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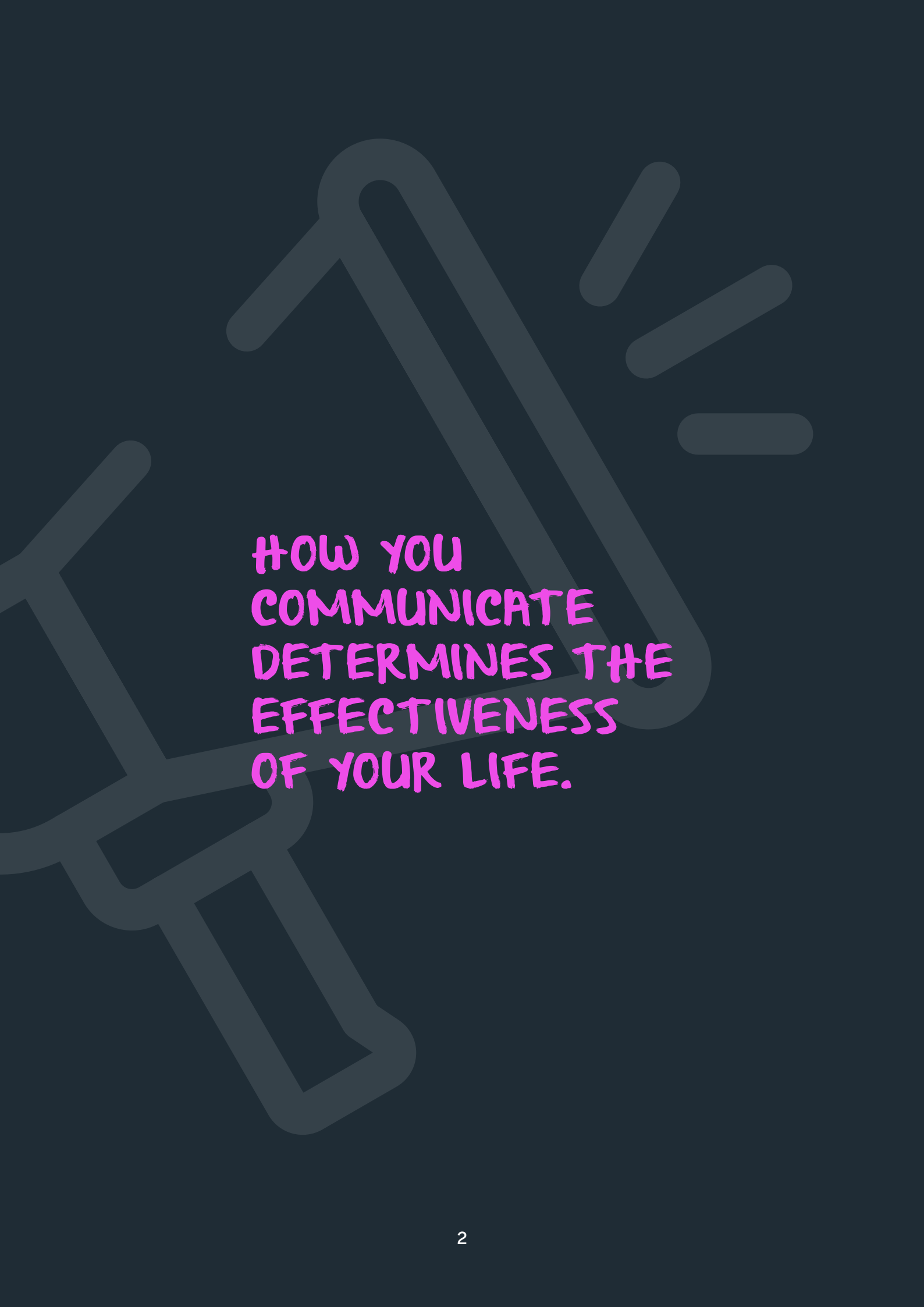
Burn The Deck:

How to become an impactful,
persuasive and inspirational speaker.



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HOW YOU
COMMUNICATE
DETERMINES THE
EFFECTIVENESS
OF YOUR LIFE.

BURN THE DECK: HOW TO BECOME AN IMPACTFUL, PERSUASIVE AND INSPIRATIONAL SPEAKER.

