

## GAINING NERVES OF STEEL

By Denise Deveau

Most business leaders face stage fright at points throughout their careers, whether it's speaking to a large crowd, talking to people at a networking event, or having a difficult conversation with a single person on your team.

"It's only natural", says keynote speaker Carol Lempert. "Many started their careers as engineers, accountants or programmers. It never occurred to them they would ever have to give presentations. When they transition to leadership roles, they're called upon to do something they never thought they'd have to do."

When dealing with stage fright, Lempert says she breaks coaching down into two categories: the mental and the physical. On the mental side, she has a number of techniques presenters can use to get through a trying experience.

One simple practice is to look at an audience as a single entity. "Think of everyone as a ginormous block that acts as one person. Given that most people

are usually good interacting one-on-one, you can replicate that feeling by shifting your mindset."

Another is to run through a worst-case scenario in your mind. "You won't get fired for forgetting a few words. It's not about being afraid to make mistakes. It's about how to recover if you make one. If you think about that ahead of time, you will know what to do if things go badly."



**Executive coach Carol Lempert says part of success for business leaders is knowing how to manage stage fright.**

Don't give in to your inner critic. "Let's acknowledge there's that little voice that

says you hate presentations. So figure out what will give you energy instead, such as 'I will be proud of myself if I do the best I can.'"

Visualize your presentation ahead of time. "Olympic skiers run through the course in their head before leaving the gate. The same works for presentations. Walking through different scenarios can be really powerful."

Imagine an ally in the room with you. Lempert draws this technique from her experience as an actress auditioning for roles. "I imagine my grandmother sitting beside the scariest looking casting person in the room. That gave me confidence." Or, place yourself into the role of someone who gives you confidence. "For example, I might love to show up in a room like Meryl Streep, so I imagine myself stepping into her body and feel that confidence flowing through me," Lempert says.

Put this moment of your business life into perspective. "What you do for a

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living requires you to stand in front of others and talk. You are not going to die. Unlike a firefighter, your job does not require you take physical personal risk. In fact, the audience wants you to succeed and learn something from you.”

There is no denying the physical stress that goes hand in hand with presenting. The adrenalin release can manifest itself in many ways, from stomach pains, to perspiration, to an accelerated heart rate. Lempert has these tips on how to manage physical responses.

Take five to 10 deep breaths to trigger a relaxation response. “The best time is within the first couple of minutes of feeling that adrenalin rush.”

Get grounded and smile. “People get so focused on the people looking at them, they feel light. Feel the feet in your shoes and the ground beneath them. Also, forcing yourself to smile can short circuit the feeling of being afraid.”

Don’t get flustered by a tired or grumpy looking audience member. To overcome the feeling, simply look for friendly faces in the audience and focus on them. Turn fear into excitement.

“When I coach executives, I ask them to tell me about a time when they were really excited about something — a first date or a roller-coaster ride perhaps. Excitement and feeling nervous produce the same sensations in the body. “All nerves are energy. It’s what you label them that gives you power and kick starts them in a positive way.”

Find time to be in the presentation room a day or so before your event. “Walk around it and really own the space,” Lempert says. “Rehearsing out loud can also be helpful.”

Avoid caffeine until after the presentation. “Drinking coffee can amplify the adrenalin response,” Lempert says. “Drinking water an hour

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before the presentation will help to flush away the adrenalin.”

Perhaps the most important thing to remember in all this is that you are not alone.

“You might think successful people don’t get stage fright. They do. Just because you are successful it doesn’t mean you don’t get nervous. Part of executive success is knowing how to manage that.”