

CEP Magazine – September 2022

Overcoming the fear of public speaking

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Glossophobia is the fear of public speaking and it is a remarkably common social phobia. Someone can be comfortable and outgoing in working the networking breaks at an SCCE conference, but terrified when they are asked to address the same group of people as an audience. For many of us (if not all of us) in ethics and compliance, public speaking is not something we can avoid. Whether we are conducting trainings for our colleagues or clients, presenting to the board of directors, or wanting to share our knowledge and ideas to help other people learn at a conference, we are all going to have to get up and speak from time to time. While I consider myself to be a somewhat socially awkward person and will never be the life of the party, I have learned to enjoy public speaking, and it is now something that I actually look forward to. In this short article, I will share some of my suggestions for how you can address any fears you might have about public speaking and let your knowledge and ideas help other people.

Who are you trying to help, and what do you want them to learn?

I am an advocate of reframing “training and communication” to “learning and engagement.” While the difference might seem subtle, I find “training and communication” is too focused on the process or intent, whereas “learning and engagement” is focused on the desired and actual outcome on the target audience. Even if you are a big-name speaker or the number one expert in your field, the focus of any talk or presentation is the audience. As the speaker, you need to ask yourself: How do I get the audience from where they are at the start of the presentation to where I want them to be at the end of the presentation? You need to have a clear understanding of who you are trying to help, what they need to know, and then be able to reduce that information to a very small number of key learning outcomes for your presentation.

A good way to test whether you have a clear understanding of who you are trying to help and the desired learning outcomes is to see if you can summarize your presentation into one or, at most, two sentences. I find it is useful to then incorporate that one-sentence summary into my presentation, including toward the beginning of my presentation (to introduce the audience to what we are going to cover) and at the end (as a reminder of the key aspects of what we covered). Here is an example of a one-sentence summary from a talk on the role of leadership in an effective compliance program that I have used at a few SCCE events: “Leaders, managers and supervisors—at all levels in an organization—play a significant role in helping to build and sustain a culture of ethics and compliance throughout an organization; this happens when they are engaged, regularly talk about compliance, and are incentivized to use their roles to drive integrity and compliance.”

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