



So Long, Stage Fright

Banish public speaking jitters with 10 top strategies.

by AZRIELA JAFFE

Gorgia will never forget the day she stepped to the microphone, looked at a sea of 400 expectant faces, and froze, unable to utter a single word. The consultant and businesswoman, who asked not to be identified, said it took several years of therapy and speech training to get her back to the microphone. The experience drained her per-

sonally and almost killed her business. But she's back on her feet now, dazzling her audiences.

The Book of Lists ranks the fear of public speaking before the fear of death for most people. Like Georgia, many of us are afraid of making fools of ourselves in such a situation. If the thought of standing behind a podium, taking the chair at the end of the conference room table, or even presenting ideas to a client

leaves you a little weak in the knees, there is help.

Georgia found hers in Dilip R. Abayasekara, founder of Speaker Services Unlimited, a consulting firm in Mechanicsburg, Pa. Abayasekara is on a mission to help professionals rid themselves of debilitating jitters.

TROPICAL TO TOPICAL

At first glance, Abayasekara is an unlikely master for such a task. Born on the tropical island of Sri Lanka, off the southern tip of India, he grew up speaking mainly Sinhalese. But Abayasekara's parents attended British-run schools where they learned the Queen's English, which they then taught their seven children.

Abayasekara's fascination with public speaking started when he was a boy. His family employed a child as a domestic. "He and I would often compose speeches in Sinhalese and give them to each other," Abayasekara recalls. "When I grew older I studied great American and English speeches, like those of Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, and other famous orators."

After completing high school, Abayasekara came to the United States on an exchange program, "The Experiment in International Living." He was hosted by several families in Dayton, Ohio. He went on to earn a B.S. in chemistry and a Ph.D. in organic chemistry and polymer science from Virginia Commonwealth University, in Richmond.

During his college career, Abayasekara pursued his interest in public speaking by taking every related class open to non-speech/drama students. "These courses were a welcome respite from the arduous studying I had to do for my chemistry, physics, and math classes," he says, adding that he immediately entered an oratorical contest organized for students. "It didn't even cross my mind that my accent might be an obstacle," he recalls. "Looking back, I think the professor who organized the contest was surprised that a foreign student entered. I placed second."

Following graduation, Abayasekara pursued his vocation as an industrial scientist for 12 years but continued to prac-

tice his avocation by joining Toastmasters, an international nonprofit organization that promotes better listening, thinking, and speaking for individuals. He thought of it as a means to help him excel in his career, and he embraced the concept of "learning by doing in a supportive atmosphere."

AWARD-WINNING SPEECHES

Abayasekara quickly moved from learning to teaching. In six years, he had topped the mantels in his home with more than 45 trophies from speech competitions, including a second-place award at the World Championship of Public Speaking. He was receiving invitations to speak and to lead public speaking seminars.

In 1992, Abayasekara took the next step by starting a Toastmasters club at the company where he worked in response to requests from other scientists and engineers to help them polish their presentations. "I led lunch-time workshops and also conducted eight-week sessions on effective speaking at several plants in my company," he says.

It wasn't long before Abayasekara decided to turn his part-time hobby into a full-time occupation. In 1996, 10 years after his first Toastmasters meeting, he turned in his chemist's flask for a speaker's microphone and never looked back. Today, Abayasekara sits on Toastmasters' International Board.

THOSE WHO CAN, COACH

Abayasekara has a number of clients throughout the Northeast, many of whom prefer anonymity because of high-profile positions. His list of clients includes professional organizations, colleges, and the Pentagon. But what he loves to do more than anything is to serve as a private coach. He has coached company presidents, university professors, physicians, city officials, scientists, engineers, clergy, and even speech contestants.

"Dr. Abayasekara taught me the importance of using mind mapping, which is a valuable tool that assists the presenter in remembering important topics," says

one client, a marketing specialist from Delaware. He also shared tips such as "know your topic, memorize your opening statement, pause throughout your speech to make a point, and always smile."

The president of a marketing/communications company says Abayasekara customized a program to meet specific needs. "As a successful business owner, I knew that my skill level at oral presentations was my greatest weakness. Videotaping the sessions was very helpful in identifying unconscious gestures, hesitations, etc. I learned that, like in everything else in life, preparation is the key to being an effective speaker."

FIND YOUR GIFTS

If you should decide to hire a speech coach, look for one who will address the emotional issues involved in effective speech-making, not just technique, Abayasekara says.

"Effective public speaking is 95 percent mental preparedness and 5 percent technique. If only the 5 percent is learned, the client will be a technical robot and speech training will not have a long-term impact," he says.

Perhaps what makes Abayasekara most important to his clients is his ability to convince them that they are remarkable individuals with something of importance to share with an audience. He believes that the most powerful "technique" for converting self-consciousness to self-confidence is to believe that you have something significant to offer.

Got presentation jitters? Investing in a private speech coach could be a wise investment in your career. Contact the local Toastmasters or National Speakers Association chapters in your area to scout out the right coach.

Reach Abayasekara at 717-612-9622, drdilip@paonline.com, or <http://companyontheinternet.com/drdilip> ■

Azriela Jaffe is the author of eight books, including Starting from No, Ten Strategies to Overcome Your Fear of Rejection and Succeed in Business. Email comments and questions to azriela@mindspring.com, or visit her website www.isquare.com/erlink.htm



10 Tips from Abayasekara's Arsenal

- 1 Speak to express, not to impress.
- 2 Focus on blessing, not impressing.
- 3 The "U" (you) comes before the "I" in "public" speaking.
- 4 Every "I" story must have a "you" message.
- 5 Every member of the audience is tuned into the radio station "WI-IFM"—"What's In It For Me?"
- 6 When you go fishing, do you bait the hook with what you like to eat or what the fish like to eat? Talk about the interests and needs of your audience, not simply what interests you.
- 7 An effective speaker is so busy being audience-centered, he/she has no time to be self-centered.
- 8 Fear of public speaking stems from the fear of being judged.
- 9 The love of public speaking stems from the desire to impart something of value to your audience and the belief that you have something of value to give.
- 10 The most important speech you will give is the one for which you are preparing; the most important audience you will ever have is yourself.