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Mom Was Right

In high school I was pushed into playing the lead in the Spanish class play for Humanities Day. It was not because I was so poised before a crowd – I was as terrified of the auditorium filled with hundreds of students and teachers as I still am during nearly any public presentation. (Yes, that’s right, I have stage fright.) It is true that I had participated in summer stock productions for six years, but primarily as a member of the chorus and the stage production crew, and rarely as a solo speaker. So my starring role as the mayor’s wife in eleventh grade was not for my theatrical skills. Instead, it was because I could ad lib in Spanish better than my fellow classmates; if anyone flubbed their lines I could pick up and keep going.

That is not a glowing recommendation for speaking in public, but is a fair example of how many of us feel when compelled to stand before a group for the first time. As surveyors we are before the public constantly, and we must be aware of our presentation skills.

What is a presentation, anyway? The short answer is that it is any communication for which we have an opportunity to think about what we are going to say before we say it. That covers a fairly broad spectrum. If I call a client, I’m about to make a presentation; I had time to think about what I was going to say before I picked up the phone. Hopefully I will deliver my message clearly and concisely, whether directly or to my client’s answering machine. If I need to talk with a colleague about dividing up committee work we are sharing, I have to provide enough



information to my partner so we can make logical decisions and I won’t have to answer follow-up questions the next day. Did I convey my intended message effectively?

Still, many times we feel nervous when called on to make a “formal presentation.” The reactions can be physical (rubbery legs or fidgety hands), mental (fuzzy, frozen, or racing

thoughts), and vocal (squeaks, stutters, and uhhhs). Blame it on shyness, blame it on lack of confidence. But the real reason is not fear of talking, which we do all the time, but of being on display. It is the delivery and not the content that triggers our great Fear of the Unknown.

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Mom was right. All that nagging has finally served a purpose, much as I hate to admit it. All right, perhaps not all of it, but certain parts. And I'm sure your own parents gave you the same guidance.

"Stand up straight!" My posture was never the greatest, particularly in the teen years when it was way more cool to slouch around and look uninvolved. But I've found that standing up straight helps me to breathe better – crucial for vocal control and

to respond when I wasn't involved in all that extra activity. The same holds true in front of a group. I concentrate better on my message and understand the questions more readily if I'm not distracted by my own movements. A little movement is fine, but no racing or pacing.

"Don't mumble!" Speaking clearly is not an easy thing to learn. Part of this requires opening the mouth fully, and part entails breath control. Living with a retainer for much of

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mental clarity. No air means no voice or brain function. Good posture also helps me to look at the people I'm talking to (see Mom's next command).

"Look at me!" This was sometimes an admonition to see if I could look Mom in the eye while telling her something she did not believe, but more often so that she could tell that I was paying attention. If I make eye contact with the people I'm talking to, no matter the size of the group, I can tell if I'm reaching them. When a speaker makes eye contact with me, I feel involved in the conversation, too. Speakers who rivet their eyes on their notes without ever looking up generally are uninvolved with their audiences, who tune them out, especially if the room is darkened to enhance a slide show.

"Stop fidgeting!" Hyperactivity is a lifelong trait for me, always wanting to be on the move. While growing up I played every sport, danced, and rode my bike for hours (although that last part was often to escape my little brothers). So it was hard to unwind enough to actually sit or stand still without shifting my weight or fiddling with the zipper on my coat or playing with the cutlery on the dining room table. But all of that also presented a distraction so that I was not really paying attention to what was being said to me, and I certainly found it easier

my adolescence did not induce me to open my mouth any wider than was barely necessary to vocalize. The sole exceptions were while singing or while playing sports, when my mouth would be wide open to let out the most sound. Later on, more breath control evolved from martial arts training. It is easier to punch or kick an opponent effectively when timing a yell (and consequent exhalation of breath) to coincide with the moment of impact. (It is also, incidentally, easier to take a kick to the mid-section if you know how to expel all the air rapidly. I don't recommend this latter exercise as a means to improve breath control, however.) There are a number of reasons why martial artists yell when they fight, only one of which is to scare the opponent. The mere act of making the sound focuses the yell's attention on his or her action, bringing intent and commitment together. This is, incidentally a good way to practice projection, breathing from the lower abdomen to increase volume of air and thus amplify the sound.

Finally, **"Practice makes perfect!"** Rehearsing overcomes the fear of forgetting. The more familiar I am with my intended message and presentation format, the less likely that particular fear will have a chance to buckle my knees or tighten my throat.

Thanks, Mom! *A*