

You Can't Learn to Walk Without Falling Over.

By Nigel Higgs.

Published in Training Management Volume 5 Issue 15 July/August 1993.

© Nigel Higgs and Actors Mean Business. This article or any part thereof may not be copied, published or reproduced in any way without the permission of the author or his agents. For reference purposes and ease of use, this article may be downloaded or saved so that it can be read offline.

"Do you have any presentation experience?" your Boss asks.

"Er... yes," you reply.

"Are you any good?"

"I should give a confident image," you think to yourself. "Yes," you say, "quite good."

"I need you to do a presentation on our corporate report, the meeting's tomorrow. Here are some notes I've made." He says, dropping them in your hands.

"Sorry?" Your jaw drops, your legs go weak, you get that funny, sick, churning feeling in your stomach and suddenly, very suddenly, you desperately want to go to the toilet and never come out again.

"Is that a problem?" He asks.

"No. No." you stutter, "No."

"Good." He says, shutting the door behind him.

And it's at this point that the little voice starts to whisper in your ear....

"You're not that good at presenting," the voice says.

"I'm not terrible," you whisper back, "Am I?"

"Remember the OHP slides you lost," the voice hisses.

"What?"

"And the time you got your notes mixed up," it adds.

"Oh yes..."

"And no one seems to enjoy your presentations."

"No..."

"No one ever asks questions."

"I know..."

"And what would you do if they did!"

"Ah..."

The sweat starts to pour off you, you don't notice at first until you see the damp patches on those notes your boss gave you, all that crinkled paper and smudged ink. Your mouth goes dry.....

Hang on! Just stop this now. Why do so many people feel like this whenever they are faced with a presentation?

The unknown - that dark place where all you want to do is say "Beam me up Scotty!" But, do you really want to be James T Kirk? After all, he isn't really James T Kirk at all, he's an actor and, as we all know, actors have to get up in front of LARGE groups of people and get them to believe the most unlikely things.

How do they do it? More to the point, why do they do it? Simple really, they find a way to enjoy it. How can anyone enjoy standing up in front of lots of people and risk making a complete fool of themselves? It takes practice and a lot of honest self-awareness.

Lets go back to The Unknown. Anything containing an unknown quantity is threatening to our security, and anything which threatens our security also

threatens our confidence, and anything that threatens our confidence also threatens our security.....

So how do we conquer the Unknown?

There are a number of ways, one is by taking risks, not wild, abandoned risks but small, calculated ones. This way we extend the limits of our confidence, just like exercising our bodies we can exercise our confidence. Small stretches, small steps, small risks. But not too small. Another is by being very well prepared - being clear in what your objectives are, and keeping to them. Know the subject, research it as much as possible. Make contingency plans about problems that may arise, thus giving you the ability to be able to deal with difficulties as they arise.

But these are technical, practical things, these are the sort of things that you get told in any presentation course. The real solution lies in that little voice that speaks to you when your confidence is low, when you feel out of your depth. Who is this whispering critic who never shows their face? You, but then, not you. So where does it come from?

Let's face it, most people like to give helpful advice, to tell someone 'how it should be done', most of the time all they want to do is to show how clever they are - glory without responsibility. It's bad enough when we do it to others but the big problem is, we do it to ourselves. Why do we? Modesty? Perfectionism? A need to be right? Well, partly, but mainly because it gives us a cushion, it softens the blow, it allows us to feel better when we fail. And nobody likes to fail. Failure is bad, failure is negative, failure is a dirty word - or is it?

We pass through our early life, learning as we go. We try to walk and fall over. Then when learn how to walk, we try to run, and we fall over. Then we get a bike for Christmas, and we fall over again. We all do a lot of falling over as we grow up and most of this is done because we want to be like our role-models - Mum & Dad. They look as if they do things so easily, and most things are easy to Mum & Dad mainly because they've done a hell of a lot of falling over to get where they are, but not all things are easy for them, they just hide it well (just wait until you become Mum or Dad, then the fun starts). It's at this level of expertise (grown up level, 14-18 years old and beyond) that things usually start to fall apart. We start to see ourselves as role-models and role-models don't fail, and it's now that failure becomes such a problem. The pressures to succeed are all around us, exams - getting better grades than anyone else, job hunting - getting a better job than anyone else or even finding a mate.

So what has this got to do with presenting? Because, for many people, presenting is such a traumatic experience. It threatens our self image, our perceived status, our inner security, and oddly enough, it's from this same place that the solution can be found.

If you can see yourself more clearly, and like what you see, then you can stand up to anything that happens to you, simply because, by doing this you give yourself the right to fail - and learn - and get better at what you do.

Challenge that voice, argue with it and be open and truthful with yourself. Once you start to challenge the voice, your confidence will start to get better and the risks you take in getting better at presenting will be productive, because, when you fail, you'll be able to see where it went wrong much more clearly. Correct all those wrong images you put on yourself and see yourself as you are - a normal person trying to do the best you can, no one can do any more than that.

And don't forget - you're not the only one feeling the way you do. Actors do this for a living and not only do they have their own, in-built critic, they also have those that publish their thoughts in the newspapers to contend with!