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“Tongue Tied: How to Overcome Your Fear and Loathing of Public Speaking”

By Mary Anne Dorward

For most people, public speaking is worse than death. Two recent national polls asked “What are your top ten fears?” Public speaking ranked number one and two.

Recently I worked with a team of discouraged engineers. They were short-listed on an important bridge project and had to make their presentation the next day. I listened to their pitch. They had created a competent PowerPoint presentation and made relevant commentary. But something was wrong. Their entire presentation was absolutely flat. I noticed the fear on their faces and the tension in their bodies. I asked them how they felt about public speaking. Both men groaned. “I hate it! I’m terrible at it! I’d rather die!” I nodded sympathetically, and asked one of the men, “Why are you an engineer?” He frowned. “I don’t know. No one has ever asked me that question before.” I said, “Well, you must love something about engineering or you wouldn’t still be doing it after all these years.” He thought for a moment and then laughed. “Well, I used to build with Legos as a kid.” I persisted, “Well, you still build with Legos now, only they weigh several tons. Why?”

He became very quiet. With tears in his eyes, his voice became filled with emotion. “I build bridges because they will be here long after I’m gone. My children will be able to walk across my bridges and say, ‘My dad built this bridge.’ From thirty thousand feet in the air, I will still be able to see the bridge I build. That’s why I’m an engineer.” I turned to his fellow engineer who said, “Hell, I agree with everything he said, only I’d be seeing my bridge going by at 75 miles an hour!”

I suggested that we build the new presentation around this shared passion for engineering bridges. I reminded them that the client would ultimately choose a team of engineers who shared their own deep and personal commitment to the project. I told them that if they could capture not only this shared humanity but also their own unique vision of the new bridge, their presentation would become both compelling and captivating.

The entire focus of the team shifted. Their nervousness and discomfort dissolved. They spoke with confidence and talked excitedly about how passionate they felt about their work and how committed they were to this new bridge. We shaped their thoughts and ideas and then wrote them into the presentation. Both men and their presentation became infused with focus, authenticity, and power.

This approach not only transformed their presentation, but also the Q and A afterwards. Instead of the normal exchange of facts and supporting data, it became a lively conversation about their mutual love of engineering and the importance of leaving a meaningful legacy behind. As the engineers left the room, everyone commented on how unusual and inspiring the exchange had been. By including stories of personal passion about their work,



these engineers transformed their presentation from competent and competitive into compelling and memorable. They also got the job.

So in your next speech or presentation, first begin by discovering the passion you feel for your subject and then build your speech around that. Create a conversation with your audience and it will catapult you right over your competition. Who knows? You might even enjoy the experience of giving a speech.