How to Overcome the Fear of Public Speaking

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by Beverly Flaxington

Beverly Flaxington is a practice management consultant. She answers questions from advisors facing human resource issues. To submit yours, email us here.

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Dear Bev,

It’s difficult for me to write this note because I have kept it a secret for a while, but I am afraid of public speaking – not just speaking to a group of thousands but also standing up in front of a conference room and presenting my ideas. I don’t sleep at all the night before. I stumble over words. Many times someone will ask me if I am feeling alright when it is over. Is there a cure for this? I am over 50 years old and have been like this as long as I can remember.

T.K.

Dear T.K.,

Fear of public speaking is supposed to be the second most common after the fear of dying (or maybe it is fear of having teeth drilled). In any event, you are talking about a popular fear! In several situations when I’ve worked with advisors to put on events or spearhead meetings, they will share a fear of speaking. Many do not like getting up in front of people and having all of the attention drawn to them, so know you are in good company.

It may sound like odd advice in a well-respected financial magazine, but I recommend you find a good hypnotherapist to work with you. I’ve been certified in hypnosis for over 20 years and public speaking is one area where it works very well. You can learn how to calm yourself and how to picture yourself as successful instead of seizing up and picturing a negative outcome. A good hypnotherapist will help you to learn self-hypnosis (the art of becoming calm without a “guide” to help you) and will probably give you a trigger that you can use every time you need to speak that reminds your mind and body to calm itself down. Check out the National Guild of Hypnotists at ngh.net to find someone near you.

If you don’t want to go that route, other options could include joining a local toastmasters group. I know the quality varies quite a bit from city to city, but I have had many people tell me this was a successful experience for them. It’s not just about fear, but also about learning how to deliver a strong and compelling message. Check out toastmasters.org to see if there is a club near you.

Practice is going to be your best friend. You might shy away from volunteering or doing more speaking than you absolutely have to do. However, this is the opposite of what you need. You want to get out and do as much as you can in as many venues as you can, so you can prove to yourself nothing terrible is going to happen. I realize “just do it” doesn’t help with your emotional response, but practice does help. The more you do it, the more it becomes old hat. Fear grows and becomes more overwhelming when we try and push whatever we are afraid of to the side and just ignore it. Facing the fear and deliberately putting yourself in situations where you have to speak is the only way your skill will improve. The more skill you have, the more confident you become. The more confident, the less afraid. Being able to speak well in a public forum is critical to success in the financial business, as in many businesses. It’s great that you have written and are bringing your fear out into the open – don’t let it go back into hiding.

Dear Bev,

Do you think it is realistic to take people who have been hired as shotgun salespeople and turn them into relational, consultative salespeople just by telling them they need to ask more questions?

Bill K.

Dear Bill,
I would really enjoy knowing the backstory to this question. We spend most of our time working with sales or growth in one fashion or another, so I can only guess the type of firm or environment you are referring to. I can see the scenario clearly: people are hired and rewarded for one form of behavior, then someone new comes in (probably to senior management) and wants to change the culture, and people are expected to get excited about the shift and change overnight. As you know, or you probably would not have written, it doesn’t work this way.

There are three aspects that need to be in place for anyone to succeed: they have to have the attributes necessary, they have to learn the skills or become competent in certain areas and they have to have the knowledge about what they are doing. Attributes are pretty well wired; either you are a detail-oriented, quality-control person, or you are not. You can certainly shift when needed, but everyone has a set of preferred behaviors, so attributes are not likely to change. Skills can be taught. This is probably where you have the greatest opportunity to see if your salespeople can shift. You want to teach them what it means to be “relational” and “consultative.” What specific things are you expecting them to do, how and with whom?

Outside of skill development (i.e. training), you need the reward system, support tools and reinforcement to help people move toward a new paradigm. Just saying they need to do it will never work if everything else stays the same.

So, to answer your question, yes, it can be done but whether it is “realistic” depends on a lot of factors around how you will support the shift.

Beverly Flaxington co-founded The Collaborative, a consulting firm devoted to business building for the financial services industry in 1995. In 2008, she co-founded Advisors Trusted Advisor to offer dedicated practice management resources to advisors, planners and wealth managers. In 2016, her firm relaunched the Advisors Sales Academy. She is currently a Lecturer at Suffolk University teaching undergraduate students Leadership & Social Responsibility. Beverly is a Certified Professional Behavioral Analyst (CPBA) and Certified Professional Values Analyst (CPVA).

She has spent over 25 years in the investment industry and has been featured in Selling Power Magazine and quoted in hundreds of media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, MSNBC.com, Investment News and Solutions Magazine for the FPA. She speaks frequently at investment industry conferences and is a speaker for the CFA Institute.