

# How to Shine When You're Put on the Spot

by Matt Abrahams

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**Summary.** Mastering the art of spontaneous speaking is important for leaders. They must do more than just deliver a good prepared keynote—they need to nail the Q&A and small talk afterward, or crush off-the-cuff toasts and speeches. The author suggests that anyone... [more](#)

In 2017 a tech-company product manager—let's call him Gabe—experienced a career surge that was both thrilling and stressful. His software started selling rapidly, causing his business unit to expand significantly. Instead of managing a small team, he now

led hundreds of employees. But he was uncomfortable with the increased visibility and performative demands of the job. Not only was he expected to deliver several presentations to large audiences each year, but he constantly had to speak informally to a diverse group of customers, prospects, partners, and top leaders at meetings and events.



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Though Gabe managed to improve his delivery of planned remarks and product demos with coaching and practice, he still struggled with the impromptu talks his new role required, and he began to lose sleep worrying about them. He knew he was expected to speak fluently and intelligently off the cuff, but he didn't feel equipped to do so.

You may recognize yourself in Gabe's story. Research shows that the fear of public speaking is common—scaring many of us even more than do heights, bugs, snakes, or flying. However, although most of us work hard to shine at the presentations and speeches we can prepare for, we pay less attention to the equally daunting—and more common—challenge of spontaneous communication, which can have an even bigger impact on career success.

Whether you have to answer a probing question from a boss or a customer, must unexpectedly deliver a toast or an introduction, want to give in-the-moment feedback to a colleague, or need to socialize at an informal gathering, you must learn not only to survive the situation but to seize it as an opportunity to excel, impress others, and make progress toward your goals.

Fortunately, as I've seen in my two decades of working with corporate clients and MBA students, anyone can become good at spontaneous speaking. Contrary to popular assumptions, you don't need to be extroverted or inherently charming to communicate effectively when put on the spot. You just need to learn specific skills, tactics, and behaviors. Here are a few pointers.

## **Avoid the Default Response**

One surefire way to do poorly with your audience—or to make no impression at all—is to fall back on conventional responses when speaking off the cuff. For example, when the CEO passes you in the hall and asks, “How are you?” do you say, “Good, thanks” or use the opportunity to make a memorable comment? When a colleague tells you that a customer meeting went poorly, do you reply, “It is what it is” or offer a helpful suggestion? When you're asked to make a public introduction, do you simply tick off the roles on the person's résumé or tell a story about how that individual added value to the team?

Although standard responses may save you from the awkwardness of trying to think of something meaningful to say, they prevent you from connecting with others in ways that might be more genuine, appropriate, creative, and productive. A better approach is to invoke analogies or shared references that can help you engage your listeners.

I once worked with Catherine, a senior VP of sales, who at company dinners was often asked either to pay tribute to a team member or to introduce a new hire. She had developed a way of handling this task in less than a minute: give the person's name and title, say a quick word about what he or she did and how it would benefit the organization, and wish the person well.

This approach was organized and concise, but it was also impersonal, overly formal, and not memorable. Catherine and I worked together to open up her spontaneous speaking while

keeping it structured. We introduced a few new elements: Start with a timely reference chosen on the spot or just before the event—something in the news, perhaps, or a corporate occasion that everyone had previously attended—to bring her audience together. Then elaborate a bit on the person’s impact by connecting it to something in her own career or telling a story. For example: “I’m so excited about Sarah’s new sales initiative. It reminds me of what we did when I first started at the organization, 10 years ago. I think we’re going to be extremely successful with it.”

This allowed Catherine to forge stronger bonds with her colleagues while being more memorable. Many started thanking her for her remarks—often days or weeks after she’d given them.

### **But Know That Less Is More**

As you work to keep from being brief and sterile in your spontaneous speaking, take care not to swing too far in the opposite direction. For many people, the desire to sound intelligent and avoid awkward silences often leads to verbosity. They forget that, as Shakespeare put it, “brevity is the soul of wit.”

To find the right balance, begin by quickly identifying a communication goal (changing minds, prompting action, building rapport) and then consider what your listeners already know about your topic. Having a clear goal paired with an awareness of your audience will narrow your focus, so you can prioritize what to say and choose your exact words more wisely.

Next challenge yourself to deliver your message as concisely but effectively as possible. After you’ve tried to get your initial point across, pause before adding a story or an idea. Ask yourself, *Have I made my point? Can I end now?*

To be sure, you can take brevity too far—leaving concepts or arguments ill-defined and omitting jokes, stories, or illustrations that might keep the audience engaged. The best way to find the

communication sweet spot is to review what you've done in the past. If someone has recorded your impromptu remarks, watch the video, listen to the audio, or read the transcript to see what you could have left out (or added). If there's no record of what you said, try to remember it and consider where you might have been more concise. Ask for feedback from the people you were talking to. Try looking at your text, email, or Slack messages to see whether you tend to be too loquacious (or too terse) and adjust accordingly.



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Another client of mine, Devin, was told by his boss that his answers during the Q&A portions of virtual town-hall meetings tended to run long. When we watched the recordings, we noticed that he often began a response by restating the question, which the audience had already heard. He also used a lot of corporate jargon and repeated key points a few times in slightly different ways. Devin worked on changing this, practicing with sample questions generated by an AI chatbot and recording his answers. He was soon able to reduce their length by 25% or 30% without sacrificing the quality and usefulness of his responses.

