



Lessons from the Podium Public Speaking as a Leadership Art

by Steven D. Cohen

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Sneak Preview

Lessons
from the Podium

Public Speaking as a Leadership Art

Steven D. Cohen



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*To my mother—
for giving me the strength
to stand on the podium in the first place*

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Preface

Public speaking is not really about speaking in public. Although public speaking involves sharing ideas with a group of people, it is mainly a mechanism for exercising leadership.

Lessons from the Podium introduces a unique set of powerful public speaking techniques that you can use to champion a cause that matters to you. It is organized as an action-oriented guide that you can begin using right away to become a more effective public speaker. While this book won't make you a professional public speaker overnight, it will give you the tools—and hopefully the confidence—to stand up in front of a crowd and speak powerfully.

In the pages that follow, you will learn how to:

Lead Through Speech

Your primary goal as a speaker is to lead your audience members toward a particular objective. But before you can lead, you must think like a leader, and above all, know where you want to go. The first part of this book will help you develop a leadership mindset, examine your default public speaking settings, champion your cause, and embrace the art of practice. After understanding these concepts, you will be able to exercise leadership in new and exciting ways.

Connect with Your Audience

The key to connecting with your audience members is to imagine that you are going on a first date with them. If you want them to listen

to what you are saying, you must first show them that you are worth listening to. The second part of this book will help you conduct an audience analysis, manage first impressions, create a strong bond, and own the room. If you employ these ideas effectively, you will be able to impress your audience members and easily land a second date.

Use Your Voice

Like a guitar or trumpet, your voice is an instrument. You can use the musical properties of your voice to “coat” your words with emotion and take your audience members on a musical journey. The third part of this book will help you tune your voice, layer the five key musical elements, and elicit specific emotional responses from your audience. Once you master these concepts, you will be able to use your voice to produce a powerful symphony of words.

Construct Memorable Messages

If you want to construct memorable messages, you can't just write down a bunch of words and read them to your audience. You must think about where you want to take your audience members, and use words that will help you take them there. The fourth part of this book will help you use powerful language, tell moving stories, and leverage repetition. After digesting these ideas, you will be able to construct messages that leave a lasting impact on your audience members.

Deliver Specialized Speeches

You can stand out from the crowd by delivering powerful impromptu speeches, persuasive speeches, and inspirational speeches. Although these types of speeches may appear challenging, you can impress your audience members by structuring your ideas in specific ways. The fifth part of this book will introduce specific techniques to help you deliver dynamic speeches. By using these techniques, you will be

able to motivate your audience members to trust you, follow you, and believe in you.

These five parts are full of practical techniques that you can use to design and deliver powerful speeches. Even if you apply just a few of these techniques to your next speech, you will dramatically improve your ability to speak powerfully from the podium and captivate your audience members.

I hope that you will use the techniques in this book to pursue your passion and support a cause that really matters. Now is the time to use your voice to change minds and change hearts. Now is the time to *lead*.

The Leadership Mindset

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. Your job is to show them that you are a *leader*.

Your audience members won't remember everything that you say, but they will remember what they thought of you. This is why it is important that you develop the mindset of a leader. With the proper mindset, you will be able to convince your audience members that you care about them and that you want to help them achieve their goals.

To get your audience members on your side, it is essential that they trust you—trust that you believe in your message and trust that you will do what you say you will do. You can't expect your audience members to give you the benefit of the doubt. You must earn their trust by conveying the appropriate character or *ethos*.

In *The Essential Guide to Rhetoric*, William Keith and Christian Lundberg emphasize the importance of establishing credibility:

Ethos is not automatic. Think about cases where you weren't persuaded by a speaker; if you felt the speaker wasn't honest or didn't have your best interests in mind, you might have decided not to listen to all the (potentially good) arguments presented to you.¹

According to Keith and Lundberg, speakers can create a positive ethos by highlighting “the history of their actions, as politicians often do when invoking their voting records,” referring to “deeds that exemplify their character ... [such as] a war record or participation in a social

movement,” and citing “their education or the research they have done with experts.”² Ultimately, they must provide compelling reasons that their audience should believe what they are saying and consider their point of view.

