

Introduction by Richard D. King, President,
Rotary International, 2001- 2002

FRANK TALK ON PUBLIC SPEAKING

How You Can Overcome Your Fear And Become A Dynamic,
Effective Presenter In Your Business, Profession — and in Rotary

By

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CHAPTER 1



The Greatest Fear . . .

“Fear defeats more people than any other one thing in the world.”

~ Emerson

“Dizzy.”

“I break into a cold sweat.”

“Fear. No—sheer terror.”

“Embarrassment.”

“Weak-kneed.”

I had not anticipated such a cacophony of negativity. I had asked the audience of incoming Rotary club and district officers how they felt about being asked to speak in public. As each Rotarian gave his or her response, the vast majority of the other 200 people in the room nodded in concurrence.

“You people are scaring me,” I said, showing my surprise. “You are the incoming leaders of these hundred-or-so districts. You *have* to stand up in front of audiences and inspire them. Yet all I am hearing is what, maybe 15 examples of why you are scared of doing so. Is there *anybody* here who enjoys it?”

I scanned the room.

“One, two . . . maybe five. Five people out of two hundred actually enjoy speaking to groups. David, I guess we have our work cut out for us today.” I turned to David Forward, who nodded his agreement as he drew the microphone closer to him at the table beside me.

“That’s probably why we have a standing-room-only crowd in this workshop, Frank.” he began. “But I agree with the majority opinion we have seen here this morning. Fear of public speaking is one of the greatest phobias. In fact, there’s a clinical name for it: it’s called glossophobia. Let me tell you a story. I once had to teach a seminar of public speaking in Tampa, Florida. During the morning break, an audience member admitted to me his dread of having to speak in public. ‘What do you do?’ I asked him. ‘I work for the circus as a trapeze artist,’ he replied. My mouth must have dropped open. ‘You mean to tell me you have no problem walking a tight rope 40 feet above the ground every day, and yet you’re afraid to stand behind the podium in a nice, safe meeting room and give a speech?’ I asked him. ‘Sure!’ he affirmed. ‘Tightrope walking is easy. It’s an acquired skill. Once you’ve learned how to do it, it’s a piece of cake.’ He went on to say that living in Florida, he regularly encountered rattlesnakes and alligators, but even they did not scare him so much as the prospect of having to give a speech, which, as he entered management, the circus was frequently asking him to do.”

“He is not alone,” Sue chipped in. “I recently read *The Book of Lists*, and the authors claimed the fear of public speaking is what Americans dread more than anything else. Death ranked number five!”

“I must admit, I am with the majority on this topic,” Bob confessed. “Put me in front of a computer and there is no

problem too challenging. But don't ask me to stand up and address a group."

"I hear this from so many people." I said. "I don't want to dismiss or trivialize this fear—indeed, I, too, have heard these survey results that claim people are more worried about public speaking than they are of death. In fact, I remember watching an episode of the TV series *Seinfeld* where Jerry Seinfeld said most folks at a funeral would rather be the person in the casket than the one asked to deliver the eulogy.

"Fear is a very powerful emotion. What we're talking about here is really a form of stage fright. For most people, walking out onto a stage before an audience is, at least, unnerving, regardless of whether they are on that stage to sing a song, tell jokes, dance a ballet, act in a play, or deliver a keynote address."

"And yet the ability to confidently communicate a message is essential in Rotary, whether you are a committee chairperson, club president, or district governor." said Sue.

"It's also important for a successful career," added Duncan. "Throughout my professional life, I had to succinctly and persuasively sell myself and my company to customers, and to my internal customers such as my bosses, peers, and subordinates."

"I think you both make an excellent point," I agreed. "When I think back to all those meetings I've had with vendors, my management team, and our employees, I had to have a consistent, persuasive message. And I've never really thought about it before, but I suppose my friends and fellow Rotarians would never have nominated me all the way from a club committee chairman to Rotary International President if I had been terrified to open my mouth in front an audience."

“Let me ask you a question, Frank.” said David. “I know you learned the optical business from your parents. Did they also teach you oratory skills?”

“Heavens, no!” I replied.

“That’s my point,” he reasoned. Good speaking skills are not inherited. They are acquired. And whether you are an optometrist or a trapeze artist—or a Rotary district governor—those skills can be learned. And if you practice them over and over, you can leave your audiences inspired while enhancing your own self esteem and confidence.”

“I’d like to take Rotary out of the picture for a moment,” I began. “If I start talking about giving speeches at district conferences and the like, some of you will think, ‘Well, that doesn’t apply to me.’ So let me pick up on what my friend Duncan just said. In case you don’t know him, Duncan could be the poster child of corporate America. More than forty years ago he started as an apprentice for one of the largest chemical companies in the country, and he rose all the way through the ranks to become senior vice president. So, Duncan, were you scared when you had to speak to groups?”

Duncan drew the microphone closer to him. “At first, I surely was, Frank. I would prepare a sales presentation and rehearse it all the way to a customer’s office. Then I would feel the perspiration breaking out all over my body while I sat in their waiting room. As the company promoted me, I would go through the same feelings of intense stress before having to address the weekly sales meetings.”

