



The Making of a Professional Speaker by Bobbi Linkemer

The Decision

A few years ago, I decided to move my career in a new direction — into speaking and training. It wasn't an idle goal but, rather, one that would help me to achieve my vision of helping writers write. After some research, I joined Toastmasters and National Speakers Association (NSA), each for its own strengths: Toastmasters to build platform skills, and NSA to build my new career. I felt excited and confident and plunged in with great enthusiasm. I was in for a rude awakening: my project turned out to be much tougher than I ever dreamed.

Expectations

At Toastmasters, I was supposed to give ten speeches, from seven to ten minutes long, with each one building on the skills of the preceding talk. There would be evaluations and feedback to help me improve my areas of weakness. Speech by speech I would improve, and, by the tenth speech, I would be pretty good ... or at very least competent.

At National Speakers Association there were monthly meetings featuring national experts on a whole range of topics. There was a Protégé Group, comprising a small group of aspiring speakers, of which I was one. I applied and was accepted. There was to be personal mentoring and guidance by local experts, some of whom were friends of mine. And, as time went by, I knew I would develop my career from by booking my obligatory twenty speeches.

Reality

Toastmasters was so much harder than I anticipated. As the weeks turned into months, my confidence flagged. Despite my best efforts, because I am a writer, I wrote out my speeches, word by scintillating word. Then, I was so married to those pearls on paper, I clung to my notes and totally lacked spontaneity. The feedback I received was consistent:

My speeches were well researched and well written. But I was not very animated; I didn't use my body; I clung to the podium. Intellectually, I knew what to do, but I couldn't seem to do it.

The national speakers who presented at our monthly NSA meeting were superb and inspiring, but they focused on those with already established careers. I was overwhelmed by the material they crammed into their presentations. The Protégé Group started out like a house on fire, but I lost momentum as my business situation worsened. I never reached my goal of booking twenty speeches; in fact, I didn't even hit ten!

Epiphany

The next to last speech I gave for Toastmasters was pretty good. I got a positive evaluation but consistent feedback. I had all the same weaknesses as before: I was married to my notes, and I was not spontaneous — except when I told my impromptu story about the man sleeping under the tree at 10:30 at night. Wow! Even I knew something different had happened. I woke up; I lit up. It felt right ... like the perfect golf swing.

The next day, I met with a client and found myself telling a couple of stories. I was relaxed and genuine. I thought to myself, I wish I could speak in public the way I do in private. I just talk, no prepared remarks, no notes. Well, of course. I'm a talker. I'm a storyteller. Always have been. It was not necessary to write a speech. All I had to do was talk, tell stories, relax, and be myself.

New reality

It's one thing to know something intellectually; it's quite another to know it in your gut. Suddenly, I knew what I was doing wrong and, what's more, I knew how to fix it. All I had to do was know my subject and keep it simple. I didn't have to write an essay. I didn't need notes. A speech doesn't have to be a speech. All it had to be was a conversation. All I had to do was talk to my friends and tell them stories.

On my 13th speech to Toastmasters, I knew I nailed it. I just talked. I didn't cling to the podium; in fact, I didn't even stand behind it. I didn't use my notes; I left them on the podium before I began. At the end of the speech, which was on this very topic — the making of a public speaker — I said, "I think I've got it. I really think I've got it." Then, I walked around the podium, picked up my notes, and tore them up.

I won "top speaker" of the night.