

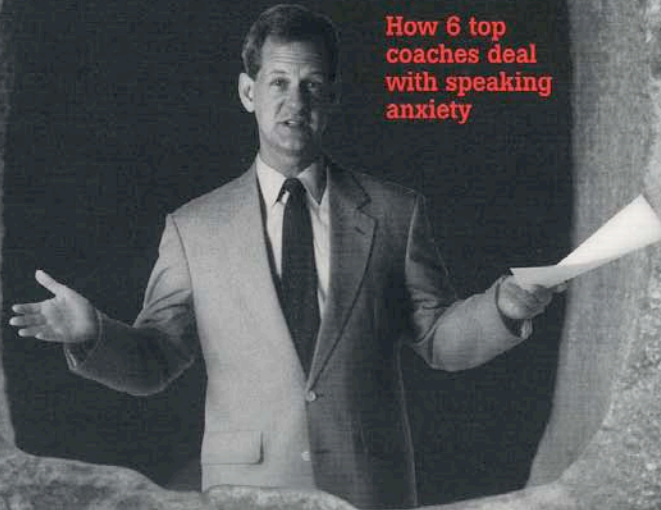
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# Presentations

TECHNOLOGY AND TECHNIQUES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

## Taming the **Beast** Within

How 6 top  
coaches deal  
with speaking  
anxiety





**Susan Peterson**

Founder, Susan Peterson Productions, Washington, D.C.

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**S**usan Peterson founded her business in 1983, after 10 years as an on-air correspondent for CBS and NBC news. In her opinion, the biggest misperception about the fear of public speaking is that people tend to believe their nervousness will last forever, or that the fear will invade their body and ruin a presentation.

"I try to teach the difference between harmful anxiety and adrenaline rushes," she says. In fact, she avoids using the term *fear* altogether. She prefers using the term *anxiety* because fear implies something unfixable and entirely debilitating, whereas anxiety is something that can be managed.

Peterson's approach with her clients is down-to-earth and practical. "Our approach is that this isn't brain surgery or any sort of razzle-dazzle. We give people the reassurance that 'we can fix this.'"

Before actual training sessions begin, clients are urged to keep a log of exactly what happened during a speech to cause their nervousness and what they did or didn't try to get over it. By cataloguing their experiences, individuals assess their own strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas in which they need to improve. Possible solutions to their problems are identified as well — for example, deep breathing, better preparation, a site visit before the speech — with the goal of creating an anxiety-control package, which is a list of practical solutions for that individual's specific problems. "Our method allows people to decipher what solution suits their situation, which usually leads to a sense of self-assurance and control," Peterson says.

A presenter also needs to identify possible physiological factors that can result in an extra dose of nerves. One of Peterson's cases involved the chief financial officer (CFO) of a Fortune 100 company who delivered weekly presentations to the company board and president. "He was absolutely terrified, so much so that I was sent to his office with only a few hours before his presentation," she says. She addressed his physical self first, finding that he usually drank about six cups of coffee before speaking, which multiplied his already high level of anxiety. Switching to decaf settled him down somewhat. They then concentrated on specific presentation techniques. "[The CFO] was so intimidated he wouldn't come up for air and look anyone in the eye," recalls Peterson. To combat this common problem, she videotaped him speaking so that he could see what he was doing wrong, then she addressed how to get him to ease up in front of the audience. One technique that helped was something Peterson calls "switching paradigms," which, in this particular case, meant

teaching the CFO to switch the spotlight off himself and onto the audience, to combat the feeling that his every movement was being scrutinized.

Peterson's clientele cover a wide spectrum of corporate managers, associates and managers in government agencies. She's found that although every case of anxiety is slightly different, most people have one fear in common: admitting their vulnerability. "Oftentimes it seems that [speaking coaches] are like therapists without a license: We have to be tough with these people and remind them they cannot skirt around the problem, since avoiding it is a sign of an even more debilitating disease," she says. For clients who already have a therapist, however, Peterson notes that she works closely with psychiatrists to make sure her program for dealing with a client's speech anxiety won't interfere with their professional progress in other areas.

## Naked untruths

Bad advice that ought to be forgotten

We've all heard the maxim, "Just picture the audience in their underwear." But does anyone ever actually do this, and has anyone ever been helped by it? Probably not, yet the common wisdom about how to vanquish one's fear of speaking tends to boil down to this and a few other tired bromides, such as "take a deep breath" or "get your butterflies to fly in formation." In addition, here are a few other misguided ideas our experts think you should disregard.

**Susan Peterson**

**BAD ADVICE:** Take drugs, such as beta-blockers, to ease nerves before speaking

**WHY:** Presenters have to face the fear and get rid of it, not put themselves in a drug-induced state of mind.