

How to Think on Your Feet

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There are times we make extremely important presentations. Perhaps, it is to an unhappy customer to retain the business, or maybe it is to our own management team about a controversial project. When nervous, we tend to freeze. It seems like we can't think or breathe. There are two skills that are lifelines. They are **eye contact** and **pausing**.

Eye Contact

When we are anxious or feel threatened, our tendency is to want to look away or to depend on our notes. However, if we continue to maintain eye contact with an individual, our thought process will come back to us more quickly. By looking away, a speaker takes in new stimuli that actually delays regaining focus. Thus, solid eye contact is a lifeline to retrieving one's thoughts.

Additionally, eye contact will help a speaker establish credibility with his listeners. People feel more comfortable with a speaker who looks them in the eye and states his position than one who seems lost in his own thoughts and more interested in what is on the floor or ceiling than in them. Instinctively, they conclude that the speaker is anxious or untrustworthy. Someone once said the eyes are the windows to the soul. For a speaker to be perceived in a positive manner, the individual must look at his audience.

Just looking at an audience is not enough. There is a big difference between the speaker who has sustained eye contact and the one who only gives listeners a fleeting glance. It is important for a speaker to finish a thought or a sentence with each person in the audience and as often as possible. Listeners use eye contact (or the lack of it) to determine trust and credibility.

Pausing

Pausing is the speaker's other lifeline. When a speaker pauses, he can think. He can ac-

cess information in the file room of his brain. A speaker does not need to speak non-stop. Silence is good.

In addition to thinking about where to go next, pausing allows the individual time to take a breath. A voice that is straining for air sounds raspy and unsure. Also, without pausing the individual will invariably have lots of "filler" words, like "um," "ah," "like" or "you know." Filler words chip away at credibility. By pausing at the end of thoughts or sentences, a speaker can refresh his voice and eliminate negative impressions.

From the listener's vantage, pausing is a godsend. First, it aids retention. Secondly, it allows people to think about their questions and to compare what the speaker has said to what others have recommended. Without pausing, listeners often struggle to remember key points.

While eye contact and pausing are a speaker's lifelines, they're underutilized. Most speakers already believe they have strong eye contact and good pauses when in reality they don't. Once a speaker gets comfortable with sustained eye contact and longer pauses, they realize how useful the skills can be, particularly in stressful situations.

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