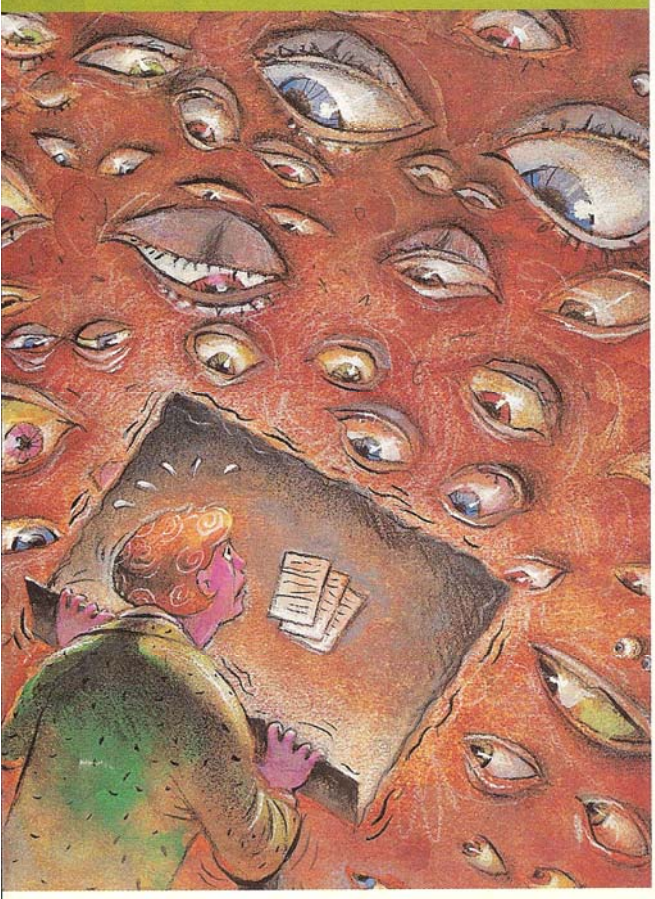

Speaking Up For Yourself

If making presentations inspires only fear, investigate the growing industry that teaches corporate titans, middle managers, and business owners the mechanics of slam-dunk speeches.

By Cynthia Hanson

I have a confession: I'm not afraid to speak in public. My comfort comes from the nearly three decades I've spent "on stage" — tap dancing in recitals, reading the daily announcements over the school intercom, performing in community theater, and hosting local beauty pageants.

Yet today I'm anything but comfortable as I prepare to address seven strangers in a powder-blue conference room. My palms feel sweaty and my heart is thumping. I'm nervous because for the first time, I'm about to receive an objective assessment of my public-speaking ability. Even more distressing, I'm about to see what I look like on videotape.

From the back of the room, instructor Joe Bill tells me in a soothing voice to state my name, occupation, and shortcomings. A few minutes earlier, he'd tried to put us at ease with this little gem: When *The Book of Lists* asked 2,000 Americans what they feared most, forty-one percent said "public speaking."

I take a deep breath and start talking: "Good morning. My name is Cynthia Hanson. I'm a magazine writer and part-time journalism instructor at Northwestern University. I'm here to be cured of fast talking and hand flailing."

Confidence can take you only so far in public speaking. At a certain point, you need to acquire some solid skills and kick some bad habits, like talking too quickly or too softly, gesturing too much or not enough, pausing at the wrong point or never pausing at all.

This is why I've come to the Chicago office of Communispond Inc., a company that trains corporate titans, middle managers, and business owners on the mechanics of slam-dunk speeches. "Executive Presentation Skills" is a two-day oratory boot camp, where participants learn the finer points of public speaking — from controlling volume to organizing information — and then practice in front of the group.

After I finish my introduction, a Communispond employee hands me the tape and sends me into the next room. Bill sits beside the VCR, waiting to deliver a diagnosis. A lanky guy with a receding hairline, round wire-rim glasses, and engaging smile, he could be the

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twin of *ER*'s Dr. Mark Greene. Hopefully, he'll have the same gentle manner.

