

On Emotions & Public Speaking



Kim A Page

Article published by *infonomia*, the largest Spanish speaking innovation company of services, May 2007, link: www.infonomia.com/inf/articulo.php?id=71&if=52

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou,
American author

Why are we afraid?

When we are in a face-to-face conversation or talking in an intimate group, and even when we are talking over the phone, we are continually sending signals confirming that we are listening. Supplementing the words there is a continuous stream of non-verbal signals, the facial expressions, the gestures and the body positions, the apparently insignificant sounds like the *mm* and the *aha*, etc. These signals guide us during the conversation, helping us to adjust the content and the form of what we are saying. They give us feedback about whether the listener agrees or not with what we are saying, whether we are expressing ourselves clearly, whether the listener is interested or not. When we enter the stage as speakers, the conditions change.

Suddenly we are confronted by a number of faces without any facial expressions to support us, the pauses lingering in the air without any sounds from the listeners to guide the speech. Suddenly we are speaking in empty space, in silence, and this can activate our fear. In the silence we can hear our doubts and our inner monologues. We all have our personal profile of these scary monologues. They can sound like: "What are they thinking about me?", "They will realize that I haven't prepared enough...", "And what if they discover that I'm nervous...?", "And what if I have a black-out...?", etc. But behind the neutral faces and within the silence, passion and delight for what we are communicating might be hiding. I have often spoken to faces that seemed uninterested and sceptical, receiving acknowledgement and praise afterwards. Simply because the concentrated listening of an audience is manifested with silence and often behind frozen faces.

Transparency of the emotions

When it comes to public speaking, the fear of 'they will see who I really am', the fear of being transparent, is a paradox. We tend to think that the formula for giving a good speech is based on acting like professionals, transmitting information in an organized way, and more than anything, staying as neutral as possible. The secret is, to connect with the audience there is no better ingredient than the use of emotions. It is the emotions that give us credibility and the ability to persuade and affect the audience.

While we think that a good speaker should stay formal, what we really want is blood! This generates many smiles when I introduce the idea to MBA students, but putting it into practice, they realize how effective it is. And to be able to use the emotions efficiently we need to know them and to feel them.

A master in action

The top of the bill attraction of the Innovation Forum arranged by CIDEM in Barcelona this year was speaker and business guru Tom Peters. Filling the stage in front of an audience of 2.400 people, he left no one disappointed. Within a few minutes his performance was the one of a true master. And how did the audience know? The key to his mastery was the management of emotions. Starting out with a joke like so many lectures, the audience relaxed to receive an anecdote. But Mister Peter knows that the anecdote can be used for more than merely illustrating his point of view.

To him, the anecdote is a *crescendo*, accumulating motives to carry the audience along to his first emotional exclamation. And when I say exclamation I mean exactly this. The tool includes cries, and loud ones! This speaker displayed an effective use of emotions throughout his lecture. Like waves of energy, each new theme moved from a quiet place in a low voice to gain more and more intensity, until a point of climax with excitement in a loud voice.

And the two key phrases were: "I hate...!" and "I love..!" The example speaks for itself. Tom Peters, who has given more than 1.000 lectures, knows that the use of emotions is what enables him to persuade and come across to his audiences.

Bathing in oneself

As the situation of public speaking can activate quite a high level of stress, it is common to be demanding with ourselves in the preparatory phase, sometimes approaching the verge of self destruction. For the inner critic, the situation is a feast, and the demanding voices make us investigate more, adjust the contents, and read the script again and again. And of course it is important to prepare the contents of what we want to transmit, but often the preparatory task that I recommend is bathing in oneself.

This means looking for a situation of pleasure, finding what we do to recharge the batteries and to connect ourselves with our bodies and our emotions.

Some people relax listening to music, others do sports, go for a walk or watch a favourite movie. The important thing is to find a situation in solitude where the pleasure is guaranteed beforehand. It is not about inventing new forms of enjoying, it is about doing that, which makes us feel spoilt in the best sense of the word, enjoying 'being inside ourselves'. Because the moment we enter the stage our bodies are telling the story of how we are feeling. And because our bodies and our wellbeing is what we use to connect with our emotions, giving us confidence.

Instead of considering the emotions as something that should be tamed, it is more beneficial for the speaker to look at the emotions as the abundance that gives nuances and power to the speech. Approaching the emotions with this attitude it is possible to transform fear into a radiant presence and an efficient speech.

Kim A. Page, trainer in non-verbal communication and in public speaking, collaborator at the business schools EADA, ESADE, ESCI, European University - Barcelona and at Copenhagen Business School - Denmark.