

Inside Advice From a Professional Speaking Coach

With the call for speakers now open for the 2017 PowerSpeaking Leadership Summit this October 16 - 26, it's useful to review what it takes to become a great presenter. Rachel Rodríguez is a personal coach and trainer who has extensive experience with all types of presentations. We reached out to Rachel, PowerSpeaking coach, professional speaker, and author for a short conversation about the fundamental truths of being an effective communicator.

PowerSpeaking, Inc: Thank you Rachel, let's start with your background. How long have you been a coach with us, and what do you think it takes to become a masterful communicator?

Rachel Rodríguez: In my 17 years at PowerSpeaking, I've trained over 11,200 individuals across the US, Canada, AsiaPac, and Europe to be more engaging, strategic speakers. Through these successful coaching engagements, I've helped people develop more dynamic, compelling leadership presence in their talks. In my own career as a keynote speaker and published author I've delivered talks on leadership development to my own clients around the country. As I reflect on my rewarding work with PowerSpeaking I notice there are certain fundamental truths that apply for all of us.

PSI: That is quite a few reference points to draw from! It sounds like you have ideas on what it takes to become a better speaker. What's the one thing you notice all the best speakers learn how to do?

R: In most organizations, there are many people around you who are good at the business, good at the technology, and good at the selling (or the science). But those who rise to the top - and you probably see this as well - are those who are also very good at communication. Specifically, they are good at presentation skills. It is worth your time to invest attention and focus to this part of your career. Consider your own development. Where would you like to be a year, two years, or five years from now? Presentation skills are jet fuel for your career tank. I'll never forget flying to England to work with Apple London. We were setting up for the group early that morning when a gentleman came into the room. He sought us out to inform us that he'd taken our class nine months before and recently gotten a promotion. The feedback was that he had "polished his executive presence," and they wanted to give him more visibility within the organization. It made our day - and it hadn't even started! We hear anecdotal evidence of successes all the time.

PSI: It sounds like being a life-long learner and willing to have the diligence for practice are important. You also mentioned getting outside training. Is it true that speakers will become more effective by simply choosing to focus on improving their communication skills?

R: It means for all types of speakers, taking the time to hone their skills means they are willing to repeat themselves. Many people are familiar with the famous scene from the film Karate Kid, where Mr. Miyagi has young Daniel practice repetitive moves over and over again. Much of becoming a refined presenter is based in this same idea of 'muscle memory' and building your own skill —practice makes better. Malcolm Gladwell in "Outliers" talks about the "10,000 hours" it takes to achieve world-class expertise. Whatever aspect of presenting you could strengthen, it simply begins with practice all the time, on everyone, to reach your mastery. If you get intimidated, overwhelmed or frustrated as you practice, remember: By your adult life, this process has already occurred countless times...when you learned how to ride a bicycle. Or play guitar. Or snowboard, or drive a car. Over time I've seen how practice has refined my own speaking skills.

PSI: Successful speakers are practiced speakers willing to overcome personal fears. That sounds great, but what if someone practices frequently and stress in the moment is still too much? How can one learn how to manage their nerves?

R: Nerves are a huge concern for many presenters. An assurance I offer to our clients is the simple reality that the audience doesn't have X-ray vision. I encourage clients to remember who is in control and that the audience can't 'see through you'. Even in a small-group training of 10 or 12, I let participants know that I could be having a meltdown while standing in front. But guess what? I've learned how to not show that stress. Truly they won't see what is occurring inside. If nerves or anxiety are a concern for you, as you start your project update or keynote, remember: They can't see what's happening on the inside.

PSI: What do you tell clients who are particularly anxious of being nervous?

R: Remember, all the audience knows is what you choose to show. Until the nerves dissipate, keep reminding yourself of that. That stress is a discrepancy between your internal state and what the audience perceives. Use that to your advantage by slowing down and projecting a calm, confident presence.

PSI: That can be easier said than done!

R: Stress regulation is fundamentally a physical process. Good speakers are able to understand the physical stress they feel and remain competent in communication. I think it's useful to use an analogy in thinking about self-regulating stress. Think of a snow-globe. Figures inside a landscape that is sometimes chaotic, sometimes still – but always a glassy surface. If you think of your 'self' and brain as a snow globe, it can get shaken up with nerves and stress before a talk. How do you calm the snow globe? Breathe. The morning of, or even minutes before your presentation, take deep belly breaths with a longer exhale than inhale. With this "stealth strategy," no one at your team meeting, all-hands or conference talk will notice. You can self-regulate, calm the snow globe and come across as a more grounded, deliberate leadership presence.

PSI: Where do you recommend novice speakers practice this?

R: The best speakers think from all angles – the world is their stage and they perform all the time. I encourage students to attend speaking events, watch great TED presenters or recruit a speech coach privately. You interact with hundreds of people within a given week—at work, at home, and in the community. Polish your skills constantly. Practice on family and friends. The pathway to "better" and possibly mastery starts here. And remember as you "practice on civilians" to reach mastery, bring along with you a spirit of fun.

PSI: Thank you. It's always enlightening to hear from the coaches on what it takes to become a talented presenter! Rachel Rodriguez is a PowerSpeaking coach, professional speaker and author to children's books. She will be back to give us a more tips on gestures and moving with ease next time.

*Take your skills on the road this October 16 - 26 for the 2017
 PowerSpeaking Leadership Summit - call for speakers now open!*