

## Chapter 1:

*“The key is sincerity, and once you learn to fake that, you’ve got it made!”  
... And Other Really Bad Advice*

Why are there so many people out there telling so many other people the wrong things about public speaking? There are many giving advice, but no one addresses the main issue: how we communicate one-on-one and how we communicate with a group of people, what’s the same and what’s different, and how we direct focus to our message.

In life, so much of our day-to-day communication is overwhelmed with facades, and most of what we are communicating relates to image. Usually, these images we project are quite simple: strength, anger, concern, happiness, love, kindness, confidence, and so on.

And herein lies the problem with what most people these days are passing off as public speaking training. Most teachers and trainers try to teach us how to “show” the emotions mentioned above. Hence, they may tell the student to smile when they give a speech because studies show that an audience is more receptive to a friendly face. Or they may tell the student to look people in the eye, because that will communicate honesty or trust. The problem, however, is that in telling people to be happy, or to be confident or to be concerned, we have effectively told them to “act” or “pretend” when they are speaking. The result is dishonest, phony communication.

When we attempt to teach people how to project a certain image, we set ourselves up for dishonest communication. Haven't we all seen the salesperson whom we just don't trust, or have been aroused by a public speaker, but then we become suspicious when he tries to sell us his latest book at the end of the presentation? So how do we teach the art of effective communication? How do we honestly—and with integrity—communicate passion, concern, authority, credibility, or righteous indignation? First, let's define what we mean by "effective communication."

Why do we communicate in the first place? Usually, it is to get a specific result from another person or group. Actors call it "playing an intention" or "playing an objective." In other words, I want you to do something in response to what I am saying. It is my intention to make you do something. For instance, when we enter a fast-food restaurant and order a sandwich, we are asking the person behind the counter for a specific sandwich. We attempt to use the most effective words. We want the sandwich, and we are "playing that objective" to cause the other person to give us a sandwich. We try, though not always successfully, to communicate effectively to reach that goal. Have you ever tried to special order something in a restaurant and you find yourself tongue-tied, trying to explain to the server exactly what it is you want?

Whether ordering a sandwich or trying to persuade a judge or jury that your cause is the right one, the first step is still the same: to define your intention (what you want the listener to actively do in response to your communication). Making your motives conscious and intentional is the first step in the process.

Next, you want to find out what the listener's needs are regarding what you want. Are they compatible? Are they able to hear, understand, and believe in your message the way you are communicating it?

Finally, and most importantly, focus your attention and actions on helping the listeners obtain what they need to make the decisions you need them to make. The mindset of your communication is the most important element.

Let's say, for example, that you are defending ACME Tool Company in a product liability suit. You want to communicate your theory of the case, which is that the tool was being used irresponsibly and that there is nothing wrong with the product. You have accomplished the first step by knowing what exactly it is that *you want* to communicate.

Now, here is where the plot thickens. Most attorneys never move beyond that first step ("What do I want to say?"). But the next step has little to do with what you want. The next step is all about the trier of fact. What do members of a jury need to help them understand and see the case clearly? Do they need to know about the painstaking research and design that went into this product? Probably. Do they need to know what the plaintiff was doing the night before the accident? Quite possibly. Do they need five different experts to tell them the same thing: that most accidents are due to human error? Maybe not. What specific details do the jurors need to know in order to understand your point of view?

And finally, you need to focus your attention and intention on helping them see your picture and come to the same conclusions that you did. Your focus is on specifically communicating the information they need to help them make a decision, and not on helping them see a simple image of you, such as “confident,” “authoritative,” “angry that your client is being accused,” and so on.

**More bad advice ... and by the way, all of these stories are true!**

A woman in the back raised her hand. The public speaking “expert” acknowledged her, “Yes, you have a question?” The woman stood (she was about five feet tall), and said, “I feel so self-conscious when I stand up in front of a group. I never know what to do with my hands!” She laughed nervously, and sat back down as quickly as possible. The “expert” said, “Oh, that’s not a problem. Just put them on the sides of the lectern.”

