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PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: SPEECH IMPEDIMENT

Stutterers, worry not in isolation

SUSAN PINKER

Dear Susan,

I work in a government agency and was recently promoted. This job would be perfect for me if I didn't have to do presentations in front of the whole department every second week. The problem is not only that I am shy and hate public speaking, but that I stutter, less than I used to, but it still happens when I'm put on the spot. I don't want to lose my job over this. Please advise.

-- N-no name, please

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Dear No Name,

People who stutter draw attention to a universal fear: speaking in public. Only about 1 per cent of the adult population stutters, but they seem more prevalent because their symptoms are exacerbated in public, when they're under pressure. And as most of us dread appearing less than perfectly confident and competent in front of an audience, those who stutter make our apprehension all too plain.

As a result, my first bits of advice are generic pointers about public speaking. The three key elements (pardon the alliteration) can be summed up as: prepare, pick your story, and practice like hell.

Prepare:

The better prepared you are, the more you can express yourself naturally, focusing on such essentials as making eye contact with your audience, using your hands and body to enliven your message, and varying the volume and tone of your voice to keep your listeners' interest. There's nothing more deadening than being subjected to a PowerPoint delivered by a robot standing rigidly at attention. You're less likely to deliver your message in a halting, breathy monotone if you know exactly what you want to say, and can act as if you really want to share your ideas with the group.

Pick a story:

Preparing is a matter of good research so that your points are compelling. But instead of just looking for a mountain of incontrovertible facts, think about why people see movies and read books: to experience a human story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Michael Sheehan, a

communications consultant who, as it happens, was also a stutterer, now helps Bill Clinton and others with their speeches. He suggests using a "brief, linear story line" to cut down on dross and detail. That way, people will remember what you have to say and there will be time for questions.

Practice:

When one of my children took up the violin at the tender age of five, he innocently asked his teacher how often he had to practice. Was it really every single day? No, came the reply. Just every day you eat. Rehearse your presentation until it's almost second nature. If you know that you're expected to make a presentation every two weeks, then as soon as one is behind you, start working on the next so that you have at least 10 days to practice. By the way, the mirror, a tape recorder and video camera are your friends.

And don't forget the Q&A, which needs prep time, too. Imagine what you might ask if the topic were new to you, then craft a simple but persuasive response. Mr. Sheehan advises speakers to listen to each question carefully. That way you can use your answer to enhance your big idea.

A shred of advice about stuttering: Aside from cognitive and speech therapy - which can include cool technologies, such as computer simulations (virtual reality environments) or a portable device that transforms how people hear their own voices when they talk (delayed altered auditory feedback) - many stutterers find that their fluency improves when they learn to assume other identities through the performing or creative arts. Mr. Sheehan and James Earl Jones took up acting, Carly Simon started singing, and Lewis Carroll started writing. So have you thought about a sideline in story-telling?

Dear Susan,

My immediate supervisor is volatile, and this affects the emotional climate of our small office (we have a staff of 10). I am second-in-command under the moody one. Simple questions asked at the wrong time often set off a snippy response. She can also be vindictive to those who stand up to her. Other days she is overly effusive and talkative. This also freaks out staff. We have recently moved into a new space where I am in closer proximity to her and would appreciate tips on how to manage her ups and downs.

-- *Barometer Rising*

Dear Barometer,

First, acknowledge that your boss's weather patterns are internally driven. They affect you but are not created by you. Given the unpredictability of her outbursts, it's fair and wise to preface queries with "is this a good time?" Then stand back and let her blow. Hot or cold, it's not up to you to manage her mood swings but to ride them out.

Second, moodiness is one thing, but vindictiveness is something else entirely. No one should put up with abuse at work, no matter how cranky the boss is. Stand your ground, firmly and politely. It is your right to defer discussions until everyone feels calm enough for a respectful exchange.

And just because you're next-in-command doesn't mean that you must buffer your superior's negative vibes so they don't move down the line, or be the bitching post for everyone's angst. This is what it means to be a "toxic handler," a term the late University of British Columbia management guru, Peter Frost used for empathetic managers whose people skills can keep an organization chugging along - even with a despot at the helm. Typically, they are good listeners who are attuned to what others are thinking and feeling - and who keep an open-door policy to defuse crises of all kinds.

Toxic handlers have a paradoxical role. They work magic behind the scenes to translate a brusque or mercurial boss's behaviour into something rational and workable - thus shielding others from harm. But in mopping up messes, they can absorb the impact themselves and are prime candidates for burnout. And in some cases their protective behaviour masks the true impact of an erratic boss, thus preventing the real problem from getting attention.

You have to decide if you have the resources to shore up the morale of the office, or if this problem is too big for you to solve on your own.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*, to be published in February.*

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