

The Triple Ps of mastering the fear of public speaking



Ghandi, the great leader of Indian independence, froze during his debut case as a young lawyer in Bombay, as he rose to cross-examine a witness for the first time.

"I stood up, but my heart sank into my boots. My head was reeling and I felt as though the whole court was doing likewise. I could think of no question to ask." he wrote¹.

Having handed on the case to a colleague, he hastened from the courtroom in humiliation.

When I first read this, I was surprised that such an eloquent leader, whose words had persuaded and mobilised millions of people, often suffered from stage fright, or as Ghandi called it *"the awful strain of public speaking"*.

It made me wonder, what happens to us - in our bodies and minds - when we become nervous? This seems to be it:

Once your brain receives messages that you are in danger, Adrenaline is pumped into your bloodstream. Noradrenaline activates the 'fight or flight' response in your brain, and Adrenaline does the same in your body. It increases heart rate, dilates your pupils, breaks down lipids into fat and suppresses other non-emergency processes like digestion...all to prepare and help you survive the perceived danger.



An angry bear produces fight/flight

'But why do I do that when it's just a

simple speech!" I hear you scream. Well, evolutionary biologists tell us that your brain's limbic system, the body's way of responding to very primitive threats, developed long before the cerebrum or neocortex. Although the threats have changed from our hunter/gatherer past, the limbic system is still very useful for many of today's threats.

While your conscious mind can clearly differentiate between an attack by a grizzly bear and giving a pitch, your Limbic System reacts in the same manner to both situations, since they are both interpreted as DANGER.

So how do we overcome this inherent animalistic condition? The answer is: Prepare, Prepare, Prepare or what I'd like to call **"The triple Ps"**.

P 1: Prepare your content

What is your presentation's main purpose? What do you know about your audience? What do they know about the topic? Are you aware of Aristotle's three appeals? What are your key messages? What about the use of rhetoric?

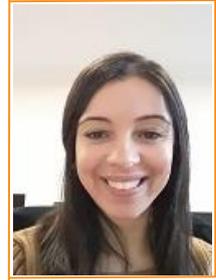
Mapping out and building your story is crucial to your presentation's success. Making sure that you are *content with your content* (Speak up #57) will make you feel competent and boost your self-confidence significantly. You get both by knowing that you have got a great story to tell. The questions I pose above will quickly get you there.

P 2: Prepare your delivery

Just like a sculptor carving a masterpiece, you need well-honed skills to deliver your story. Some of your most important communication tools are your vocal and visual delivery.

Imagine what happens when singing "Once in Royal David's City"; you emphasise the word "City" first time then "David's" the second time.

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Hasnaë Kerach

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts



The triple Ps ... continued

The emphasis and meaning of the sentence change; you probably altered pitch, pace or volume. Do consider using these tools when preparing your delivery. Doing this won't only keep your audience more engaged and focused, but it signals competence, confidence and control to your listeners and to your brain, thus decreasing your nervousness and stress.

In addition to your voice, make sure your visual expressions are congruent with your words. Don't start your story with "I'm pleased to be here" while you are frowning and your eyes are nervously twitching. Why? Because Faces don't lie!

What you can do, however, is SMILE! Research² has shown that genuine smiling decreases stress as it releases Endorphins, which are the body's natural pain relievers, along with Serotonin, which is associated with feeling good. Please note that the key word here is GENUINE. So please go ahead, and throw a big genuine smile at your audience, which will tell them that you are pleased to be there.

Learning how to use your visual and vocal tools will increase your confidence considerably.



Pleased to be here, genuinely

If you are nervous about your story or delivery, our scientific measurement of the content, and vocal/visual parts of your persuasiveness will help. Clients find this objectivity really helpful both as a baseline measurement and as a progress report.

P3: Prepare your mind and emotions

According to *Science Daily*, researchers have found that writing helps decrease anxiety and stress levels³. It also helps

students perform better in exams and presentations. Unloading your worries on a piece of paper helps you free up brainpower that is normally occupied by nervousness and anxiety before a key event.

Allocating just 15 minutes to express your emotions and thoughts in writing about an act of public speaking will help you to step into 'observer mode'. This will bring your unconscious fears, beliefs and thoughts under the scrutiny and spotlight of your reason and intellect.

A second tool is to shift your focus from those fears to your message, the purpose of your engagement, and the difference you wish to make. Your presentation is not just about you, it is about your message and those people who have taken the time to listen to you. Gandhi found a passion for his life's work that was so great it overrode all his fears, including the fear of public speaking.

Slow breathing (5-6 breaths/minute) is another coping mechanism that can help you when you are nervous. Slowing down your breath rate stimulates your body's Parasympathetic system, via the relaxation response. This uses the body's equally powerful and opposite Sympathetic system to counteract the emergency 'fight or flight' response.

Finally, it is worth noting that none of the Triple Ps is a quick fix on its own. However they are a powerful combination, and once mastered thoroughly they will unveil the persuasive communicator that you really are.

By Hasnaê Kerach.

1. *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* by Gandhi, Mohandas K. First English translation from the Gujarati, by Desai, Mahadev, in 1927.
2. Psychological Science, Kraft.T and Pressman.S, (Univ. of Kansas) August 2012
3. Source: Science Daily, 13th January 2011.

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