

Getting Over the Fear of Public Speaking

A Conversation with Tim 'Gonzo' Gordon and Roger Pike

T: Based on every survey taken in America over the last two hundred years, public speaking is the number one fear.

R: Yeah. Most often Number One. Sometimes Number Two, most often Number One. 'Snakes in a Plane' sometimes may be Number One someplace!

T: Dating a really pretty girl in high school is right up there too, knowing that you're going to be nervous and knowing you'll say the wrong thing and make a fool of yourself.

R: Without question! So the thing is, how do you get over your fear of public speaking? Everybody's going to be nervous the first couple of times they get up to speak in public. The question is, is how do you pass that?

T: It might be interesting to share some of our personal experiences, because I know you started speaking in public in high school.

R: I did.

T: I got into radio at the age of nineteen. So by the time I was 20, 21, 22, it was very comfortable for me to talk in front of a microphone with nobody in the room - especially nobody in the room - maybe one or two people in the room, I could handle that. But you're talking one-on-one with one person at the other end of the radio, even though there may be hundreds or thousands of listeners. And it wasn't until the boss would say "You've got a remote broadcast this weekend," or "You've got to emcee a contest or a concert," and I would get literally freaked out and I would sit and stew on it...

R: You didn't introduce the Oak Ridge Boys at the State Fair? I did that once...

T: I introduced local bands, other bands. I remember one thing we did was called The Ugly Contest, and it was around Halloween.

R: I win!

T: And people would show up dressed as really ugly things. This thing went on for a good hour, and of course you had to manage this. And when I was told I was going to be the host of this, this was one of the scariest things of my life, knowing I was going to get up there. Not having a plan. The thing was going to happen and I was going to be GLAD when it was over. But it was very, very difficult. I tell you, when I finally joined a Toastmasters club, it was because I'd run out of excuses not too. So it did take me a long time, but the bottom line with getting over the fear of public speaking is you have to do it.

R: Like the Nike thing, right. Now here's the deal: speaking is a learned discipline. And unless you have gone through a considerable public speaking education with the opportunity to practice, practice, practice in front of an evaluative group, the first few times you do it, you're flat not going to be any good.

T: There are a few naturals, but boy there's not too many of them.

R: I don't want to say you're going to suck, because probably you're not, but you're not going to be the kind of dynamic speaker that enralls your visitors that you want to be and you hope you're going to be. All of that is technique and it's learned and you have to learn it. And you have to put it into practice. So the very first thing you need to do in order to become a good public speaker is accept that the first few times may not be up to the standards that you set for yourself, but DO IT ANYWAY!

T: And the thing about sucking is, SO WHAT? It's over with; you're done, even if you did suck. It's not the end of the world. That's one

of the perspectives you have to take. It's just a presentation, it's just speech, it's not your life, it's not your career. It's just a few moments in time. And that once you get up there and give it, you may be sweaty and you may be stuttering, you may be doing all sorts of things that you don't like, but it's going to be over.

R: It's a presentation you gave; it's not who you are. It is not the definition of your self worth in this universe.

T: And if you do another one shortly thereafter, you're going to remember the things you did wrong, and you're going to discard a few of them. You'll still do a few, but the next time around it won't be so bad. I think really the key is to do it consistently and have a plan.

R: And have a plane. And do it anyway. And for the love of Pete, as often as you can, record yourself and evaluate. There's stuff you're going to do, that you're not going to know what you're doing that's going to detract from your skills, that somebody else is going to point out to you, or that you can point out to yourself but only if you can see it on tape. You won't know it's there when you're doing it.

T: And have an open mind about people giving you comments and feedback. Don't have an ego about it, because if you take it in the spirit they're intended because these people that are evaluating you do want to get better, they do want to support you, they do want to you succeed. They're going to give you information - if they're any good - that is going to be helpful.

R: A simple thing might be: I've evaluated speakers who had no idea they were standing onstage and wringing their hands through their whole speech. And you're eyes become riveted on their wringing hands. And your ears become riveted on the noise their knuckles are making as they're wringing their hands.

T: And I may have mentioned this, I had to take a speech class in my second year of college when I was doing radio, and I thought, I don't want to do speech - I'm doing radio! But I had to give a

speech and at the end the instructor asked me “Do you know what you were doing the entire time?” I said no. “You were playing with your pen!”

R: And the thing about it is, is that the people who do these things, who wring their hands or play with their pens have NO CLUE that they’re doing it, or that it’s detracting from their message. And in the end it’s the message that’s important. And you need an evaluator. So if you videotape yourself so that you can see for yourself what you’re doing that’s one thing, but even then, even if you can see for yourself what you’re doing, a second opinion is NEVER out of place.

T: And it won’t happen overnight to get over your fear of public speaking. As Roger said, it is a learned craft, it is a learned skill. And there are some things you can do to help make that learning a little bit better. And part of that is what we’ve gone over in some of our earlier discussions on Communication Steroids, is to stick to one or two or perhaps three points in your message. Practice those, rehearse those, don’t dig deep, don’t try to stick the kitchen sink in there, your audience is not expecting that.

