

Managing the Jitters

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Presenting your ideas to the boss is a double edged sword. On the one hand, it's an opportunity to show the boss you know your stuff and you are someone with real potential. On the other hand, if you don't do a good job or your boss is disappointed with your message, you may forever be sitting on the sidelines. The anticipation of speaking to an executive might make anyone anxious and unable to perform at their best. It is essential that you harness those nervous jitters.

The Problem

Obviously, you want to come across as confident and knowledgeable, but uncontrolled nerves make it difficult to breathe and cause your muscles to constrict. Your hands may shake, any gestures become tight, your face tenses and your voice typically quivers. Often, you speak very quickly because you just want to be done. You also do a lot of fidgeting because you are holding energy in. The end result is that you look stiff and nervous; definitely not someone an executive will trust.

There are four tactics you can employ to overcome nervousness: **Prepare, Practice, Picture and Pause.**

Prepare

The most reliable stress reducer is thorough preparation. There is no substitute for putting in the required sweat equity. Prepare by

- Analyzing your boss' style.
- Learn what is going on in the boss' world at this particular time.
- Understand what your boss cares about.
- Determine what questions your boss will likely ask to make a decision.
- Be clear on what you want to happen as a result of your meeting.
- Create your strategy, keeping in mind the amount of detail your boss prefers.

- Be sure you have the necessary supplemental materials, either on a slide or hard copy.
- Have an elevator pitch in case the boss slashes your meeting time.

Practice

Any professional athlete or musician will tell you that they would never go out on the playing field without practicing. You shouldn't either so rehearse your conversation. Be rock solid on your opening and close. They focus and refocus the executive on what's important. Always rehearse difficult explanations and complex ideas. Say out loud the answers to any anticipated tough questions. Definitely don't try to memorize or create a script on your slides. Executives just want a conversation. Here are some practice tips:

- Come up with key words or trigger phrases to help you transition from one point to the next.
- Rehearse out loud.
- Practice 3-5 times so that you internalize the message. Saying it out loud for the first time in front of the executive inevitably means there will be lots of filler words. You will be trying to think of the best way to say something and will get tripped up.

Picture

Picture yourself being successful. Don't go into the meeting "hoping" you won't flub up.

Some tips for constructive visualization are these:

- Think about how you want to be perceived and imagine yourself looking and sounding that way.
- Envision the actual meeting and the boss being pleased.
- See yourself making small talk about the weather, world events, etc.

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- Visualize that you stayed calm and cool during any questions.
- See the meeting as hugely successful. The boss is comfortable with your findings and will move forward.

Pause

When you are under stress, you need to think and access information. The best way to do that is to take frequent pauses. Do not rush or speak quickly. Your boss will appreciate your pauses because it will give him/her time to think and absorb what you are saying. You will also appear thoughtful.

When faced with a high stakes conversation, a certain amount of anxiety is inevitable. However, it doesn't have to control you. Implementing the four strategies will help you feel ready and able for the challenge. Your boss will see you as confident and knowledgeable.

***Question:** What additional ways have you found helpful when nervous? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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