"You're scanning the crowd," Bill says, pointing to my eyes, which dart right to left, left to right. "You're looking over their heads. See how you're craning your neck?"

I'm stunned. I thought eye contact was my strength.

As Bill presses the pause button, my image freezes on the screen. To my horror, my hands are clasped in front of my chest, as if I'm praying or begging.

"Your hands are a huge distraction," he continues. "Keep them at your sides. Use gestures to emphasize a point."

"Am I doing *anything* right?" I ask.

"You didn't use any non-words, like 'uh' or 'um.' And you didn't sound nervous."

But I *look* awful, I think. On tape, my cheekbones have vanished, leaving my face as round and flat as a pancake. My hair is crying out for a trim. And my black pantsuit — the one I thought was *trés* chic — is so bulky that I have no figure.

I'm a talking head.

Bill senses my disappointment. "This isn't about looks," he says, ejecting the tape. "This is your baseline — the natural you. Our goal is to improve the natural you."

It's going to be a long two days.

The logo on the blue instruction manual reads "Communispond ... To Speak As Well As You Think." Since 1969, the New York City-based company has trained nearly 300,000 businesspeople worldwide to do just that through intensive classroom seminars and private coaching sessions. Today, more than 12,000 folks per year enroll in courses at Communispond's seven offices, including Dallas, Detroit, San Francisco, and

Newport Beach, California, as part of their ongoing professional development. (Sponsoring companies — usually Fortune 500 firms — foot the $1,200 bill for "Executive Presentation Skills.")

Not surprisingly, enrollment has soared by nearly 4,000 participants in the past two years. "Back in the early Nineties, corporate America was so busy figuring out who should be downsized that training took a back seat," says Kevin Daley, Communispond's founder and CEO. "People who survived downsizing ended up with expanded jobs. And in this new interactive business world, presenting before a group is a crucial part of a manager's responsibility.

"Information, by itself, is not exciting," he says. "It's only exciting when the presenter brings it alive."

In 1969, as an account supervisor at J. Walter Thompson, the Manhattan advertising giant, Daley recognized a need for Communispond after hearing colleagues drone on and on in meetings. If advertising executives — the very people who pitch products for a living — weren't dynamic speakers, surely other folks also could benefit from coaching, he reasoned.

Of course, Communispond isn't the only firm cashing in on corporate America's need to stamp out stage fright. Businesspeople also are flocking to other public-speaking companies, including Speakeasy Inc., in Atlanta; Decker Communications in San Francisco; and Franklin Covey in Salt Lake City. In fact, in recent years these firms have expanded their programs to satisfy the growing demand for lessons in the art of presentation.

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"There's a heightened awareness that strong communication skills are no longer a luxury — they're a critical necessity," says Victoria Seretny, regional executive vice-president at Decker. "Employers want their managers to communicate more effectively both inside and outside the organization."

Jeff Butler, vice-president of com-

munications for Franklin Covey, agrees: "People make business decisions based on information that they receive in presentations. If the message is muddled or if the delivery isn't effective, companies can lose clients."

Company officials are quick to point out what makes their program unique. For example, Speakeasy's "Talk So People Listen" is a three-day course ($1,500) that concentrates solely on delivery and features instruction from a certified speech pathologist; Franklin Covey's "Presentation Advantage" is a two-day seminar ($350) that addresses how to design and deliver your message; and Decker's two-day "Effective Communicating" ($1,100) examines physical behaviors, such as movement and facial expressions, that can be changed overnight.

Despite the subtle differences in content and price, the nuts and bolts of Communispond, Speakeasy, Decker, and Franklin Covey are strikingly similar — small classes (ten participants is the norm), skills drills, coaching, and videotaping. Essentially, the courses teach participants how to control themselves (give up nervous habits), control information (organize content), and control fears (boost confidence).