R: We were talking about this in the ‘green room’ -

T: --in the green room as a matter of fact -

R: and so many people think that preparation is about developing more material. Preparation is NOT about developing more material. Preparation is about perfecting your presentation for the material you have. So when we say prepare, prepare, prepare, we are not saying go the library and do a mountain of research so you can document every possible permutation of every possible extrapolation of every possible interpolation of everything that could happen on your topic! That’s not what we mean when we say prepare. Prepare means that you take your three main points, understand them, and then you focus on how you can best present them. You have to know enough to be able to answer questions, if that’s part of the presentation.

T: Part of the reason that they're asking you anyway to do a presentation or if you're going to do a presentation is that you DO know the area. And let's say, just for example, you're the manager of a bank, and you're asked to give a short presentation at a dinner meeting on what the state of banking is in the state, or the city, or maybe an world overview. Something that a lot of people may not know about, but you know well because this is your business. Generally speaking, what you talk about will be something that is 'in your wheel house' as they say. You'll know the topic.

R: So what it is, do you suppose...and I'm trying to drag us back onto the central thesis, not that we were off of it, but take it in a slightly different direction, what do you suppose that makes people fearful of public speaking?

T: Fear of failure, fear of looking like a doofus in front of ten people, or a hundred people or a thousand people. Fear of falling flat.

R: The point is that the reason think they're going to be a bozo or a doofus or whatever it's because they compare themselves to the greats. When you go into a public speaking environment, you can not go into that public speaking environment expecting to be brilliant. You don't go into it expecting to be Zig Ziglar. If you do, you're in for a fall.

T: Or Bill Clinton, or Ronald Reagan or Tony Robbins...

R: Exactly. Those people earn their living doing just that.

T: They took years to get there. They had huge desires to want to do that. If you do any public speaking, it does take a little groundwork to start and as we talked, preparation is one of those things.

R: But don't set the bar at 'brilliance!' Set the bar lower than brilliance.

T: Competence.

R: Competence is a good place to set the bar, at least initially.

T: Don't hit a home run when you can bunt! And get on base. Or even if you get base on balls. You're on base!

R: Don't try and hit a home run. All you're going to do is pop one up into shallow left center.

T: Exactly: Baseball analogies are just ...

R: Coming out like fly balls...

T: Right.

R: The point is you can't be a Tim 'Gonzo' Gordon in your first presentation. You just can't. You're not going to do. You're not going to be Zig Ziglar, you're not going to be Ronald Reagan, you're not going to be The Reverend Jesse Jackson - these are all great speakers... you're not going to be George C. Scott. These are all great speakers. Don't set the bar at that level. Set the bar at getting the information that you need communicated, communicated. Set the bar at competency, I love that word.

T: We've seen so many people give their first speech in various presentations. And their goal - they want to get through it without DYING. They want to be able to sit down and say "That's OVER! I got that under my belt." That's a good goal.

R: It is. So many people tell me that the way they got past their initial fears is that they stopped thinking of themselves as - well in one case it was a public speaker, but as any kind of presenter. And they started thinking of themselves as a teacher. Or as a seminar leader.

T: Or expert, or a consultant.

R: A consultant, sure. The way that you envision yourself, the way that you see your own persona is so important to how you're going

to feel when you're up there actually giving the presentation. If you're up there thinking that you're a public speaker, then you're going to expect the kinds of success that public speakers have, the kinds of outcomes they have.

T: And you're going to set yourself up for a big fall because you're not a public speaker yet. But you can make yourself one.

R: And that's what we do, we help people become better public speakers. In our instruction seminars we've talked about some tips and tools. For example memorization is generally a bad idea. You want to only memorize you're opening and closing and then your main points. If you try to over-memorize you end up putting your mind in...

T: getting lost...

R: you get lost in the twists and turns of your language instead of the information that you're trying to impart.

T: What I like to do is have the two or three bullet points that I want to cover in mind, and know there are a couple of stories involved there, maybe an anecdote, there's going to be some facts and figures and you're got all of these in your mind. They're not memorized, but they're there, and when you get up on stage and start to do your presentation you know the information you're going to cover. It depends on the situation. You may in a situation where it's much more loose and less formal so you can meander a bit. It may be a company meeting where all you're really doing is giving a synopsis of the new widget you're coming out with and you're been called upon from your department to do this because you're new to the company or you've been promoted or for whatever case may be, but you know what you're going to talk about essentially.

R: I like to think of it this way. You want to become a pilot. And so you take flying lessons. And there's a guy with you the whole time evaluating what you're doing. Teaching you to fly an airplane. And you finally get to a point where you're going to solo. And you don't try to land a freaking 747!

T: No, you land the plane you've been flying for the last 15 hours or whatever.

R: Exactly ! You don't take your brand new student pilot's license and go to TWA and say man, I'm ready for the big leagues!

T: Earlier in the green room before we turned the microphones on and started talking in front of everybody, you had made a comment about finding out online what some of the so-called experts said about getting over the fear of public speaking and you said you liked it because you disagreed with it! Like what?

