

How to bring out the authentic speaker within.

10 Tips to Finding Your Style

Every time we give a speech we expose our vulnerability. We worry the audience may not like or approve of what we say or, worse, they may not like or approve of *us*. This need for acceptance and approval from our peers may cause us to hide our true selves and show only the part we think will please. By doing this, we are not being our authentic selves.

Terry Cole-Whittaker, in her book *What You Think of Me is None of My Business* (1979), writes about this need for acceptance, which, in turn, makes us hand over our personal power instead of harnessing it to make ourselves stronger. By being afraid to expose our true selves to others, we give a performance rather than a speech. It may be a very fine performance, but it's not real. If we speak with our own voice, we display our own unique style. What's wrong with that?

We camouflage our style with a display of nervous movements, darting eyes, involuntary hand gestures or any of the other habits we have picked up through the years that distracts the audience from what we are saying. The good news is that by joining Toastmasters, you have taken the first step toward uncovering your style, and the more you speak, the more your real self will begin to emerge like a caterpillar breaking out of its cocoon as a butterfly.

The *Competent Communication* manual has 10 projects that can teach you the nuts and bolts of

public speaking. Your style, however, comes from within you. You need both to become a *truly* competent communicator.

A glimmer of your speaking style may begin to emerge when you deliver your Ice Breaker, and by speeches No. 2 and 3, it should be more apparent. It will probably still be like an unpolished gemstone, rough and grainy, but I am going to give you 10 tips for smoothing the edges and polishing your style to perfection:

1 Relax – It is not enough to appear relaxed; you have to *feel* relaxed. A mixture of nerves and excitement before you begin a speech can help get you started but if your nerves do not calm down, your breathing will become ragged and that in turn, will make your voice sound high-pitched and uneven. There are many ways to learn to relax. Choose the method that suits you.

2 Smile – When you reach the podium, pause for a few seconds and smile at the audience. They, in turn, will smile back; that is a connection that makes the audience want to hear what you have to say. Smiling also makes you feel more optimistic.

3 Be Concise – Get to the point and stick to it. Keep your audience with you at all times and do not lose them in a sea of words. In the

preparation stage, it pays to spend time making sure the structure of your speech is sound. If you jump around from one idea to the other it does not matter if the topic is inherently interesting; your audience will eventually switch off mentally.

4 Be Clear – Aim your speech at the level of the audience. Do not use highly technical jargon or elaborate words or phrases. If you are speaking outside your club, tailor your speech to fit. You would use different language if you deliver a speech to a group of teenagers at your local high school than you would if you are addressing a group of men at your local golf club.

5 Eye Contact – Speak to the audience as if you are having a conversation with one person and you really want that person to understand what you're saying. Then, during the speech, let your eyes rest for a few seconds on one audience member at a time, before moving on to someone else and doing the same. Others sitting near that person will also feel included.

6 Know Your Subject – If you know what you are talking about, your enthusiasm and passion for the topic will transmit to the audience. Also, appearing knowledgeable gives you authority and that makes people sit up and listen. But be careful: If you have researched a topic in which you have no real

interest, just to give a speech, it will be obvious to everyone. The speech may be factually accurate but the delivery will lack sincerity and depth.

7 Forget Yourself – Once you have prepared your speech, concentrate on getting your message across to your audience and do not worry about the impression you are making. It is like dressing up to go to a party. You get ready, have a last look in the mirror, then just go and enjoy yourself.

8 Practice – Take every opportunity to speak. Volunteer for roles, schedule manual speeches, offer to evaluate other speakers at your own club and other clubs, volunteer to answer Table Topics questions, enter speech contests, join a committee – just speak. If you

use filler words or phrases, make it your goal to get rid of them. If you habitually exceed time limits, make it your goal to speak succinctly.

9 Record Yourself – One of the best ways of noting when you are being natural and when you are not is to watch yourself on video or DVD. Many digital cameras nowadays can record. Ask another member to record your speech, then watch it at home. You will probably put your hands over your eyes and cringe the first time you see yourself on screen, but persevere and you will reap many benefits.

This is one of the best methods of noticing when you are being yourself and when you are covering up. Only you know the answer. Your nervous gestures, awkward body language or lack of movement will be revealed – but only to you.

Be ruthlessly honest with yourself and make notes. Added benefits can be gained if you watch with your mentor. Your mentor or another experienced club member can be even more objective and pick up things you miss. Beware, this is not for the faint-hearted: Be prepared to make changes!

10 Be Yourself – You were born a unique human being. If you try to be someone else, the disguise will sit awkwardly on you like an ill-fitting suit. The audience will remember the suit more than they remember you. **T**