"We're not trying to turn you into a motivational speaker," says Communispond instructor Paul Curtis. A no-nonsense former Army officer, Curtis team-taught my class with Joe Bill. "We're trying to make you more comfortable in front of a group. It takes just one bad experience, such as getting laughed at during show-and-tell in kindergarten, and you can be scared for the rest of your life."

Communispond graduate Bill Lincoln, director of international quality at Metal Container International Inc., in St. Louis, knows the feeling. At forty-two, he's spent most of his career avoiding the limelight, largely because of past disasters. "Every time I got in front of an audience, I'd freeze and forget what I'd planned to say," Lincoln recalls. "Then I'd start rambling, and I'd speak so quietly that nobody could hear me. But now, my job has thrust me into the spotlight, so I must improve my skills. To me, going to Communispond is like going to the dentist — it's a struggle to get through it, but in the end, you're glad you did."

Ditto for Becky Haglund Tousey. She enrolled at Communispond after being promoted to archives manager at Kraft Foods in Northfield, Illinois. "I'm making more presentations now, both formally and informally," says Tousey, thirty-eight. "I'm comfortable

with scripted speeches, but I know that it's also important to feel comfortable speaking off the top of my head."

These training companies let you do just that. Skills are introduced, then practiced and critiqued. Instructors interrupt participants in mid-sentence, gently reminding them to speak up, stop fidgeting, or slow down. At the end of each exercise, participants also offer feedback. "The audience's reaction confirms your strengths and weaknesses," Curtis says. "When you see the improvement on videotape, all of a sudden you can tolerate the criticism."

Back in the classroom, I'm not the only person disappointed with her diagnosis. Our group includes a bench scientist who whispers, a corporate diversity manager who lacks focus, and a commodities trader whose expressions are overly dramatic.

But there's no time to dwell on mistakes. We're about to learn the elements of dynamic presentations. The first is "eye-brain control," in which you direct one thought to one person. "Focusing on one set of eyes at a time will stop you from scanning the crowd," Curtis explains. "You'll control nervousness, think more clearly, and eliminate non-words."

Next, we learn about physical presence. Hands should be at your sides, not in your pockets, behind your back, clasped in front of your chest, clenched in fists. Curtis recommends a "balanced stance" — feet placed a shoulder-width apart and nailed (at least mentally) to the floor, so you won't shift weight or sway. A stance that's too wide — think Yul Brenner in *The King and I* — appears defensive.

"Use hands appropriately," he says. "Don't do the bent-arm-Bill-Clinton thing. It's too repetitive."

In our second taped exercise, we're asked to relate an anecdote and use body movement. I describe my experience as a Hollywood "seat filler," someone who fills empty seats at a televised event while celebrities are temporarily out of the auditorium. Only I don't describe what happened. And when I watch the video, I'm appalled.

"I look like an escapee from a game show," I shriek, pointing to my arms and exaggerated expression.

"Well, you *are* theatrical," Bill says, chuckling. "It's okay in small doses — and as long as it's appropriate for the audience."

He listens to how I almost knocked down Angela Lansbury in front of the stage.

"You're rushing," Bill says. "Find the pause and use it for emphasis. Fast talking is perceived as insecurity."

On the positive side, I've stopped craning my neck like a turtle. In one short lesson, I've mastered eye-brain control.

After lunch, we work on "visuals" — the transparencies for the seven-minute talk we'll deliver tomorrow. Before the seminar, we chose a topic that we might present on the job. Now we're supposed to draw pictures and graphs that will be shown on an overhead projector and used to enhance our main points. To me, this is the toughest part of the curriculum, since I'm a lousy artist and I never use overheads to teach journalism. At least my topic — "Five Steps to Success as a Freelance Writer" — lends itself to a rudimentary sketch of a staircase.

Once we've finished our transparencies, Curtis explains the most common mistake people make when using them: reading the information off the screen. "It minimizes your contact with the audience," he cautions. "Plus, there's a tendency to read quickly, so it throws off your pace."