R: one of the things that everybody talks about is preparation. And most of them talk about memorization. And I think that absolute memorization is a crummy idea. I think you need to understand your topic; you need to know what you want to tell people, you need an opening and closing that you are going to memorize and you need to know where you want to go 0 an outline of the speech. If you try and over-memorize you do one of two things: either you get lost in your language and you spend your whole speech thinking about 'what was I going to say next.' Or you end up robotized.

T: And the chances are if you memorize something and you're not experienced getting up in front of people one of the most likely things that's going to happen to you is that you're going to forget what's next. The deer in the headlights look. And you're going to just feel that 'everybody's looking at me.' You may not have the skills or technique to get past that smoothly. That happens to a lot of people; that happens even to experiences speakers. They get to a point where they go - uh oh - but they've been up there enough, they know how to do it so they can cover, they can handle, they can move on. It also shows that you're human if you can do that and move on from that comfortably. If you've got your speech 'memorized' and you forget what's next it can be a disaster. So you want to be comfortable with your topic, but not necessarily memorizing what you're doing. There are some times when it's appropriate to read a presentation. It depends..

R: And another thing that I disagreed with was one person who said, 'you need to find ways to relax' before you speak. And I disagreed with that on two counts. First, I'm always filled with nervous energy before a speech before I give a presentation. Always, always.

T: Adrenalin.

R: Adrenalin, but I'm not relaxed. The second thing is, that is an impossible thing to achieve. You're looking at a guy who's going to be nervous in their first public speech, saying "relax, pal." And the answer is, "yeah, freakin' right!"

T: Yeah, there's no way! (18:30) I don't think you need to even try to relax: breathing techniques, bending over to touch the floors. You're going to have butterflies, you're going to be nervous. You've heard it said before, try and get those butterflies to fly in formation. But as they say, this too shall say.

R: The zen yoga thing is just not going to help you!

T: But the perspective as we mentioned before is this is not your life, this is not your career, this is just getting up in front of people and talking. And generally speaking it's talking about what you know. And that's pretty easy. Once you realize 'okay, all I have to do is get up in front of people and talk about what I know. Maybe it's something specific, maybe it's something I'm going to research, maybe I'm writing something, but nonetheless it's something I'm going to know.'

R: There are ways to get better at it. For example, if you know in three months you're going to have to a tradeshow presentation in Florida, and you know its coming, well, why not find some people within your organization who need the information that you're going to have to do at the tradeshow and do the tradeshow for them. And do it three or four times in-house. Before you take your act on the road.

T: And you ask those folks at the end to not necessarily give you a professional critique but just say 'what do you think?' 'What would

you change?’ ‘What did you like?’ Ask those types of questions and you’re going to get some body to say ‘you know that thing you said about the Widget coming out on Friday - you’re wrong!’ Or whatever the case may be. Or ‘that just didn’t come across well.’

R: When I used to give speeches competitively, we did something called ‘campaigning’ our speeches. We would write the speech that we were going to give at an international competition and I’ve done several and we would take it out on the road. We would give it at Optimist clubs, we would give it at Rotary clubs luncheons, we would give it in front of our friends, we would have a party and have people over and give it then. I’d give that speech in front of an audience twenty times before I’d actually give it in competition. It was called ‘campaigning’ your speech. Mostly I did it in front of service organizations. That just worked for the kind of environment I was in at the time. But it makes you a champion.

T: I think we can wrap this up, Roger. It’s been great talking about getting over the fear of public speaking. Anybody who wants to be a public speaker and puts their mind to it and does a little bit of work and a little bit of time, don’t expect the world to change overnight, don’t expect to become the best speaker in three weeks. It’s not going to happen. But like any other skill, you’re going to make regular progress. Can you imagine trying to learn an instrument in a few weeks?

R: Your public presentation skills, your public speaking skills are a muscle. And you have to develop them.

T: You’ve got to practice. I like the musical instrument analogy. If you start young, fifth or sixth grade, by the time you’re in high school you can play it pretty well. But if you going to become very good at it you’ve got to keep playing it all your life. Whether you’re a guitarist or a drummer, it doesn’t matter what that instrument it - whether it’s your voice up in front of people - you have to keep doing it and keep developing. But you can’t think that it’s going to happen immediately or instantly or overnight you’re going to become - overnight - this great speaker. You’ve got to realize there’s a fear, and once you overcome that fear, you’ll get better.

Major Points to Getting Over Your Fear as a Public Speaker:

- Practice makes improvement.
- Speaking in Public is a learned discipline.
- Get feedback.
- Know your topic and material.
- Don't go overboard memorizing. If you want to memorize anything, do it for the open and close.
- Practice again.
- Videotape yourself.
- Give your presentation to co-workers and friends. Take their feedback with a grain of salt (some will know what they're talking about and others won't!)
- Realize that you're going to be nervous the first several times - it's OK!
- Realize that developing your speaking skills will take time, practice and commitment.
- Picture yourself as anything but a public speaker: an expert, a consultant, a leader - and concentrate on getting the essence of your message across.
- Practice again!