Your audience members won’t trust you just because you rattle off a list of impressive facts or accomplishments. They will only trust you if you think and act like a leader. By developing a leadership mindset, you will be able to create a powerful ethos that makes your audience members want to listen to you. Once you have their attention, you will be able to take them on an experiential journey—a journey that excites their minds and teaches them something about the world or about themselves.

Stepping Back

We already have established that your primary goal as a speaker is to show your audience members that 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 can achieve this perspective by stepping back and getting on the balcony.

Ronald Heifetz and Martin Linsky talk about the importance of “getting off the dance floor and going to the balcony” to emphasize the need for leaders to step back in the middle of a situation and ask themselves, “What’s really going on here?”³

Let’s say you are dancing in a big ballroom with a balcony up above. A band plays and people swirl all around you to the music, filling up your view. Most of your attention focuses on your dance partner, and you reserve whatever is left to make sure that you don’t collide with dancers close by. You let yourself get carried away by the music, your partner, and the moment. When someone later asks you about the dance, you exclaim, “The band played great, and the place surged with dancers.”

But if you had gone up to the balcony and looked down on the dance floor, you might have seen a very different picture. You would have noticed all sorts of patterns. For example, you might have observed that when slow music played, only some people danced; when the tempo increased, others stepped onto the floor; and some people never seemed to dance at all. Indeed, the dancers all clustered at one end of the floor, as far away from the band as possible. On returning home, you might have reported that participation was

sporadic, the band played too loud, and you only danced to fast music.

Achieving a balcony perspective means taking yourself out of the dance, in your mind, even if only for a moment. The only way you can gain both a clearer view of reality and some perspective on the bigger picture is by distancing yourself from the fray. Otherwise, you are likely to misperceive the situation and make the wrong diagnosis, leading you to misguided decisions about whether and how to intervene.⁴

Once you are on the balcony, you will be able to see yourself clearly. As Heifetz and Linsky explain, the “balcony” is not just a place where you can observe others; it is, perhaps more importantly, a place where you can observe yourself.⁵ Getting on the balcony will help you analyze your own actions and observe how your audience members respond to you.

One of the most important ways to become a powerful public speaker is to evaluate your performance objectively. You will be able to achieve this objectivity from the balcony by noticing “that part of yourself that others would see if *they* were looking down from the balcony.”⁶ In fact, you will be able to understand, perhaps for the first time in your life, *how* you can improve.

There are many different ways to get on the balcony. You can pause for a moment during your speech and mentally note how your audience members are reacting to what you are saying. You also can ask a few people for feedback after your speech or videotape and review a particular speech on your own. But thinking and analyzing are the easy parts. The hard part is changing your behavior the next time you speak. Heifetz and Linsky emphasize that “staying on the balcony in a safe observer role is as much a prescription for ineffectuality as never achieving that perspective in the first place.”⁷

Indeed, powerful public speaking, much like leadership, is an “improvisational art” because it requires speakers to constantly assess and improve their performance.⁸ Heifetz and Linsky describe this process:

Going back to our metaphor, you have to move back and forth from the balcony to the dance floor, over and over again ... You take action, step back and assess the results of the action, reassess the plan, then go to the dance floor and make the next move. You have to maintain a diagnostic mindset on a changing reality.⁹

Stepping onto the balcony allows you to feel the emotion and capture the energy in the room. From the balcony, you can focus on what is actually happening rather than on what you are saying. Once you more firmly understand what your audience sees, you can take action steps to improve your performance.

In order to use the balcony technique to your advantage, you must know what behaviors to look for. I call these behaviors default public speaking settings.

