



## Be Confident When Called On

Speaking tips to help you thrive when caught off guard.

BY MATT ABRAHAMS

On the first day of the business-school class I teach, my students fear me. Not because I am mean or unsympathetic, but because, like my fellow professors, I wield a tool that is simultaneously humbling and scary. The “cold call” is an age-old device to test students’ acumen on the spot. You simply point to a student and ask him or her to respond immediately to a question.

I am not a fan of cold-calling in my teaching, and when I explain this to my students, you can hear the collective sigh of relief. However, I immediately tell them that we will work together to hone their impromptu speaking skills so they will be more comfortable and confident when confronted with cold calls or a litany of other spontaneous speaking situations in the future.

To me, spontaneous speaking refers to any situation where you are asked to speak off the cuff and in the moment. The reality is that spontaneous speaking is much more prevalent than planned speaking (e.g., presentations). Think of being called on to introduce someone to others, or having your boss ask you for feedback on a new idea, or handling questions at the end of a meeting. These situations occur all of the time.

As all Toastmasters know, Table Topics is a great way to practice this skill. Among the many members who praise the benefits of Table Topics training is Jeremy Donovan, DTM, co-author of the book *How to Deliver a TED Talk*.

“Over the last 20 years, I have relied on countless Toastmasters skills to accelerate my career, but by far the most helpful have been the impromptu speaking skills that I developed practicing Table Topics,” he says.

To boost your skills, combine your Table Topics practice with the following three steps.

**1 Get out of your own way.** The first thing that gets in your way when speaking off the cuff is *you*. Your desire to do well, to give the right answer, to have your feedback be meaningful and memorable, actually works against you. Before you speak, you likely judge what you intend to say and weigh it against your internal criteria: *What I plan to say isn’t* \_\_\_ (fill in the blank ... *insightful, helpful, worthy, relevant*, etc.). This pre-speaking evaluation inhibits you.

Rather than striving for greatness, dare to just accomplish the task at hand—answer the question, provide the feedback, introduce your colleague. Reduce the pressure you put on yourself and you will increase your chances of doing well. Simply put: Setting greatness as your goal gets in the way of you getting there.

Of course, this is easier said than done. You are working against the muscle memory you've developed over the course of your life with a brain that reacts very quickly to help you solve problems. But by giving yourself permission to respond in the moment, rather than get it "right," you can get out of your own way and speak well.

**2 See it as an opportunity, not an obstacle.** You must also change how you perceive the speaking situation you're in. See it as an opportunity rather than an obstacle or a threat. For example, when I coach executives on handling the Q&A session after their presentations, they often view the session as an adversarial experience—they versus the media, investors, whomever. I work with these senior leaders to change their perception. A Q&A session is actually an opportunity—to clarify, to understand, to dialogue and engage.

If you look at impromptu speaking as an opportunity to explain and expand, you will interact with your audience in a more connected, collaborative way.

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Let's say you are at a corporate dinner, and your boss turns to you and says, "You know our guest better than the rest of us. Would you mind introducing her?" Respond by saying, "Great, thank you for the opportunity." And do think of it as an opportunity rather than thinking, *Oh no! I better get this right.*

Improvisation exercises provide a great resource for this type of situational reframing. One of the tenets of improv scenes between partners is the phrase, "Yes, and ..." This mindset guides improvisers to not only embrace the scenario offered by their partner but to expand on it, rather than to shut down the partner's suggestion. The "Yes, and ..." philosophy opens up myriad opportunities not just in spontaneous speaking but in life.

Patricia Ryan Madson, the author of *Improv Wisdom*, says, "A 'Yes and' approach to life keeps you open to possibilities that you otherwise might have never seen, or worse yet, prevented yourself from taking advantage of."

**3 Leverage structure.** Now that you've moved out of our own way and reframed your situation as an opportunity, what do you do next? Simply put: You respond. However, you don't respond with a stream-of-consciousness rambling. Rather, you

respond in a structured manner. Some call this telling a story. Structure is important because it increases the audience's ability to process the information.

According to John Medina, a biologist and the author of *Brain Rules*, structured information is processed approximately 40 percent more effectively and efficiently—it's understood more easily and retained longer—than non-structured information.

Many structures exist, but here are two of the most useful.

■ **Problem-solution-benefit.** You start by addressing what the issue is, the problem. You then talk about a way of solving it, and then describe the benefits of following through on your plan. This structure is persuasive and effective. I used the "problem-solution-benefit" structure with this article. I started by explaining the challenge of impromptu speaking and then moved to potential ways to address the problem, and I'll end by describing the benefits of adopting these strategies.

■ **What? So what? Now what?** You start by talking about what "it" is (e.g., what you're answering or giving feedback about), then you discuss why it is important to the recipient(s), and finally, you explain what the next steps are (i.e., how the recipient can apply the feedback or answer).

I often use this structure when providing feedback to MBA students in my Strategic Communication class. For example, after a student successfully presents her case analysis, I might say, "The portion of your talk that addressed the detailed steps of the communication rollout plan (the 'What?') were very helpful because they clearly laid out the metrics for success (the 'So what?'). Please leverage that type of analysis in the other aspects of your next case analysis (the 'Now what?')."

The reality is that when you are in a spontaneous speaking situation, you have to do two things simultaneously: figure out what to say and how to say it. These structures give you a format for how to present your message. When you become comfortable with the structures, you will be able to respond more quickly to impromptu situations.

The last day of my business-school class is very different than the first. We do an activity where each of my students stands up and gives an unprepared toast to something of value they are taking away from our time together. Invariably, they express their gratitude for learning how to speak in spontaneous situations ... and the best part is, they excitedly demonstrate their ability to present this way in the toasts they give!

By getting out of your own way, reframing your situations as opportunities rather than threats, and leveraging structures, you can become a more compelling, confident and connected spontaneous speaker. ■

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