“How did you overcome it?” I asked.

I will be forever grateful to my boss at the time,” he answered. “He saw how I would shake and stammer and pepper

my talks with *ums* and *ers*. He took me under his wing and showed me that speaking does not have to be stressful. It's just a question of how you approach it."

"I'm in that position right now," said Bob, brushing his long hair away from his eyes. "I was recently promoted to department manager. So how *did* you learn to make speaking less stressful?"

Duncan hesitated for a moment as if to recall exactly what his mentor had taught him almost a half-century earlier. "I learned, first of all, that one doesn't have to be perfect to be a good presenter," he began. "Even today in Rotary, I look at eloquent, inspiring speakers such as Cliff Dochterman . . . and Rick King . . . and I realize. . ."

"AHEM!" Sue interrupted loudly, with a theatrical head nod towards me."

The audience laughed. "Of, of course, and Frank Devlyn," Duncan continued. "I was deliberately saving him for last. Anyway, my point is, I don't even pretend to be in their league. When I was sales manager all those years ago, we would sometimes attend conferences with world-renowned professional speakers such as Art Linkletter and Zig Ziglar. If I expected to deliver the same sort of polished, perfect message as they did, I would be creating unbelievable stress—and setting myself up for failure.

"So be realistic. The world needs *great* speakers, the world needs *good* speakers, and the world needs *average* speakers."

"When I was district governor, I saw clubs with some way-*below-average* speakers," Sue chipped in. "And you know what? The clubs survived. They even prospered. And some of those pretty awful speakers that I inducted into office in July had become quite decent speakers by the following June."

“If I may interject,” said David. “We’ve already heard how stressed most people are at the prospect of speaking in public; one suggestion I often give people is to not think of themselves as public speakers. Be yourself! Don’t try to be something or somebody else. If you are a nurse, you are a nurse who sometimes speaks to groups. If you are an accountant you’re not a public speaker; you’re an accountant who also talks to others.

“Duncan just mentioned three of the most-requested speakers in the Rotary world. But I dare suggest none of them would call themselves public speakers. They think of themselves as a college professor, an attorney, and an optometrist who are passionate about sharing their Rotary knowledge and experiences. Now think about my point that also describes everybody in the room. We are *all* Rotarians who are sometimes asked to speak to other Rotarians. Agreed, Frank is a past R.I. President, I have written a few books, Sue is a Past District Governor (PDG)—but many of you have more knowledge and enthusiasm for certain subjects than any of us. Can you see how the prospect of standing up to give a speech becomes less scary when you stop thinking of it as a *public speaking* assignment?”

A ripple of nodding heads in the audience confirmed David’s reasoning had made sense. Then a hand went up from the third row. The aide passed a hand-held microphone to the middle-aged woman.

“I am president-elect of my club,” she said. “I never really wanted to be president, but our previous president-elect got transferred, so they persuaded me to accept the position. As July 1st approaches, I am becoming more and more nervous about having to stand up in front of the club and speak every week.”

“What, specifically, are you nervous about?” I asked.

“I worry that I might mess up,” the woman answered. “I worry that I won’t be able to motivate the members; I might sound boring. I might get questions that I cannot answer. They might not like me.”

“I can understand your concerns,” I began. “I would like to take you back a few years to when you first began driving a car. Do you remember that?”

“I do,” she answered. “Although you are being kind, Frank. It was more than a few years ago!”

“Okay then. Now think back. You didn’t even know where the key went, how to open the hood, how to put gas in the car, correct?”

She nodded.

“I’ll bet you were *beyond* nervous; you were scared to death. But you learned. First came the basics. Then, as you mastered those, you gained confidence in your abilities and learned to drive at night, how to drive in snow, how to be a really *good* driver. In fact, if you have had teenage children, you have probably taught *them* how to drive. So the very thing that you were once terrified of doing by yourself you now do without even thinking—and you do it that way day in and day out.”

“May I add something?” asked Bob. “I know we feel the burden of wanting to perform flawlessly when giving a speech, but I think we need to put it into the proper perspective. As nervous as I *still* feel when I’m asked to speak—whether to a Rotary audience or at a managers meeting at work—I tell myself this: *Bob, first of all, somebody thinks I’m good enough because you’re the one person they picked to give the*

presentation. Second, what's the worst thing that can happen? I mean, a pilot screws up his assignment and he crashes the plane; a heart surgeon performs poorly and the patient dies. When I put into perspective the fact that all I have to do is make a presentation, my fear and trembling subsides."

"Let me ask you a question, Bob," I said, looking down the table at him. "Why does your company ask *you* to make a presentation to the managers from around the region?"

Bob hesitated for a moment before leaning into his table microphone. "Er, I guess because they think I have the knowledge and experience those other managers can benefit from hearing."

"And what about Rotary? What types of Rotary audiences are you typically invited to address?"

"They primarily invite me to speak on The Rotary Foundation," he answered. "Because I spent time in India and actually participated in a PolioPlus National Immunization Day, I have become a passionate promoter of The Rotary Foundation. So I am often invited to give Rotary Foundation talks to other clubs, and at district events."