## **Dare to Be Dull**

A big part of why impromptu speaking feels so challenging is the desire to always say the right thing in the right way at the right time. But that just leads to excessive self-evaluation and criticism, consuming precious mental energy, adding stress, and preventing you from dynamically, fluidly, and authentically engaging in the moment.

Instead recognize that there is no single “correct” way to answer a question, give feedback, welcome a colleague, or raise a toast—only better or worse approaches. Don’t worry about wowing others, because demonstrations of competence and authenticity are impressive in themselves. I often advise people to follow an improv comedy maxim: “Dare to be dull.” That is, don’t feel you need to give a standout performance. Just as the best comedy comes from truth, the best communication comes from being real.

Another popular directive also applies here: “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” Listeners are more apt to trust and approve of you when you speak like a human being rather than an actor or a robot. For example, research shows that the most effective speech includes moderate use of fillers such as “um” and “ah.” So when you need to speak spontaneously, tell your inner critic to stand down. Refocus your attention on your listeners. Attempting to serve their needs will take your mental spotlight off yourself, relieving some of the pressure you feel. Allow yourself to experiment, make mistakes, and learn during spontaneous interactions. Avoid trying to memorize or stockpile explanations or responses you think you might need. That will only increase your chances of stumbling when you forget or are forced off the script.

Micah, a student of mine, was fearful that his class contributions would be seen as inadequate or silly. To avoid embarrassment, he planned and rehearsed the points he wanted to make. But

because he was always working to remember them and find the right time to use them, he was preoccupied and failed to get the most out of discussions. With my help he focused on relaxing and silencing his inner critic. He began offering more ideas, sometimes imperfectly formed, and in just a few weeks he became less anxious and more confident. He—and the rest of the class—appreciated the dialogue that his contributions helped spark.

## **Listen as Well as You Talk**

Most people obsess over what to say during impromptu encounters. You should do the opposite: focus on *listening* so that you can better understand the in-the-moment needs and interests of your conversation partners and respond more effectively.

I recommend considering “space, pace, and grace,” which I heard about from my Stanford colleague Collins Dobbs on my podcast *Think Fast, Talk Smart*. First, allow yourself space to process the information. Paraphrasing or asking open-ended follow-up questions can help confirm your understanding and provide extra time to think about your response.

Second, slow down and focus on being present. Maintain eye contact and observe nonverbal cues as well as spoken words. (Does your colleague constantly look at his watch? Does her vocal inflection match her expressed emotions?)

Third, be aware of and sensitive to how others are presenting themselves and in what context. Assume positive intent and demonstrate compassion. The tone of a high-stakes leadership meeting will differ from that of a routine virtual update. Listen not only to other people but also to your inner voice, which will guide you in communicating empathetically and making necessary adjustments as you go. By heightening your situational and interpersonal awareness, you can better understand the reactions of others, read between the lines, and be more gracious in your responses.





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Gabe practiced those techniques—and it paid off. At one point, when his team merged with another, he had to help orient several new managers and address their questions and concerns on the spot. One of them asked how quickly he was planning to release a particular product. Listening closely to what was said and how it was said, Gabe realized that the timeline was of less concern to the manager than job security: That manager and others joining the team had been working exclusively on the product and were worried that they'd be out of a job after it launched. So when Gabe answered, he also detailed the new offerings those folks would work on next, putting everyone at ease.

### **Organize Your Thoughts**

When making formal presentations, most people give them a nice, logical structure that audience members can easily follow. But few of us adequately organize our thoughts in impromptu situations. We may presume that it's impossible to do so on the fly. Or perhaps we think that too much structure will make us seem stilted—the opposite of spontaneous. But how often have you encountered people whose meandering, hard-to-follow answers made you look longingly at the exit?

The best speakers maintain audience interest by demonstrating connections among specific points, ideas, or examples. Adhering to a structure enhances comprehension, emotional engagement,



and retention. It can sharpen your thinking by forcing you to stay focused on essential points only.

Some people equate structured thoughts with lists. Lists can be boring or confusing. Consider crafting a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end in which ideas are logically and naturally linked. Having a few simple frameworks ready can help in any spontaneous situation. (See the sidebar “Structure in Action.”) One of my favorites is useful in so many situations that I call it the “Swiss army knife” of frameworks. It has three parts: *What? So what?* and *Now what?* First introduce an argument, a product, an idea, or a point of view. Then explain how it is relevant to your audience. Finally, convey the next steps, such as potential actions, applications of new knowledge, or future plans.

### **Structure in Action**

Here are four spontaneous speaking situations you might encounter, along with structures you can use for each. These aren't the only ways to frame strong impromptu responses, but they provide a starting point.

Maya, the organizer of a large virtual meeting, employed that structure when one of the speakers, who was slated to give an update on a new product, didn't show up at the last minute. Rather than postpone the update, Maya decided she was familiar enough with the product to talk about its features, explain its

benefits to prospects and customers, and describe the launch plan. Executives at her company later made a point of complimenting her on her presentation, having no idea that it had been framed on the spot.

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The real problem we face when speaking spontaneously isn't an inherent inability to communicate. It's being so nervous that we strive for perfection or use default responses, talk too much without listening or observing, and fail to create structure around what we're saying. But there's no need to shrink back in fear when you're put on the spot. A measure of experimentation, thought, and practice can make impromptu speaking opportunities your time to shine. As you learn to think faster and talk smarter, your authentic personality can fully emerge. The result will be a more enjoyable, enriching, and memorable experience—for you as well as for your audience.

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