How to Scare the "Gooey" Out of a New Public Speaker
By Doug Staneart

95% of the population has some type of fear of public speaking, and a great deal of this nervousness or anxiety comes from well-meaning friends or coworkers who offer constructive criticism as a way to help a new presenter improve his/her public speaking. Public speaking is not unlike any other new skill that is developed in that when we try to speak in front of a group for the first time, every one of us will be nervous (just like the first time you used a computer, or the first time you drove a car, or the first time you rode a bicycle.) What happens next, though, usually determines whether the first-time speaker will gain confidence or become more nervous.

Any time we try something new and have what we consider to be a success, we gain confidence in that skill. Any time we try something new and feel like we failed, we diminish confidence.

Think about learning to speak in front of a group as we do about riding a bicycle. When a kid hops on a bicycle, rides for a few yards, then falls over, the Mom or Dad, usually says something like, “Look how far you rode! Let’s see if you can go farther next time,” not “You did good, HOWEVER, toward the end there, you really tapered off, so you should probably keep pedaling a little longer and make sure you keep a firm grip on the handlebars, and oh yeah, by the way, you looked a little shaky, so keep your posture upright so you can have better control of the bike.”

Most Nervousness in Public Speaking Comes From Perceived Failures Created From Constructive Criticism

HOWEVER, that’s the way most friends and coworkers coach speakers. We tell the speaker something good, but then we follow up with either a BUT or a HOWEVER. What that tells the speaker is, “What I just told you was just to make you feel better, BUT here is how you really did.”

A seasoned presenter will be able to accept this type of coaching more positively. A new speaker, though, will most likely reduce his/her confidence and focus primarily on fixing the problem instead of presenting well. For instance, if we count “Uhs,” then over time, a new presenter will focus on not saying “uh” instead of on presenting his/her talk well. Consequently, the speakers will most likely say “uh” more often.

Constructive criticism in public speaking usually sounds like the following (I’ve included natural interpretations that we all internalize when we hear these types of comments about ourselves):
- Slow down (You talk so fast that people can’t understand you.)
- Speak up (You timid little person… We can’t hear you.)
- Stand up straighter (We can all see that you are not confident enough to present well.)
- Take your hands off the lectern (We want to be able to see your hands shake.)

And there are dozens more. Just remember, the best type of coaching you can give a new speaker is to tell them they look natural and confident (if that is a stretch, tell them how much courage they have.) Let them get comfortable speaking a few times and have a few successes in front of a group. After a few successes, a lot of the menial nervous ticks and symptoms will start to diminish. When the trust is high between you and the speaker, and he/she knows that you think he/she is confident, then you can begin to offer a few constructive comments a little at a time.

Doug Staneart, doug@leaderinstitute.com, is CEO of The Leader’s Institute, www.leadersinstitute.com, specializing in leadership, public speaking, and team building training for individuals and groups. He can be reached toll-free at 1-800-872-7830.