

Speak up or maybe sink down

Verbal skills, confidence are major career assets, and they can be learned.

Laura Raines For the AJC

In sixth grade, David Greenberg had to give an oral book report, and he remembers the details clearly. "I stood up and said, 'Good afternoon, my name is ...,' and nothing else came out of my mouth. I couldn't remember my name," Greenberg said. "That's when I found out that sixth-graders are so kind and supportive. After that, I had a horrible fear of public speaking."

A second experience turned his fear around. A colleague suggested he visit a Toastmasters club when he moved to Atlanta. Toastmasters International is a nonprofit organization that helps people develop public speaking and leadership skills through practice and feedback.

"Everyone was friendly, but I'd been a member four months before I got up the nerve to make a speech," Greenberg said. At one point in his talk, he started to blank again, but then heard a woman whisper to her neighbor, 'He's a natural.'"

"It truly inspired me to know that someone believed in me," said Greenberg, who went on to teach public speaking and help business people develop their presentation

skills through his company, Simply Speaking.

"Top leaders are usually very fine presenters. Speaking with competence and confidence is one of the quickest routes to a promotion," Greenberg said.

Jennifer Kahnweiler — speaker, coach, writer on workplace success and founder of AboutYou — interprets public speaking in a much broader sense than speech making

and calls it "a foundational skill."

"In today's highly matrixed organizations when you are trying to influence others in meetings of all kinds, you have to be able to get your point across in a cogent way," she said. "It will benefit your career."

A recent client was competent and smart, yet when he spoke it was in a low tone. He didn't make eye contact, looked down and was fidgety, Kahnweiler said. He told her that people were always surprised when they got to know him and found out he knew so much.

"That's a perception gap — when what you intend to put out there isn't what people perceive," she said. "You want to show confidence and authority, but your tentative speaking abilities say something else — so there's a gap. The way to close that gap is to sharpen your speaking skills."

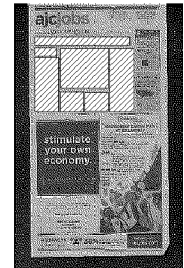
Almost everyone has had some childhood experience where he had to memorize a poem or give a report and flubbed it, said Marty Mercer, an Atlanta professional speaker, sales trainer and presentation coach. "I believe 100 percent that everyone can improve in public speaking with a little coaching, preparation and practice," he said.

Here's what the experts advise.

Prepare thoroughly

"I tell clients they may not have known the poem at 10, but they know their subject matter now, so write it all down. Having a script will help alleviate some of the anxiety," Mercer said. "Now simplify it. One of the biggest mistakes is trying to tell too much. Keep it to three points. Ask yourself, 'What is this speech about and what do you want your audience to do afterward?'"

Speaking continued on R3



"Find the meaning in your mission," suggested Waldo Waldman, a former Air Force fighter pilot, who coaches and inspires others to peak career and personal performance through keynote addresses. "If you're scared of heights or the water, you'd never dive from a 30-foot platform. If your child was screaming 'help' below – you'd jump," Waldman said.

"When you focus on how what you say will help your coworkers or organization, you'll focus on serving others, and how best to get your message across. If you keep the focus on yourself, you'll be afraid," Waldman said.

Develop your style

"Speak from the core of who you are," Waldman said. You don't have to be as funny as Jay Leno or as inspiring as Billy Graham. "People want to see what's in your heart – there's power in authenticity," Waldman said. "It's

not what you say, so much as how you say it, and how they hear it."

Powerful speaking comes in many styles, and even a quiet-spoken introvert can learn to make himself heard, said Kahnweiler, author of "The Introverted Leader: Building on Your Quiet Strengths" (Berrett-Koehler, 2009). "Preparation is important and that's something that introverts do extremely well," she said. She noted that many successful actors and comedians are introverts who have learned to "act" confident, even though they are quaking inside.

Forget perfection, Greenberg said. "The goal is not perfection, but connection."

Learn to tell a story

"A story is one of the easiest and best ways to make a point. People love stories, and it will humanize your communication," Waldman said.

Greenberg recommends keeping a story file, so that you'll have the right story at hand to reinforce your message. "I don't know a soul who won't listen to a well-told story," he said. "Stories stay with us forever."

Practice, practice, practice

"Players probably spend about 30 hours of field practice and film-watching for every 60-minute football game," Mercer said. Practice allows them to learn from their mistakes and perform better. People get more comfortable at speaking by doing it. Mercer suggests volunteering to speak at clubs or in church, joining Toastmasters or finding a coach or a mentor who will give honest feedback about verbal and nonverbal skills. A mentor can tell you to quit jangling your keys, smile more or slow down.

Arriving early to visit the site, test the equipment and visualize the audience can increase your comfort level. "A pilot doesn't jump in the plane and go," Waldman said. "He 'chair-flies' every mission. He goes through all the procedures and contingencies

and envisions success. Preparation and practice lead to confidence."

"The confidence people gain from being able to deliver a compelling

message, overflows into everything else they do," Greenberg said. "It gave me the confidence to start my own business."



Speech and presentation coach David Greenberg (left) works with Richard Starcher of Gerding Collaborative on giving a presentation. *Leita Cowart Special*