

Talking loud and clear

Death is final, ultimate and inescapable, and because of this, understandably, most people fear it.

Yet, although to a lesser and greater degree there is a fear of death instilled in all of us, in some people this fear is surpassed by other things. For some it may be a phobia of Elvis impersonators or a phobia of peanut butter sticking to the roof of your mouth, but in most it is something far more common – speaking to an audience.

“The findings of an American study revealed that most people fear public speaking more than death,” says Delia Thompson, speech facilitator at the Communication Academy. “In addition, public speaking was found to be the third most common phobia.”

However, unlike death or other phobias, such a fear is unfounded and rather ironic, considering that public speaking, in a similar way to death, is something that will fall on all of us at some stage or another and need not be the substance of nightmares.

“Anyone, with the right training, can become a good public speaker”

– Delia Thompson

“Everyday we are involved in a constant interaction with other people where we have to present and sell ourselves,” says Thompson. “This can be anything from talking to colleagues about a movie we have just watched or trying to convince a board of directors to go with a new proposal.

“In either setting, being able to communicate effectively is not just an advantage it is a key to success. Oral presentations will always be the most effective means to persuade audiences.”

According to Thompson, this is important when reflecting on how a fear of public speaking can hamper this process. “From an early age we are taught to fear making

speeches or making oral presentations and this is largely what makes most people ineffective speakers. However, I do believe that this phobia can be unlearned and with the right training, anyone can become a good speaker.”

Thompson bases such claims on her experience as a coordinator of communication workshops aimed at enhancing presentation skills. “Lots of the people I have trained have come in with little confidence. It is not uncommon for such people, based on their fear of speaking, to be reluctant to come. They may even cancel their



appointments with me a few times before finally plucking up the courage to come, but once they have done the workshop the change is apparent. It really is a transformation.”

In this regard, becoming an effective speaker may very well be as much a process of learning new techniques, as it is unlearning old habits and conditioning. “In school we are taught to speak with our hands at our sides. To stand still. To look over our audience. However, these rules don’t apply to adults. In school we are told these things because we are children and children can be overly active and have trouble keeping still or suppressing the giggles. Obviously adults have no such problems, yet we still carry the same ideas about how to present ourselves.”

“If someone does not communicate with their audience properly, regardless of how good their message is, it will be lost”

Against the backdrop of a society and culture that is becoming increasingly characterised by a lowering concentration span, this holds a problem for anyone wanting to make a public presentation. “The truth is that speaking styles are changing. We are finding that to maintain an audience’s attention, speakers are having to become more animated and maintain more eye contact than, for example, in the 1970s. Having said that, there is just no way that anyone can make an effective oral presentation using the methods we are taught in school.”

Of course, making a presentation effective is where the key lies. In this regard, in her workshops Thompson tries to establish how important one’s communication skills weigh in on the entire presentation. “Regardless of the setting, if someone does not communicate with their audience properly, regardless of how good their message is, it will be lost.”

Thompson says that this is because only roughly 7% of what we say is through actual words. The rest is through body language and tone of voice. “You can take a brilliant doctor or auditor who has written a brilliant presentation, but stumbles through its delivery speaking too softly, too monotonously and too nervously and compare it to

someone who has written a poor presentation but delivers it charismatically and confidently and you may find that the second person actually accomplishes more.”

Acknowledging this, it becomes possible for someone who is knowledgeable in their field, but also a brilliant public speaker, to have a huge advantage in the business environment. In many functions and corporate events a number of speakers will appear on one night and sometimes most of them will be ineffective speakers. They will read their entire presentations or rely on an extensive number of PowerPoint slides, all of which kill their ability to convey their message. In such settings, a good speaker can really stand out. Since the gap between his or her presentation and

the other presentations is so large, the speaker’s speaking ability can essentially put him/her in a different league.

One can gain such an advantage through two ways. On the one hand, one can learn to be a great speaker by trial and error over a long period of time, with

many opportunities lost along the way, or one can go the much easier route. Seek professional help.

In this regard, Delia Thompson conducts her workshop “Confident Communication” once a month, and her reference list is testimony to her skills as a communication trainer. She has dealt with government officials from almost every government department as well as countless high-flying corporate executives from companies such as Caltex, Investec, Anglo Gold and SAA.

“No matter who comes on the workshop and what credentials they bring with them, I try to make sure that the fear of public speaking is what ultimately gets left behind.” **S**



If you would like any further details or to register on the Confident Communication workshop call (012) 345-5828 or 082 920 5945 or e-mail: marc@thecommunicationacademy.co.za. Alternately you can visit www.thecommunicationacademy.co.za

About the facilitator

Delia Thompson received her ATCL and LTCL in speech tuition from the Trinity College of London, which is associated with Cambridge University.

She has been giving training in communication, pronunciation and presentations skills for the past eight years, and has trained executives from government as well as private sector.

Six years ago she founded the Communication Academy when she decided to go into business for herself.

2006 dates for the Confident Communication workshop

Presentation skills for managers (two days)
Open workshop - St George Hotel, Midrand

May 24 & 25	wed / thur
June 28 & 29	wed / thur
July 26 & 27	wed / thur
August 30 & 31	tue / wed
September 27 & 28	wed / thur