Default Public Speaking Settings

Each of us has default settings—automatic, pre-programmed behaviors that are comfortable and familiar. For example, when someone sneezes, our typical response is “Bless you.” We don’t often stop to think about why we say “Bless you.” We just say it. After all, saying “Bless you” feels “right.” When it comes to public speaking, however, some of our default settings may actually be impeding our ability to make a powerful impact on our listeners.

Let’s try an experiment. Put down this book for a moment and clasp your hands together by interlocking your fingers as if you are praying. How does your grip feel? Comfortable, right? Normal, hopefully. Now, unclasp your hands, and clasp your hands together the *other* way, so that the opposite thumb is now on top. How does your grip feel now? A little awkward?

We each have a default way of clasping our hands—a pre-programmed grip that feels “right”—just like we each 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.

To become a powerful public speaker, you must identify your default public speaking settings and determine the impact that they are having on your capacity to lead. By getting on the balcony, you will be able to see “your own default [ways] of interpreting and responding to events around you ... and gain greater latitude and freedom to respond in new and useful ways.”¹⁰

As you observe yourself from the balcony, make a list of the default public speaking settings that are hindering your ability to speak powerfully. Do you nervously adjust your glasses or run your hands through your hair? Do you say “um” or “uh” every few words? Do you clasp your hands in front of your body or behind your back? Once you identify these default settings, you can begin challenging yourself to adjust them.

It is worth noting that adjusting default public speaking settings isn't an easy process; it's a lot like undergoing an orthodontic procedure to eliminate a gap, straighten crooked teeth, or correct an overbite. The process may take time and the changes may feel uncomfortable for awhile, but most people would agree that the result is well worth the effort.

Although you may have many problematic default public speaking settings, you don't have to adjust them all at once. You can make significant progress by pushing yourself to overcome nervousness, eliminate filler words, and use natural gestures.

Overcoming Nervousness

Most speakers are not naturally at ease in front of an audience. In fact, many people are downright afraid of speaking in public. But when you ask these people why they feel nervous, you quickly learn that they are afraid of what *might* happen. The truth is, most of the preconceived notions that people have about public speaking stem from uncertainty about what their colleagues or friends may think of them after they finish speaking.

The only way to deal with this uncertainty is to step up. You must face any fear that you have, even the fear of being in the spotlight, because public speaking is not really about being in the spotlight. On the contrary, it is about self-sacrifice. It is about using your voice to say something that really matters.

The next time you start to feel nervous, try using a technique called the “T Repeater.” Take a deep breath in and then exhale short “T” sounds very slowly until you are out of air. Go ahead. Try it. Breathe in

and exhale, “Tuh-Tuh-Tuh-Tuh-Tuh-Tuh-Tuh-Tuh.” Focus on relaxing your mind and your shoulders as you are exhaling. Try to make sure that your short “T” sounds are evenly spaced. Feel yourself releasing your nervousness as you let out one short “T” sound after another.

Another technique that you may want to consider is turning your palms up. You tend to be more nervous when your palms are face down next to the sides of your body. If you turn your palms up, you are less likely to have sweaty palms. So before you speak, turn your palms up, breathe in slowly, and then breathe out slowly. Repeat this exercise a few times. Then walk to the front of the room and dazzle your audience.

If you are especially nervous about speaking in front of an audience, you may want to try easing into eye contact. Many speakers believe that they have to look at their audience members right away. In reality, speakers need only create the *impression* that they are looking at their audience members. To create this effect, look at the space between an audience member’s eyes or the lower part of her forehead. If there is some space between you and your audience, you also can look at the top of an audience member’s head or the rims of his glasses. Shift your eye contact every few seconds just as you would if you were looking directly at individual audience members. You can use this technique until you are comfortable enough to make genuine eye contact with your audience.

Of course, these exercises will only help you overcome your last-minute jitters if you are prepared. Some speakers are nervous when they are getting ready to speak because they are not sure what they are going to say or how their speech is going to turn out. This is why it is so important that you know your material and know it well.

Eliminating Filler Words

Once you overcome your nervousness, you will be able to focus on one of the most common default public speaking settings—the use of filler words.

