

FIRST TIME SPEAKER AT THE MIC

By Doug McCarthy

"I am very comfortable about being in front of students but I am very nervous about speaking in front of a room full of adults."

This is a common lament voiced by teachers. And teachers are not alone. In his 1977 publication *The Book of Lists*, David Wallenchinsky noted that 41 per cent of survey respondents feared speaking before a group, while only 19 per cent feared death. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld used this data to quip that most people would rather be in the coffin than delivering the eulogy.

The good news is that public speaking is a learned skill. While some people may have qualities that make them appear to be "natural born" speakers, the truth is that all accomplished presenters had to learn the craft. Experienced speakers will admit, while very excited about a speaking opportunity, they can at times still feel anxious.

Speaking at the AGM

Talk about feeling anxious - being a first time speaker at the Annual General Meeting takes courage for most people. Not only do you have an audience of almost 800, your image is projected on large screens at the front of the room. At AGM 2006 an experienced delegate acknowledged how difficult it must be for most first time speakers and suggested that they should be encouraged by applause, a tradition that continues today.

In 2007 the Toronto Elementary Unit took it one step further by announcing the Oratorical Premiere Award, which they have recently named after one of their great unit debaters, Anthony Bellissimo. The goal is to encourage, recognize and honour first time speakers at the AGM. The award is bestowed annually to the delegate who, when speaking for the first time, "displays oratorical eloquence above all other first time speakers." The ultimate goal, of course, is to encourage involvement in the democratic process by creating an



Anthony Bellissimo (L) and Robert D'Alessandro (R), with the Oratorical Premiere Award at OECTA AGM 2007.

atmosphere that encourages all points of view to be expressed and all delegates to be involved.

Two Common Errors Made by New Speakers at the AGM

Error 1 - Thinking of what they will say rather than preparing

This is an oversight commonly witnessed at weddings, when the person who is to speak has only been ruminating about what to say. These unprepared speeches usually go too long, repeat points, and drift off topic. Debate is only as good as the reflection and thought that is given to it.

Solution:

Consider using P.R.E.S. to organize your thoughts. P – Point: make it clear which side of the debate you are on at the very beginning. "I speak in favour of the motion to..."

R – Reason: give the reasons supporting your point. Your second strongest reason should be first and your strongest reason should be last, for greatest impact. E – Example: give either facts or examples to support your reasons. Facts tell...stories sell.

S – Summary: again, make it clear how you stand on the issue and encourage others to support your point of view with their vote.

Error 2 - Giving more thought to content than to delivery

To have impact on an audience, a speaker needs to consider both pillars - content and delivery. Regardless of the merits of our debate, if the message doesn't get delivered then there is no message.

Solution:

Speak slowly and project your voice. Less information delivered with conviction can have more sway than a lot of information delivered quickly. According to Jose Benki, a speech scientist from the University of Michigan, speakers who use frequent, short pauses are more persuasive than speakers who are perfectly fluent. The reason is that pausing four or five times per minute sounds most natural to people. If you barrel through those pauses, you sound too scripted and your audience doesn't have time to react.

Remember, if you feel anxious you are not alone. To paraphrase Mark Twain, "There are only two types of speakers in the world: those who feel nervous, and liars."

Doug McCarthy is a retired OECTA member and principal, and currently a member of OECTA's Speakers' Bureau.