The solution? Stand next to the

screen at a forty-five degree angle. Then use Communispond's "touch-turn-talk" method: touch the screen, turn to face the audience, and talk. "But don't talk when you're changing the visuals on the overhead," Curtis says. "If you're silent, you'll seem more organized."

I'm frustrated during the practice session. At five-feet-one, I can't point to the top of the screen without losing my balance. Or looking like a crossing guard at rush hour. Clearly, this is the least practical part of the course for me.

Later that night, I prepare my speech, fitting it into the "action strategy format" outlined in the Communispond instruction manual. The next morning, I pull my hair back in a headband (so I'll have cheekbones) and choose a fitted blazer and slim trousers (so I'll have a waist). Communispond isn't an image workshop, but let's face it: If your outfit is distracting, nobody will pay attention to what you're saying.

One by one, we deliver our speeches. Overnight, everybody has improved. Yesterday, Bill Lincoln was an easily flustered soft-talker; today he's calm and articulate. Becky Haglund Tousey doesn't glance at her notes once during her speech. As for the bench scientist, well, I haven't a clue what she is talking about, but she sounds terrific.

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When it's my turn, Curtis stops me often, reminding me to pause. As I expected, I tank the visual portion by placing the transparencies upside down on the projector and then leaning into the screen. Those mistakes aside, I can feel myself slowing down and being more deliberate with my gestures.

In the debriefing room, Bill reviews my performance.

"Much better," he says, nodding in approval. "You've got natural presence. When you focus the energy, you come across as very likable — girl-next-door mixed with young businesswoman."

That afternoon, we learn the art of Q and As — the most dangerous portion

of any presentation. "It's the last thing that the audience will remember," Bill says. "Credibility can be damaged with one hostile answer."

For me, the role-playing session was extremely valuable. In the past when I've opened the floor to questions, I've been quick with one-liners; my attempts at humor can be misread as arrogance. At Communispond, I learn how to listen for the issue behind the question, to rephrase a negative question so it sounds neutral, and to diffuse hostile questioners.

"Nobody masters these techniques in two days," Bill tells us in his final remarks. "Practice every day. If you use eye-brain control in small groups and balance up when you're talking to colleagues, by the time you present to a large group, the skills will seem natural."

At home, I pop my tape in the VCR. Bill was right. The difference is remarkable. I hardly recognize the new me — a slower talker with smooth pacing, controlled gestures, and effective eye contact.

But my first order of business? I'm going to get a haircut.

Cynthia Hanson is a contributing editor for *Chicago Magazine*. Her work also appears in *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Cosmopolitan*.

Five Steps to Better Presentations

Here are five sure-fire techniques to help you become a more dynamic public speaker:

1. Maximize eye contact: Focus on one person at a time — about five seconds. Finish your thought, then move on to someone else. "Eye communication is the most significant skill that you can master," says Victoria Seretny, regional executive vice-president for Decker Communications. "It allows you to connect on an emotional level with your audience."

2. Don't forget to breathe: "Breathing is the base for a relaxed, strong voice," says Sandy Livner, founder and president of Speakeasy. But if you hold your breath, you'll sound nervous.

3. Use body language wisely: Balance your stance before you start talking, use gestures to emphasize key words, and move with a purpose. "If you're not standing behind a lectern, there's a tendency to pace back and forth, and it's a huge distraction," Seretny says. "Before you walk left or right, shift your focus to someone on that side of the room and let your body pull you in that direction."

4. Conquer the content: The more organized the information, the easier it is to deliver and understand. The Franklin Covey program recommends the "Triple S" approach — state your idea, support it with examples, and summarize the main points.

5. Control Q and As: Select a questioner, but don't point. Look directly at the person and listen for the issue. Then rephrase the question, addressing the group. Look at the questioner during the answer, but lock eyes with someone else at the end. That way, the audience won't think it's a one-on-one conversation.

Source: Communispond's "Executive Presentation Skills"