You know that storytelling is as old as we are. You know an inspirational speaker when you hear one. And you know it's never about The Deck.

Treatises on oratory date back to ancient times, and all cultures had an oral tradition before a written one. We are still emotional beings inspired by the right words delivered from the heart into our souls.

You spend much of your working day communicating in public, often to distracted audiences. There is a small window to make an impact, so you need to be both prepared and spontaneous in a variety of virtual and real environments. The principles of good storytelling will give you an edge.

Becoming a compelling storyteller in **2025** will create more value for you than any other personal development you undertake this year. You will be more impactful, persuasive and inspirational – a better leader and a better human being.

Here are my five steps to better presenting:

- 1. Find your motivation**
- 2. Build strong foundations**
- 3. Develop divergent thinking**
- 4. Achieve unconscious competence**
- 5. Take risks**



I. FIND YOUR MOTIVATION.

Attitude is everything when expertise is the objective,

so decide that this is the year you become a better speaker.


Improvement never happens by accident, and if you didn't start a year ago, the next best day is now. You must be motivated to move, or you won't improve.

Storytelling puts you front and centre. Confidence is foundational as you take your place on the stage, but before you get there, you must find your motivation. The hardest part of your first January 5 km run was getting off the sofa.

Nothing worth achieving is easy. You improve by doing the work. You'll find your own reasons, but here are a few until you do:

- Everyone you speak to has 70,000 thoughts a day and a phone in their pocket containing addictive distractions. When you speak, there is competition, but people will listen if you engage them. For sure expectations are high but humans crave live, authentic, real-world experiences more than ever. Imagine exceeding expectations.
- Teams are investing in quality events this year to get us away from daytime TV. These are great opportunities to be impactful, visible and appropriately memorable.
- Your words matter whether you are the early keynote speaker, running a workshop before lunch, or sending them off to dinner high-fiving.

- Being an articulate storyteller is foundational for all leaders. Chairing, presenting or persuading others is likely to be up to 80% of your week. Being average is not enough.
- Your career leans heavily on the skills and behaviours of the articulate storyteller because how you communicate determines the effectiveness of your life.
- Passion is nothing without purpose! ¹



Jimmy was inarticulate without a football at his feet but had won the Scottish Cup at Hampden Park. A creative midfielder and legend in the amateur leagues, he came to my club as a veteran and took pre-season training, leading from the front for three hours on hot Saturday afternoons in July. Every lap we did in summer paid out in January when Saturday afternoons on a frosty field were unappealing.

I remember his mantra when one more lap of the perimeter was demanded, but summer-soft bodies said no.

He said, “You’re only cheating yourself, lads – anything above a walk will do.”



Take personal responsibility for your storytelling capabilities.
Decide to take action and start now.

ANYTHING ABOVE A WALK WILL DO.

2. BUILD STRONG FOUNDATIONS.

Too many presenters today are slaves to The Deck and have learned little else. This category error will come back to bite you one day.

Get the basics right and you'll have the confidence to boss The Deck, or bin it.

Audiences love confidence.

It's time to step away from the laptop and go back to ancient Greece. Aristotle's ethos, pathos and logos are foundational to storytelling.

Ethos is character - how you appear to your audience. It starts before you get in the room, so work on your personal brand and reputation. Ensure your LinkedIn profile is well-written and on-brand; the perfect appetiser for the feast you'll provide. Respect your audience by being well-dressed and well-groomed, standing straight and speaking with clarity, focus and power. On the Zoom equivalent, imagine you are at work, so don't be in pyjamas.

MYTH BUSTING


I'm giving you these principles as perhaps you have heard the nonsense that words are only 7% of the impression you make, with voice 38% and body language 55%.

This is wrong. As a rule of thumb, ethos, pathos and logos are 30%, leaving 10% for the X Factor, which is covered in my final point. ii

Look at other speakers and comedians and note what you like about their style. I like the way comedian Chris Rock moves on stage and, as I have always been energetic and kinetic, I took some of his moves on board. And as I have a fast pace, it makes more sense for me to pay closer attention to the measured cool of Barack Obama than the fiery rhetoric of Martin Luther King.

