnic shelter, providing an overview of your park and recreation agency to a local organization--volunteer for the job.
- If you're presenting a training program at work, make sure you ask audience members to give you feedback by filling out an evaluation form.
- When possible, consider taping yourself practicing or giving presentations.
- You can then see or hear for yourself the areas where you may need to improve.

There are a variety of seminars and classes that can help you improve your speaking skills. Check out continuing education programs offered by post-secondary institutions and consider courses offered by the private sector. Many years ago, I participated in a public speaking course offered by Dale Carnegie Training and found it to be invaluable. Or consider joining Toastmasters, a non-profit organization that helps people develop speaking skills. Toastmasters clubs typically meet once per week, and provide the opportunity to practice speaking. To find a local club visit www.toastmasters.org.

Don't forget: Practice—Practice—Practice!!