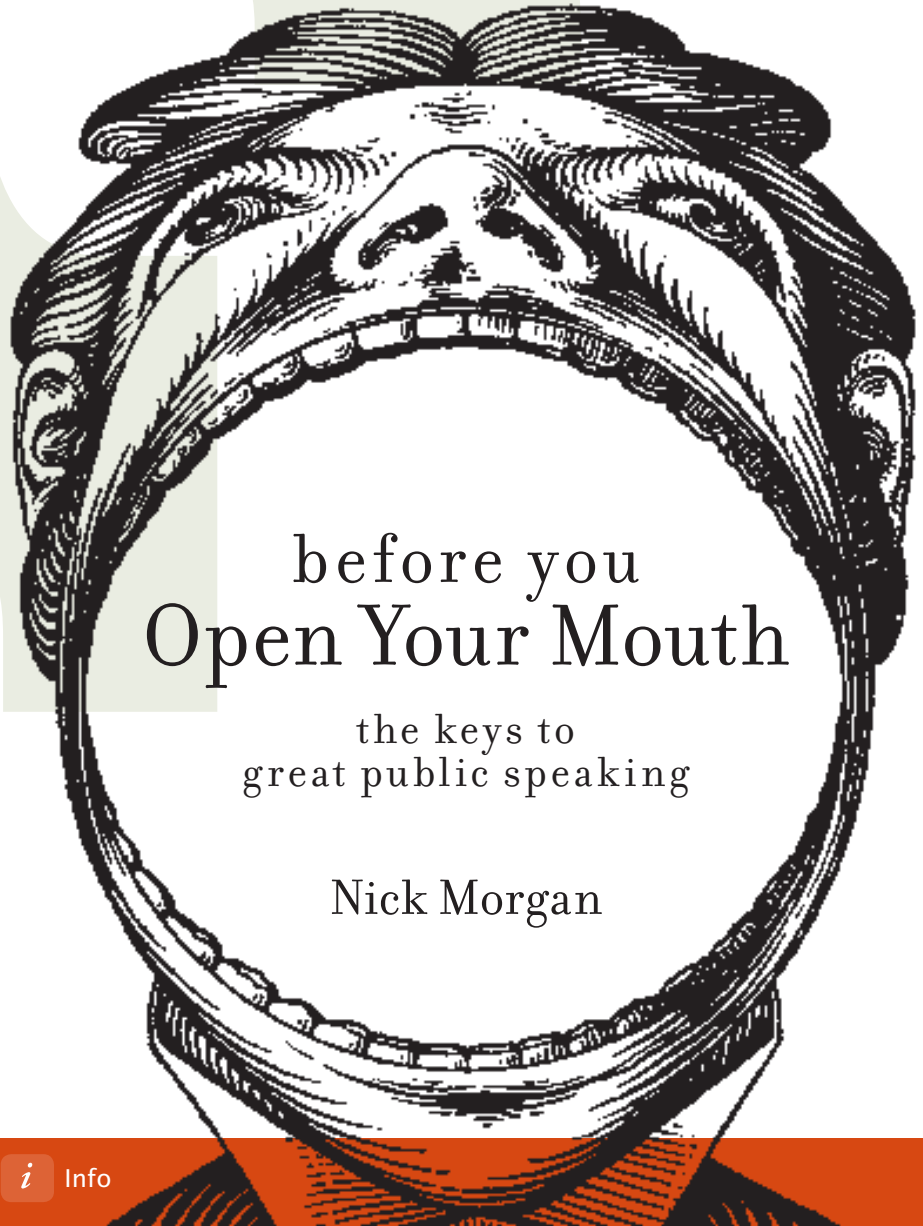

before you Open Your Mouth

the keys to great public speaking

Nick Morgan

Why is most public speaking so awful?

You know what I'm talking about because you've been there, sitting in a meeting room with 50 other hapless colleagues—or 375 other disheartened conference-goers—and listened with increasing desperation as the speaker droned on, reading from Power Point slides so detailed that you couldn't make out the words, talking about a subject so filled with jargon and clichés that the topic got less and less clear as time went on… and on… and on.

It's a near-death experience.

Why is most public speaking so awful? Why do we subject our fellow human beings to this form of torture when there are so many better things we could all be doing, like cutting our toenails, baking snickerdoodles, or watching re-runs of The Prisoner?

You're in a ballroom with no windows in some random airport hotel. The lighting is dim. The whir of the heating system fills your ears with white noise. The colors around you are shades of grey and beige with puce trimmings. You're only awake because you've had 1300 cups of coffee from the urn in the hallway. Let the speaking games begin.

It's a diabolical sensory deprivation experiment.

Why is most public speaking so awful? Beyond soulless venues and Death by Power Point, speakers make the same four mistakes over and over again, continuing the sorry state of the art.

FIRST, speeches are awful because speakers make it about them instead of the audience.

To give them their due, most speakers are eager to communicate with their audiences. Unfortunately, that's where the good news ends. Most of them think "communication" means "telling them all you know." Preferably in list form.