Pathos is how you connect emotionally with the audience - how you move them. It means personalising your message, simile, metaphor and analogy, using humour, and never getting caught down the rabbit hole of too much detail. It means minimising your reliance on technology, ensuring it's only there if it's adding something. It means saying it like you mean it and being appropriate to the occasion. It means make 'em laugh and make 'em cry.

Logos is how you display your expertise and persuade the audience by constructing an effective case. You must speak to the purpose of your presentation, structure it clearly and be just clever enough. There are no prizes for delivering an impenetrable ramble accompanied by visuals that confuse the audience and have you on a demented click-through to a late finish. Know your audience before you get in the room and before you start creating your storyboard.



The Sagrada Familia in Barcelona is amazing. Everyone queues to get in and immediately looks up, but I like to slap the foundations in the basement museum. Especially if I'm brave enough to go up the tower.

Soon, we will need to be braver - an extra 50 metres more courageous - when the central tower is finished. Long-dead builders did the groundwork that will see a 170m-tall spire crown Gaudi's masterpiece directly above the nave by the end of the decade.

But seriously, go slap the foundations first.





3. DEVELOP DIVERGENT THINKING.

You're a good presenter but, like a few drops of Angostura Bitters makes all the difference to a Singapore Sling, the sweet spot for professionals is to add a dash of creativity to conscientiousness.

Creativity is the single most important element of compelling storytelling, and you may not be creative. ⁱⁱⁱ

Specifically, you need to practice divergent thinking (brainstorming) before bothering about The Deck. You must step away from the laptop. Then, iterate 17 times before your story is ready for an audience. This is part of the KWC Method for compelling storytelling, which I created 24 years ago. ^{iv}

A word or two on AI: It's a catalyst for creativity, not a curative. You need creativity to input good information and more creativity to decide what to do with what comes out. ^v It's worth reading Benny the Blue Whale by Andy Stanton, a funny and insightful exploration of Chat GPT. ^{vi}

As you become more creative, you learn that throwing out the trash is as important as finding pearls; you could call it having a “good eye”, and that's both learned and innate.

A process for creativity helps the less creative types tell stories, just as giving a creative type a method for using Excel helps them make spreadsheets. Constraints act like buffers in ten-pin bowling, so at least you'll hit a few pins.

HERE ARE TWELVE WAYS YOU CAN ENCOURAGE YOUR CREATIVE RIGHT BRAIN:

- Be intensely curious; it's a wonderful world
- Practice divergent thinking; consciously meander towards solutions
- Give yourself time to do nothing; let your mind wander
- Collect ideas in a notebook; doodle, draw, make notes
- Read and write more; try different books and podcasts
- Be eclectic in your interests
- Get out of your comfort zone any way you can; it doesn't need to be bungee jumping
- Go to an art gallery or a new supermarket or walk a different route
- Get a flipchart and some big pens
- Take a creative for a coffee. I'm on LinkedIn; ping me
- Suspend your need to get to the right answer
- Write your obituary on a page as if you liked yourself

You can also check out your creativity levels with a Big Five personality test. Creatives tend to be high in extraversion, openness and disagreeableness. ^{vii}



The first time the entire group got to present in the main exhibition space in the architecture school at Strathclyde University was in my second year. It was amazing to see all 50 students given the same brief and, five weeks later, submit plans, sections and elevations.

We all produced different interpretations of the brief for an architect's house despite all using the same four A1 sheets. What I learned that day is that there are many ways to be creative, and we were all grappling with ideas and trying to define our styles.





4. ACHIEVE UNCONSCIOUS COMPETENCE.

Becoming a natural takes preparation and practice.

Mere competence isn't your destination, but it is important to have confidence in your ability. The benefit is that you stop worrying about the mechanics of speaking and put your focus, from the outset, on the audience.


Learning any skill means moving from unconscious incompetence to unconscious competence. You've learned to drive without constantly looking at the pedals, but your first lessons were a hot mess. Here are the signs you're nudging unconscious competence:

- Your voice projects well and is trustworthy; you can rely on it in extremis.
- Your body is open, and everything implies intent to move towards your audience; you are kinetic.
- You always speak to the purpose and are appropriately memorable; the audience is always in your mind and expectations are always met, often exceeded.
- On Zoom, you look like a favourite newsreader, not the local mafia Don in witness protection.

