



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Tension

by Michael Landrum

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*"Do the thing you fear and
the death of fear is certain."*

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

Public speaking is often listed as a top fear for people. We are all made anxious and vulnerable by speaking to a large group, and we become extremely tense. In almost any human endeavor, tension interferes with effectiveness. We can clearly see athletes working to dispel their tensions at the free-throw line, before stepping into the batter's box, preparing to receive a tennis serve. They take large gulps of air and sigh them out, stretch their necks, shoulders backs and legs, fiddle with their hands, their equipment, their clothing. They take practice swings and visualize the perfect performance. Actors, dancers and musicians have similar rituals backstage before entering for a performance. Even painters, sculptors and writers must find similar ways to deal with the anxiety that precedes the beginning of work. The blank page, canvas or block of stone, can provoke a paralyzing tension.

This is not to say that tension serves no purpose. A person devoid of tension would be dead. Tension, as we are describing here, is an excess of energy to the point that energy must be expended to restrain energy. The ideal state is to find a balance between relaxation and tension that permits a fluid mobility. In most activities, once the move begins, the tension is released and directed. In peak performances a smooth flow develops that the performer often describes as feeling effortless. An opera singer in this state, might describe herself as feeling like a hollow tube through which the music surges, unimpeded. Athletes call it "being in the zone."

For speakers, the major problem with tension comes at the beginning. Nine-tenths of the

speakers who "crash and burn" are in trouble in the opening seconds of their talk. Here are some techniques to get you past those treacherous moments and start you flowing toward a peak performance. These steps assume that you have researched your audience, practiced thoroughly and set up the room with whatever you require to present your talk.

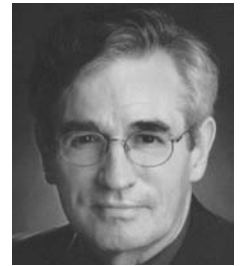
1) **Memorize the first and last couple of sentences.** No, I don't advocate memorizing the whole speech, but setting the opening and closing is a tremendous relief. Especially since these words should carry the point and purpose of the whole talk.

2) **Take time for a "pre-game warmup."** When dressing for the event, take ten minutes for a stretch, some physical and vocal exercises and a deep-breathing relaxation period. At the end of the warmup, you'll be more relaxed physically, vocally and mentally; you'll feel vigorous, alert and in the moment. As you leave, remember to "XYZ" (eXamine Your Zipper).

3) **Engage with people before your turn to speak.** Conversation and banter, where it's appropriate, can be wonderfully relaxing. Take advantage of every opportunity to laugh—laughter exists to relieve tension.

4) **Yawn.** Just before you're introduced, find a discreet way to cover a wide yawn. This is an excellent tension reliever, loosens the facial and vocal muscles and brings in a good deep breath.

5) **As you step to the lectern, stand tall, breathe deeply, smile and pause.** Take a moment to exhale your tension as you look at your audience, find someone to speak to and give them your first sentence. □



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Something To Ponder

"Why should I fear death? If I am, death is not. If death is, I am not. Why should I fear that which cannot exist when I do?"

—Epicurus, philosopher
(c.341-270 BCE)