This is a true story. And that poor woman had paid good money for this?

Gestures and body language are an important part of your arsenal when it comes to persuasion. Why eliminate your ability to use them—and thus reduce your effectiveness—just because you feel uncomfortable and don’t know what to do with your hands? Speaking is a physical skill and can be learned. There are specific exercises and advice regarding body language in Chapter 4.

## And still more

John was an excellent attorney. He was a good speaker, too. He structured an exciting argument. He modulated his tone of voice, inflection, and volume to illustrate important points and keep the jurors engaged. His one big problem was that he had a hard time “connecting” with the jurors. He could put on a great show, but he couldn’t go deeper. He was having a problem making effective eye contact—his eyes just didn’t seem to be making real contact. When we tried to work with him on this, he got a bit nervous and said, “I was told that since some people don’t like eye contact, I shouldn’t look them right in the eye. I was told I should actually look at their forehead, instead.”

Terrible, and dangerous, advice. Here’s an acting tip: One of the skills an actor will employ to play a blind person on stage is by looking at the forehead of the other actors on stage. This way, they are doing what a blind person does: looking in the right general direction, but not making a connection. Eye contact in our society is extremely important. In a courtroom, it is vital, not just because people don’t trust someone who can’t look them in the eye, but also because if you are not making effective eye contact with your jurors then you can not possibly be “listening” to them. You can’t possibly be the most interested person in the courtroom if you aren’t making that connection. (We discuss eye contact techniques in detail in Chapter 5.)

## **Beware**

People mean well; they offer you advice to be helpful. However, some people have a hard time expressing what they think you should do in language that is both clear and constructive. Some advice is not helpful, some makes you more self-conscious, and some is just plain wrong. The point is: question the advice you receive about public speaking.

Remember these four important truths, and filter all advice through them:

1. **Every speaker is different.** There is no “right” presentation style. What is perfect for me may be awful for you. Be honest with yourself, and with your audience, at all times.
2. **Never try to “be” anything.** If you try to “be authoritative,” you’ll end up looking arrogant. If you try to “be confident,” you’ll end up looking awkward. Instead of trying to “be” something, try to “do” things that accomplish your goals. If you want to appear confident, do what confident people do: stand up tall, with your feet approximately shoulders’ width apart. Balance your weight. Come out from behind the lectern or table. Make effective eye contact. Allow gestures to convey the meaning of your words. Speak strongly, with enough volume to be heard easily at the back of the room. Pause for emphasis. Smile when appropriate.
3. **Your focus should always be on your audience.** Self-consciousness is just that: being overly conscious of

yourself. Become conscious of your audience—their needs, their reactions, their mannerisms, their habits, their values. Everything you do should make it easier for them to listen, to understand, to argue your case in deliberations, to teach their spouse everything they’ve learned about how a new product is tested.

4. **Your biggest asset is your credibility.** Never, under any circumstances, do *anything* that will diminish your credibility. You may have the most brilliant argument since the Gettysburg Address, but it won’t mean anything if the jurors simply don’t believe you.

Any advice that you receive should work within these four filters. If someone you trust is trying to help and their advice is not clear, ask them to be specific about what you are *doing* that they think is ineffective. If an expert tells you to do something that clearly puts *your* comfort ahead of your audience, then think carefully about whether that is truly good advice. As we discussed earlier, something that instantly feels comfortable may not be the most effective: indeed, many elements of effective communication feel uncomfortable until you’ve gotten used to them. Beware of shortcuts.

Sometimes, bad advice just needs to be translated into an action—something you can do, which makes it easier for your listener, and boosts your credibility.

Give serious thought to all advice and try to figure out what the person giving the advice is responding to. You can’t necessarily “trust your instincts” about whether it is good advice or

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bad. Anything new will feel uncomfortable at first, and as we said earlier, your comfort is less important than your audience's understanding of your message.

Read, learn, practice, and then practice some more. That's the best way to learn how to handle advice—the good, the bad, and the ugly.