



A VIEW FROM THE BALCONY

Step back and see how your audience is observing you.

By Steven D. Cohen, ATMB

Every time you deliver a speech, you are, in fact, leading. Whether you are a student, an executive, a politician or a professor, you must lead your audience toward a particular objective. Your job isn't simply to communicate ideas to your audience members – it is to show them you are a leader.

As part of this process, you must think about how your audience members perceive you when you are standing in front of the room. You must examine what you do well and how you can improve. But how do you achieve this perspective?

In *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Lead-*

ing, Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky talk about the importance of “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony.” It's a metaphor that emphasizes the need for leaders to step back in the middle of a situation and ask themselves, What's really going on here? The “balcony” is a place where you can see yourself clearly and observe how your audience members respond to you.

Assessing Your Performance

You can reach the balcony in many different ways. For example, you might pause for a moment after sharing an important idea and mentally observe your audience members'

reactions. Or, you might ask a couple of colleagues to watch you deliver a speech and share their observations with you. You can even videotape yourself and review your speech at a later time. Whatever strategy you choose, you'll gain insight into how to improve your performance.

Stepping onto the balcony allows you to focus on what is actually happening rather than on what you are saying. From the balcony, you can feel the emotion and capture the energy in the room. Once you more firmly understand what your audience members experience while you are speaking, you will know exactly what actions to take.

That's the key – taking action. Thinking and analyzing are the easy parts; the hard part is changing your behavior the *next time* you speak. Indeed, powerful public speaking, much like leadership, requires that you constantly assess and improve your performance.

When I was in college, I remember hearing all sorts of filler words pop out of my mouth. It wasn't until I attended my first Toastmasters meeting that I realized I had a problem. When the Ah-Counter listed the total amount of filler words I had used, I asked myself, Did I really say “um” that many times? The Ah-Counter, in a sense, helped me get on the balcony and understand what my audience was hearing. Armed with this knowl-

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edge, I knew exactly what to do: Pause more frequently to reduce my use of filler words.

Identifying Your Default Speaking Settings

Each of us has default settings – automatic, pre-programmed behaviors that are comfortable and familiar. For example, when someone sneezes, we typically say “Bless you.” We don't stop to think about why we say it – we just say it. We also have default ways of getting dressed in the morning, preparing certain meals and walking from one place to another.

Similarly, we each have default public speaking settings – ingrained ways of communicating and interacting with our audience members. However, some of these default settings may actually impede our ability to make a powerful impact on our listeners.

To become a powerful public speaker, you must identify your ingrained speaking patterns and determine the impact that they are having on your capacity to lead. Do you nervously adjust your glasses or run your hands through your hair? Do you say “um” or “uh” every few words? Once you identify these habits, you can challenge yourself to adjust them.

Making Positive Changes

It is important to remember that making significant adjustments isn't an easy process. It may take time and the changes may feel uncomfortable for awhile, but the results are typically well worth the effort.

I often push my University of Maryland and Harvard Extension

School students to adjust their default settings in real time. At the beginning of every semester, I ask the students to stand in the center of the speaking area and introduce themselves to the class. Some students really struggle with this exercise and default to sharing impersonal, bland introductions. Here is an example:

My name is Susan. I've been in school for a couple years now, but I'm nearing the end of the road. I come from a large family in central New York and found my way here after living in a bunch of places. So, yeah. That's about it.

It's not that students like Susan don't have anything interesting to say; they just don't know *what* to say. I help them *get on the balcony* by suggesting that they ask their peers

for feedback. When they do that, the students discover they had sounded rather uninspired. I encourage them to share their passions with their listeners. When the students begin again, they instantly become more animated.

Like Susan, you must push yourself to adjust. The perfect place to do that is in Toastmasters. But you can't expect to become a powerful public speaker after attending a few club meetings. You need time to change the habits that are holding you back.

In his 2008 book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses the fundamental importance of practice. What “distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works,” writes Gladwell. “That's it. And what's more, the people at the very top don't just work harder...than everyone else. They work much, *much* harder.”

The only way to “reprogram” your speaking patterns is to embrace the art of practice. Make public speaking a hobby by seeking opportunities to speak. Ask to introduce a keynote speaker. Volunteer to speak at a company function. Fill a Toastmasters club meeting role. It doesn't matter where you speak. What matters is that you push yourself to get on the balcony over and over again.

If you commit to examining and adjusting your default public speaking settings, you will dramatically enhance your ability to lead. 

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