Why do we use filler words? The simplest answer is that we have been conditioned to answer questions immediately from an early age. When our mother or father asked a question, we were sure to answer right away—either because we wanted to show respect or because we were afraid of getting in trouble. Consequently, we feel the urge to speak when spoken to.

Some people argue that filler words are so common in everyday speech that they are generally accepted. But just because filler words may seem “natural” does not mean that they belong in formal speeches. After all, many people find filler words extremely distracting and equate the use of filler words with a lack of preparation or capability. Powerful public speakers work hard to eliminate words such as “um,” “uh,” “well,” “so,” “you know,” “er,” and “like” from their vocabulary so that their listeners are able to focus solely on their message.

There are two places where filler words commonly appear: at the beginning of a statement and in between ideas. See what happens the next time you are asked a question. You probably will say “um” or “uh” right away without even thinking. Then when you are finished discussing your first idea, you are likely to fill the silence with another filler word before transitioning to your next idea. You can think of these two “filler word hot spots” in the context of a two-paragraph essay. The first hot spot would be the tab before the first paragraph and the second hot spot would be the white space between the first and second paragraphs.

When you use a filler word such as “um,” you are thinking verbally. In other words, you are verbalizing your thought process. Armed with this information, it is easy to realize that the best way to avoid using filler words is to *pause*. If you’re not speaking, you can’t say “um”! Instead of speaking right away, take a couple seconds to think about what you want to say. Then begin speaking. Pause, think, answer.

The same technique applies when you’re transitioning from one idea to another. While you may be tempted to fill the silence between ideas with a filler word, remember to pause and give yourself a moment to think about what you want to say next. Don’t begin speaking until you are ready. Remember: Pause, think, answer.

It may feel unnatural to pause, especially because you've been thinking aloud for your entire life. I assure you, however, that you will deliver more powerful speeches and reduce your chance of using filler words if you give yourself time to think.

If you need help overcoming a filler word problem, ask a family member, friend, or colleague to point out when you say “um” or “uh.” You also may want to wear a rubber band so that you can snap yourself every time you use a filler word. I don't want you to hurt yourself; I want you to stop using filler words!

Although we live in a fast-paced society that seemingly demands instant answers, we must use the pause to our advantage. We may feel pressure to answer right away, but ultimately, we should only speak when we are ready.

Using Natural Gestures

Now that we have discussed a verbal default public speaking setting, let's turn our attention to a common nonverbal setting—the use of distracting hand gestures.

Many speakers default to crossing their arms, playing with their wedding ring, or putting their hands behind their back because they are unsure how to use their hands to their advantage. Although these behaviors may seem harmless, they can dramatically change the way that your audience members interpret your message. If you don't know what to do with your hands, leave them by your sides. But if you want to use your hands to enhance your speech, then you must learn how to gesture naturally.

Gestures are nonverbal extensions of your speech that emphasize the particular ideas that you are sharing verbally. They are important nonverbal tools that narrow the distance between you and your audience. When you reach out toward your audience members, you are physically getting closer to them. You also are conveying your emotions in a more direct and personal way.

Given the importance of gestures, you may feel tempted to insert them at particular points in your speech. However, you shouldn't try to time your gestures. Instead, you must give yourself permission to gesture naturally and purposefully.

In *There's No Such Thing as Public Speaking*, Jeanette and Roy Henderson explain that the best gestures aren't planned:

When the image is strong enough and the point important enough, your gesture center will automatically provide the uncontrollable urge to gesture, as well as the appropriate gesture to express that image. The best rule of thumb for gestures is simply to just *wait for it*, then when you feel it, *go for it!* Eventually, with experience, you will never need to consciously think about your gestures again.¹¹

It is important to feel rather than plan your gestures so that they naturally align with your words. Planned gestures look canned and insincere and often distract your audience members from what you are saying. Give yourself permission to gesture, and you will produce powerful, purposeful gestures every time.