



# Education for Accountants

## Best speakers captivate any audience

By JOHN PLANK

There's a point in every career where a person has to decide whether they'd like to remain backstage or step into the spotlight and take a leading role. Whether it's an actor in a play or a person with aspirations to lead an organization, the key to thriving at centre stage is learning to communicate powerfully and persuasively, under pressure.

The ability to perform consistently well in public circumstances can be summed up as having a 'commanding presence', which is also the name of an advanced communication and presentation skills workshop developed with accountants and other financial professionals in mind.

Having a commanding presence requires confidence, an enthusiastic engagement with your audience and being in the moment all the time during a presentation. People with a commanding presence are often described as being charismatic.

Most people believe that charisma is something you're born with. Most children have a wonderful ability to live in the moment and communicate directly without inhibition; most pre-schoolers have lots of charisma. We lose our un-self-conscious, live-in-the-moment zest as we get older. The world discourages spontaneity and we learn how to behave and conform, and are no longer willing to take risks in our communicating.

The good news is everyone, even the painfully shy, has the ability to communicate with charisma, to establish a friendly and immediate rapport with listeners, and hold their attention while inspiring and persuading them.

For anyone who wants to stand out and succeed, exceptional communication skills are a crucial asset. Yet, most accountants lack the opportunity during the early development of their careers, when so much time is spent in study and rigorous professional training, often in solitude, and usually in a reading and writing environment.

When it's time to step up to the next level, many professionals suddenly find that they're being asked to share their expertise, whether it's as a mentor to their colleagues or in an organizational leadership role.

The professional who becomes a CEO or a CFO may suddenly find that most of their time is devoted to interpersonal communications with individuals



**Too many people think that if you have written messages that work in print, you can just read them out loud and successfully communicate. We've all seen that in practice and it usually makes for some boring presentations.**

*John Plank, communications coach*

and groups. In television, it's the equivalent of going from being a reporter to becoming the anchor. For many people, that change requires developing or rediscovering a whole range of communication skills.

To lead successfully, you need to deliver your message with enthusiasm, energy and empathy.



PLANK

Professional performers have that ability, but it's something we can all do, if we take the time to learn and develop the required skills.

This must be emphasized; communicating verbally at an

above-average level is a skill achievable by anyone who is motivated.

The traditional professions, of accounting, law and medicine tend to attract intellectually curious, reflective types who prefer to use reading and writing to learn and to express themselves.

**In a comfortable environment, learning the basic skills can be a thoroughly enjoyable experience.**

*John Plank, communications coach*

And those abilities — hard work and being able to perform at a high level — are also the prerequisites of presenting and speaking with confidence.

Too many people think that if you have written messages that work in print, you can just read them out loud and successfully communicate. We've all seen that in practice and it usually makes for some boring presentations.

Why doesn't reading a report aloud work? Because written messages are a one-way communication, whereas an oral presentation ideally is a two-way exchange, and must have emotional as well as intellectual

appeal

When a speaker presents, he or she is not just judged by the words being said; much of the message received by the audience comes from intonation, body language and the enthusiasm with which it is delivered. Is the speaker engaged? Does the speaker care about the message?

Does the speaker care about the audience, seeking their response and buy-in? These are critical questions that audience members ask themselves, if only on a subconscious level.

Years of working with professional performers and excellent public speakers will teach you that the best of the best have an attractive personal energy.

That's important because audiences, whether strangers, colleagues or clients, are much more influenced by personality and presentation than by the actual information being delivered.

Is that intimidating? Certainly

some people think so.

Jerry Seinfeld once observed that public speaking is the number one phobia, which means some people would rather be in the casket than saying the eulogy. You may feel that your anxiety is simply part of your personality; "Some people are just born that way." Please trust this; speaking anxiety can be eliminated or reduced to a manageable level by anyone who is willing to learn some basic techniques.

Through coaching and practice, people can learn how to maximize the quality of their voices, use body language to enhance a spoken message and actually enjoy the experience.

Oscar Wilde once said: "Nothing that is worth knowing can be taught." By that, he didn't mean we're doomed to ignorance, just that truly worthwhile learning is experiential. In a comfortable environment, learning the basic skills can be a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

There are lots of strategies and techniques that can be used to become a good speaker, everything from personalizing messages through storytelling to simplifying ideas for better retention, but in the end the key to becoming a better speaker is to speak.

Whether you're addressing one person or an audience of hundreds, the best communicators are those who have the confidence that comes from learning, practice and past success.

While there's no shame in not seeking out the spotlight — organizations need and value team players who support others — but for those who want to reach for the top, superior speaking and presentation skills are very valuable.

In both careers and personal lives, people who can reach out and persuade others have a distinct advantage that builds self-confidence, improves relationships and often brings them great joy.

*John Plank is a communications coach. He has been performance coach for CBC Television for the past seven years. During his career, he has coached accountants, journalists and business professionals. His two-day course for business professionals — Commanding Presence — is being held May 25-26, June 15-16 and June 22-23, 2009 at the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Ontario. For more information or to register, please visit [www.icao.on.ca/PD](http://www.icao.on.ca/PD).*