Once you know you're good, admit it to yourself without false modesty. Then, aim for unconscious competence in all areas, in the way driving becomes as natural as walking. Your ability to trust your voice and body and fulfil the brief is well worth developing because confidence is understood in real-time by the audience... and they like it.


You get kudos for competence from the moment you enter the room. Combine that with looking smart and well-groomed, whoever you are.

I spoke recently at an event where Dame Kelly Holmes was the 5 p.m. keynote speaker. Dame Kelly won 800m and 1500m gold at the Athens Olympics, but some in the room may not have known that. What everyone knew, though, was that she stood out as the most immaculately dressed person out of 400 attendees.



Parental love is a powerful force, but one of life's pleasures is the day your precocious 17-year-old anticipates that driving a car will be easy (after all, mum and dad can do it) but can't shift the vehicle an inch without instruction. Your progeny quickly learns, in the empty Sunday morning car park of that industrial estate, that they are unconsciously incompetent.

Enjoy that moment because soon, they will be competent enough to ask for the keys... and you'll be looking at increased insurance premiums





5. TAKE RISKS.

**You are never more alone and alive than when
in front of an expectant audience.**

You must learn to love the anticipation and stimulation of the moments just before you are introduced. You must be fully present and think only, “Bring it on”. This can only happen if you take risks.

Keep notes for yourself and visuals when the audience needs them, but consciously reduce your reliance on both. When you speak extemporaneously and lose the script, this puts as little distance between your thoughts and the audience as possible. Audiences give gifts to an expert who educates, entertains and responds in real time.

Challenge yourself to create stories in the moment. Lose your fear of failure and accept they won’t all win Pulitzers (tip: they don’t need to).

When I finish a gig, the business development team, understandably invested in a happy client, will ask how it went. My reply is always, “Fine, yeah, good... terrific audience... they loved it... apart from the profanity... be ready for the feedback”.



Nineteen people from a magic circle law firm were around three sides of the long rosewood table. It was our first such pitch, and we knew we were not going to win. We were a makeweight or wildcard at best.

Michael and I sat in front of a white screen, farthest from the door and behind a humming projector, hot from overuse by the last consultants. I turned it off. Hauling a flipchart between our chairs, I sketched my favourite flip image on it: a huge, blind monster.

Within a minute, I had launched a book between the rows of shocked professionals.

It went further than I expected down the highly polished table, and I never saw that book again.

It was at that point that we won the pitch.

Michael and I still reminisce about that pitch. I'm certain we agreed on the flipchart opener, as everyone else would use a deck, but Michael had no idea I would make a hovercraft of the book. Neither did I. The decision to throw it was taken between sitting down and my opening remarks.