Here's the first problem: we can only remember four items in a list. Two or three if we're holding BlackBerrys. So by the time the speaker gets to item #5, we've forgotten #1. And we're rapidly forgetting #2 right now.

The great Zen insight of public speaking is to realize that speeches are about the audience, not the speaker.

Here's the next problem: we're an *audience*. That means we're always asking a very seminal question: *What's in it for me?* We never asked the speaker to tell us all he knows. We never asked the speaker to give us a list of the 15 most important things she cares about. We asked, *what's in it for me?*

Audiences begin speeches asking "why"—why should I care, why is this important, why are you speaking and not me, why should I listen to you, and so on.

If the speaker is successful—and it's a million to one shot against—the audience will end up asking "how"—how do I implement this idea, how do I make this my own, how do I get started, and so on.

That's the speaker's job: take the audience from "why" to "how." But you can only do it by keeping that question—*what's in it for me?*—uppermost in your mind.

The great Zen insight of public speaking is to realize that speeches are about the audience, not the speaker. Audiences know this already, and when the speaker realizes it, magic can begin to happen.

So, if you're going to speak, ask yourself this question: What is the problem that the audience has for which my information—my expertise, the reason they've hired me—is the solution? Then, design your speech around that problem. If your speech is an hour, the first 20 minutes should be focused on that problems your audience is facing. Then, and only then, will the audience want to hear about the information you've brought to bear. In fact, if you do it right, they will be eager to hear that information, instead of desperate to find the exits.

SECOND, speeches are awful because speakers don't take their audiences on a journey.

Speakers usually organize their speeches around the way they think of the material. They're experts, and they've got tons of useful information, and they are keen to display it all to the audience.

Many speakers are motivated by a fear of not being able to answer a question the audience has—even though the chances of that actually happening are tiny. So, they bone up for weeks, learning everything they possibly can about the topic until, finally, they are walking bores on the subject they are supposed to hold an entire audience's attention on.

Then, they tell the audience everything they've learned. At the 10-minute warning, when they suddenly realize that they've got 55 minutes of material left, they speed up, zipping past detail-laden Power Point slides with the speed of a gazelle and the grace of a rhino. It's breathtaking, and not in a good way.

Instead of giving your audiences a data dump, please, *please* think about them and their needs. The only reason to give a speech is to change the world. The only way to change the world in front of an audience is to change the minds of the people in the audience—the minds that are still awake, that is. And the only way to change the minds in the audience is to take them on a decision-making journey.

Fortunately, we have a good model for that. We know how people change their minds. Do you realize how revolutionary that is? That means that you can design a speech that *will make audiences happy!*

The only reason to give a speech is to change the world.

Here's how you do it. Begin by getting their attention. **Frame** the purpose of your talk in some interesting, arresting way. Usually a story works best, but there are questions, statistics, and arresting factoids at your disposal too. The frame should last no more than three minutes in a 60-minute talk. Then, take 20 minutes to go into the **problem** the audience has. After you've addressed their problem, you get to give your **solution**—20 minutes of all that lovely information you've gathered so painstakingly. Then, give them five minutes of **benefits** and concrete examples of your information. (If you've got a case study, put it here.) And then, because this speech is about the audience, close with an **action step**. Get them to do something—something small and easy, a first step down the road you want them to go on. Politicians get audiences to chant things like "Yes, we can!" because they understand that an audience that has been taken on a journey, and then called to action, wants to get started right away, to get out there and give something back.

So, give them a small, relevant task to do. And then say "thank you" and enjoy the applause washing over you. That's all there is to it. It's a decision-making journey.

THIRD, speeches are awful because speakers don't rehearse.

This one is a perpetual mystery to me. I can always tell the non-rehearsers, because somewhere in the speech, when the third thing goes wrong—and it always does—I see the deer-in-the-headlights look of a person who is going through an experience for the first time.

Or, I see a clumsy transition, because the speaker has thought the speech through in her head, but not actually said it out loud, and it's the transitions that always give that away.

Or, I see the look of panic about 17 minutes in, when the speaker suddenly realizes, "Uh oh… I've been up here forever and I've got 43 minutes to go. I'm going to die before I get to the end of my speech!"

Without rehearsal, your body will give you away at some point because you haven't gone the distance, you haven't walked the stage, and you haven't practiced the speech enough to sound like you know what you're talking about.

Every speech—every communication—is two conversations: the content, and the body language. You absolutely have to rehearse both, or *whatever can go wrong will go wrong.*

Even so, new clients will tell me, "I don't want to rehearse because I'll get stale." This is a pathetic attempt to avoid facing up to the nervousness everyone feels. The sad truth is that I let one client get away with that excuse once, early in my career, and it was a disaster.

Here's what happened. The client was giving a speech to a big audience for the first time. She had spoken to smaller groups before, but the speech we were preparing for was going to be in front of 3,000 people. The stakes were high, and she wasn't rehearsing.

