

BUSINESS

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EDITOR'S BRIEF CASE

Speaking tied to success in business

As a speaking coach for the last 10 years, Dana Bristol-Smith of OceanSide knows how



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executives in California, many of them corporate chief executive officers, presidents and senior vice presidents.

Asked how having the skill to speak to groups affected their careers, 95 percent responded that it was important or critical to their success. Yet few of those surveyed considered themselves naturally gifted speakers.

"People think this is a skill that you're either born with or not," Bristol-Smith said, adding that it's more likely the product of training and practice.

Bristol-Smith, who runs Speak for Success and has consulted with such companies as Qualcomm and Invitrogen, said public speaking helps men and women appear confident.

"That's a leadership skill," she said. "It sets people apart."

Even experienced speakers, however, suffer nervousness or anxiety before giving a talk.

"That feeling is what scares away so many people from volunteering to lead a meeting or take on a project," she said.

Unfortunately, anxiety prevents some people from planning ahead — but planning ahead can greatly help ease nervousness. Bristol-Smith recommends that speakers thoroughly understand their material, practice out loud before a colleague or two and take some practice questions.

When asked in her survey how they calmed themselves before speaking, 58 percent of the women business leaders said that they practice many times, 57 percent arrive early, 55 percent visualize their success, 37 percent have a backup plan, 26 percent practice once, and 2 percent imagine the audience in their underwear.

The survey also found that once speakers start a presentation, it took 75 percent of them only the first five minutes to feel comfortable.

While some people start their talks with a joke, Bristol-Smith recommends just sticking with something familiar as an opening.

Women can start learning public speaking, not just through work, but through PTA and homeowners associations, she noted.

Those who want to excel should have themselves videotaped while speaking. "It's the only thing that allows people to see themselves as others see them. It can be really painful."

One method that works for her, said Bristol-Smith, is to arrive at the event early and meet with audience members to learn something about them. That way, she said, "I can see some familiar faces and speak every word to the eyes and heart of another human being."