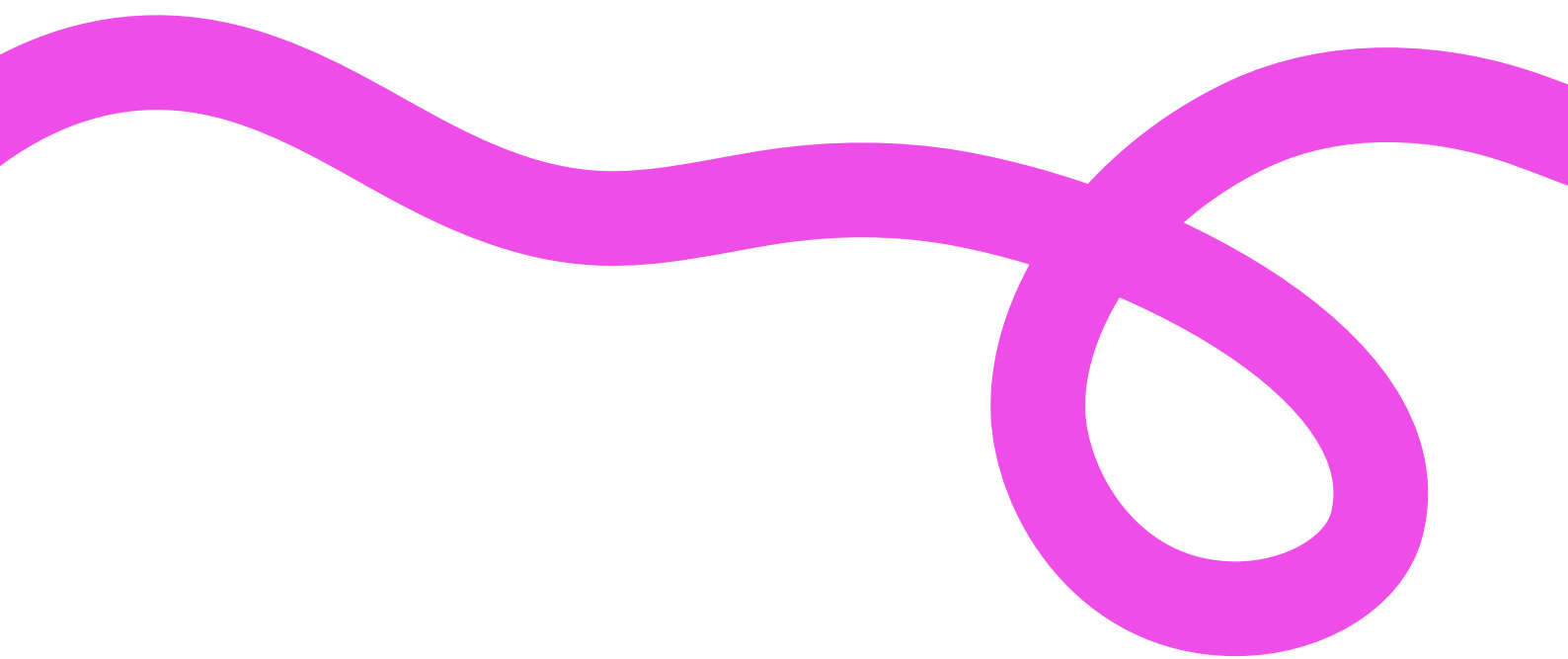


MASTERING PUBLIC SPEAKING - UPLEVEL TO EXPERT.

- Display an effortless confidence from the moment you arrive.
Everything about your comportment says this gig is in safe hands.
When you feel the gods are not on your side, you can authentically fake it.
- The audience will sense you are keen to be in front of them because you are. You are more than confident; you're politely impatient.
There is a glint in your eye, and you are keen to get up there and show them a good time because you know they will like what you say.
- Network beforehand so they know you before you start.
Ideally, integrate some of the chat into your opening remarks.
- Have a novel opening prepared just for this event and practice it enough so you know it well; same with the close.
- Keep up with your area of expertise so you have mountains of material and can display effortless expertise. This sharpens the axe, and the audience will sense they are listening to someone with deep knowledge. Abraham Lincoln said he'd spend a lot of time on the axe if he had a tree to fell.

- Have a simple system of notes that are a route map you can immediately create, even if asked at the last minute, and that can be read and understood when they are on a lectern or table. I like a black Sharpie pen and white A4 paper.
- Consciously engage fully with the audience, so it is as natural as blinking, even when the road gets bumpy. You learn more from the tough gigs anyway, and bombing in front of a crowd now and then goes with the territory. Treat the whole thing like it doesn't matter.
- You'll learn from the fiercest feedback and biggest disappointments and be better the next time.

If you still rely too much on visuals - though if you've assiduously gone through these five steps, that's unlikely - the best lesson of your life will be when the projector fails or computer says no. Displaying your expertise and finishing bang on time while telling a story that keeps everyone in the room on their toes is where you need to be: No one who relies on reading words on a wall does this.





AND FINALLY... A NOTE ON FLOW

You can't conjure flow up; it's a product of having accomplished stages one to five through hard work. If you can't play clarinet, no amount of confidence will give you finger memory, increased lung capacity and perfect breathwork.

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REFERENCES

- i [Towering Ambition...](#)
- ii [Busting the Mehrabian Myth](#)
- iii [Three Secrets of the Best Storytellers \(15-minute listen\).](#)
- iv [Check out our ABCDE Method](#)
- v [How to be the Pitchmaker](#)
- vi [Benny the Blue Whale](#)
- vii [Find Your Big Five Personality Scores](#)



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