I had written her a good speech, but she refused to rehearse. She said, "I was trained as a dancer years ago. I know how to move on stage."

On the day of the speech, something awful happened. Awful, but predictable.

Adrenaline took over, and she began to dance. In between occasional forays into the speech, she danced around the stage. The audience was spellbound, and not in a good way. The meeting planner didn't talk to me for three years, even though the client had the grace to call us all up and apologize—and take the blame. The speech wasn't stale. It was a disaster.

So I don't let clients get away with not rehearsing, and you should not let yourself get away with it either.

Every speech—every communication—is two conversations: the content, and the body language. You absolutely have to rehearse both, or *whatever can go wrong will go wrong.*

FOURTH, speeches are awful because speakers think about their content but not their "second conversation"— their body language.

So many speakers perform what I call the Power Point Dance of Death. That's a triangular dance, with one point the screen, one point the computer, and the third point an equidistant spot between the two. The speaker begins at the computer, cuing up the first slide. Then, he moves to the screen, gesturing away from the audience and getting lost in the Great White Light. Then, belatedly realizing that standing in front of the screen looking like a perp in a lineup is not such a good idea, the speaker moves to point #3—no man's land between the screen and the computer.

Here's the problem: none of those positions has any interest for the audience. Remember, the audience is asking *what's in it for me?* When a speaker's body says "nothing" by triangulating between screen and computer, the audience checks out. This is instinctive, by the way. From our cave-people antecedents, we are conditioned to notice things and people that *move toward us*, not things that don't appear to be a threat and go in circles at a great distance from us.

If a speaker isn't moving toward the audience, then an audience can't care about the speaker. It's as simple as that. It's cave-person conditioning and we can't help ourselves.

If, on the other hand, the speaker moves toward us, and even moves into our personal space—between 4 feet and a foot and a half—then we suddenly wake up and pay attention. Again, we can't help it. It's our unconscious survival training kicking into high gear.

So, if you want your message to be heard, you must—*must*—move purposefully toward the audience on important points and arrive at the destination of an audience member and your point at roughly the same time. It's choreography, and you ignore it at your peril, and you show the audience enormous disrespect in doing so.

That's just the gross motion, of course. There area thousand subtleties to body language, and they're all important. But they're hard to manage precisely because they are unconscious. We are all experts in reading each other's body language unconsciously, but we're terrible at reading it consciously.

That's because body language originates, and is read by, a part of the brain that never reaches consciousness. It's not part of the cerebral cortex. And here's the surprising news: it works faster than the cerebral cortex. That means that body language is expressed and read *before* conscious thought.

That's why people who try to control body language (like politicians who have been told not to use a certain gesture, or to appear more forceful) look fake. They're thinking about it consciously, and

thus it happens out of the right sequence. The right sequence is *intent, gesture,thought, speech.* If you think about your gestures consciously, the sequence becomes *thought, speech, gesture*—and that looks just a little ridiculous to anyone watching.

So instead, focus on your intent. That's an emotion, like *"I love these people! I want to connect with them!"* If you focus on that powerfully before your speech, it will help you have good, open body language and it will save you from looking like a tool.

If you're open, then the audience will (unconsciously) mirror openness back at you, and the possibility of successful communication will exist.

That's the first step. If you're open, then the audience will (unconsciously) mirror openness back at you, and the possibility of successful communication will exist. If you exhibit nervousness, or agitation, you will unconsciously signal "closed!" to the audience, and it will close down to you. No communication possible.

Note that this all happens *even before you've opened your mouth.*

If you're open, then you can connect with the audience. Get that intent in your head and let your body go to work. It will move toward the audience, it will raise your voice, it will do all sorts of connecting things. Again, if you try to do these thing consciously, you'll look and sound like a tool. So let it happen unconsciously. Just be full of intent.

If you're open and connected, the audience is ready to hear your passion. Focus on the emotion underlying your speech. If you have that passion in mind, the audience will see it and respond.

And you'll break the prevailing trend and deliver a great speech.

Please, for all our sakes, change the world. Move us to action. We will applaud you for it and remember your speech forever.

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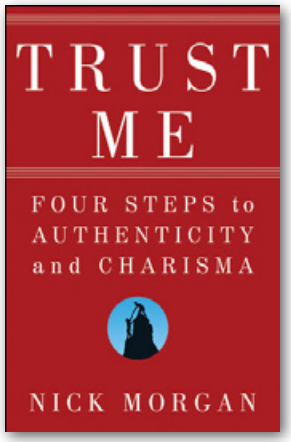

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Nick Morgan is the author of *Trust Me: Four Steps to Authenticity and Charisma* and founder of Public Words Inc. He is one of America's top communication and speech coaches. He is a former Fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, affiliated with the Center for Public Leadership, and served as editor of the *Harvard Management Communication Letter.* He is also the author of the acclaimed book *Working the Room*, reprinted in paperback as *Give Your Speech, Change the World.*

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