I looked at the audience. "My friends," I began. "You heard Bob say a few minutes ago that he was terrified of public speaking. You have now had an opportunity to see him speak to this very large crowd—and I ask you, did he seem scared? Did he stumble and stammer and have to read every word from a typed text? Of course not! Why is that?" I hesitated for a moment to see if I got a response from the audience. There was none, so I continued.

"It is because Bob *believes* in himself as having the skills to deliver talks on certain subjects. You have got to begin by

believing in yourself as a person, believing in the subjects about which you will deliver genuinely benefit the audience. It has been said that nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent. Well, nobody can make Bob feel that his insight and passion for The Rotary Foundation is not worth sharing with others. That contributes to the confidence he has *before* his speeches, and don't you think it will show through in the eloquence and delivery the audiences senses *during* the speech?"

I saw many heads nodding in agreement. I noticed a hand go up halfway back in the room, and the aide quickly passed the microphone down the row to him. "Good morning," he said. "I'm Mike Hairston, assistant governor of District 6460. My question is, do you—any of you on the panel—do anything to assuage the fear immediately before going on?"

I looked down the table and saw Sue volunteer to answer the question. "Truthfully, Mike, I believe the best tool is preparation. If I have spent time researching my audience, learning my topic, and have rehearsed my talk to where I know it is good, my fear almost completely goes away.

"Just remember, focus on the message and on your audience. It's not about you, it's about them. I used to feel my eyes glass over when a district governor would stand up and talk about himself and his accomplishments. So when I visited clubs or addressed district meetings, I always made sure my message was focused on the audience. I used to imagine each person in the seats before me asking them, 'What's in it for me?' I don't mean to imply that Rotarians are selfish. But every one of us has so many conflicting demands on our time, interests and money. So I knew that if I wanted to persuade them to support my goals, my district conference, my

Foundation-giving target, and so on, then I had to present it in ways that made sense to them.”

“I can remember when I first made department manager at DuPro Chemical, many years ago,” said Duncan. “I was so nervous about having to speak to my support team—and sometimes, my own boss would sit in and observe. He was a great mentor, and I confessed to him my fear of speaking to this group of maybe 35 people. He gave me this advice: make a list of each of my fears, then put a solution beside each of them . . . you know, how to overcome or dismiss that concern. Then I would take the list and file it away in an old cigar box. Every year during my annual review, he would make me bring the cigar box and pull out my ‘worry lists.’ And do you know what? Probably 99 out of 100 of those things I had been so concerned about had never come to pass! Then he had me take the old lists into the bathroom and flush them down the toilet. As I moved up the corporate ladder and had to make presentations to more and more influential people, right before I began, I would think back to my ritual worry-list flushings—and my fears would go away.”

“David,” I said, ‘you speak to some large audiences all over the world. Do you have any tips for avoiding last-minute jitters?’”

“Probably the best advice I know is to know your opening by heart,” he began. “You’ve just been introduced; the audience is excited and applauding as you approach the podium. The last thing you want is for the room to go silent as you fumble around for what your first words are going to be. I believe all speakers, even the ones who earn tens of thousands of dollars for each speech, feel a certain degree of nervousness immediately before going to the lectern. I find it helpful to give myself a pep talk while I’m still offstage. I use positive visualization: I picture the audience responding at a point where I use humor

or a poignant anecdote. I see myself at the podium, having a really good time, relaxed, smiling, and knowing I have the audience in the palm of my hand. I reflect on how that district governor or President-Elects Training Seminar (PETS) chair has invited me all this way because the audience wants me to succeed. I've spoken to little clubs when 6 people showed up on a snowy night, and I've addressed 20,000 at international conventions, and I am a firm believer in the power of positive visualizations to put myself at ease right before I go on. So picture yourself doing well, see the audience loving you, and then take a few slow, deep, breaths as you walk confidently to the podium.”

“I hope you are taking notes out there,” I said, returning to the podium microphone. “We’ve heard some really good tips from our panel so far this morning. I was just trying to summarize some of the advice they have given us on how to eliminate—or, at least, how to reduce the fear of public speaking. Here’s what I have so far:

- Don’t even think of yourself as a public speaker.
- The enemy of good is perfect. If you are not being paid \$25,000 to make your presentation, don’t expect to sound like one of the world’s greatest professional speakers.
- Plan your presentation according to the audience’s needs and expectations.
- Make it about them, not about you—unless they’ve invited you to talk about your conquest of Everest, or something like that.
- Don’t expect to please everyone.
- Use positive affirmations right before you go on.

“Are there any other questions?”

I saw the aide hurrying to the very back of the room and hand the mike to a man so far away I could barely see him.

“I have a question,” he said. “So far, you have all talked about overcoming the fear of making a speech. What I would like to know is: how do you decide the *content* of a speech?”



Rotarian PP Sheree Fukai of San Ignacio Rotary states: “I would like to personally thank you and District 6110 for the wonderful equipment that has been shipped to Belize through MSNI. Every Rotarian in your District should hold their head proud in knowing that they have helped to save lives on a daily Basis.”



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