

Comfort and Impact

What makes one speaker move their listeners to action and another not? In a nutshell the answer is meeting the needs of the listeners. As listeners we respond to comfortable committed speakers more favorably than to speakers who seem nervous and held back. From the listener's point of view, everything about a speaker -- how he looks, sounds, moves -- gives us a reason to listen or not. This may not sound like a revelation until you consider how self-focused many of us become when we stand in front of a group. For most people in front of an audience the self talk tends to sound like "how am I doing, did that make sense, am I as good as the other speakers, do they like me." This entire internal dialog has to do with the self not the other. If you are going to have real impact -- move your listeners -- two things have to happen. You need to find a way to feel comfortable and in control and you need to make choices that let your listeners see you the way you want to be seen. Obviously these concepts are closely related. In fact they are two sides of the same coin. Lets look at them one at a time.

Comfort

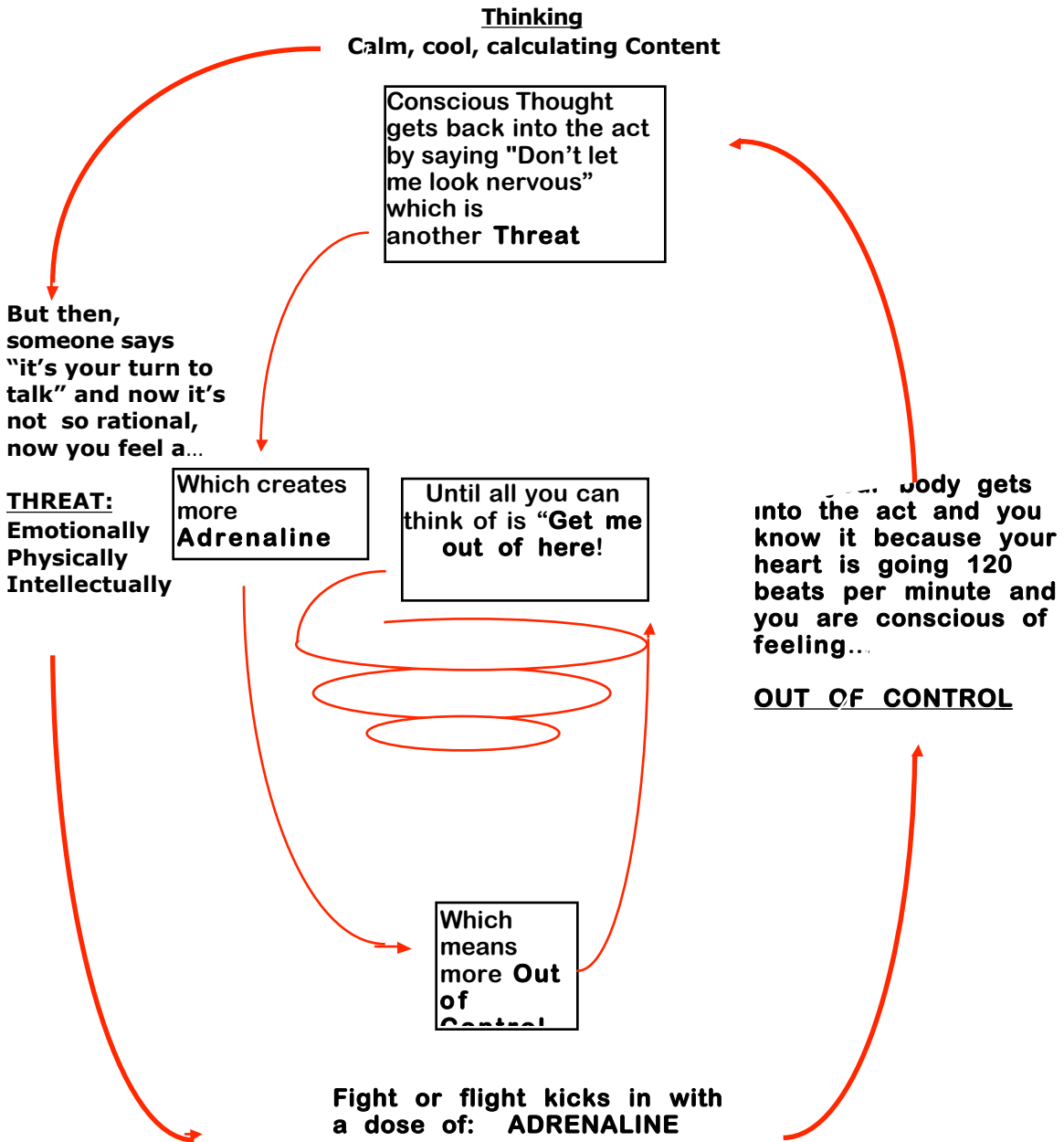
Jerry Seinfeld once said that since public speaking is America's number one fear, if invited to a funeral, most Americans would rather be in the coffin than standing at the pulpit delivering the eulogy. I hope it's not that bad for you but my experience is that even if it's not fear, your internal reaction to the prospect of a critical communication probably made you think "there has to be an easier way." There is no magic formula, but there are some powerful **choices** you can make in any communication that will help you feel more comfortable and in control.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT or why your body says GET ME OUT OF HERE!!

Take a few minutes to remember how you have responded, physically and emotionally, to a situation in which you were under extreme pressure. Ever been in a fight? Started an important sports competition? Made a pitch that would lock in your bonus or get you closer to that promotion? How did your body respond? As a coach and a performer I have witnessed everything from loss of bowel function and vomiting (very rare, thank goodness!) to sweaty palms and good 'ole fashioned butterflies in the stomach. I am not trying to frighten you. I am only suggesting that whatever you feel is OK. You name it, I have seen it or heard of it and it does not mean you are falling apart or that you are bound to fail. It means that your central nervous system is colluding with your adrenal glands to get you ready. Ready (in cave man days) for a life or death threat. Scientists and psychologists call it **Fight Or Flight** because your body is getting ready to either fight like hell or run for like crazy for the hills. Unfortunately, punching your client or running from the platform will probably not help you get that promotion so let's discuss what is happening and what you can do about it.



Let's say you are giving a speech. If you're like most people, most of your time and energy go into thinking and outlining your talk. For the most part you are comfortably in your head because you're good at...





Great. Now you understand it, what can you do about it?

Recognize it: Your body is going to respond so learn your own response pattern and make friends with it. "Heart rate up, right on time, sweaty palms, hear comes the cotton mouth." You do not have to encourage it, but if you do not know your own pattern you will be surprised and that will definitely make the cycle swirl all the worse.

Reality Check: Most of us (especially in business) are so concerned about winning and being perfect we forget why we are communicating in the first place. Getting your ideas to your listeners in a way they can hear and understand is your job as a communicator. Closing the deal, winning the contract, getting that promotion can happen only if your listeners hear your ideas. **Your listeners are not the enemy.**

Stop and exhale. No, you do not have to repeat a mantra, but when you stop talking and exhale all the air in your lungs you are literally telling your central nervous system that you are not under attack. You do it instinctively when you walk in your front door at the end of a long hard week. Ahhhhhh. By the way, what feels like an eternity of silence to you looks and sounds like control and confidence to your listeners. The pause gives you and your listeners time to think; you about what you are going to say, your listeners think about what you've just said.

Put the adrenaline to work. Fight or flight isn't there to make you feel nauseous. It's there to help you out of challenging or threatening situations. If you do not use it for what it's intended, it will make you feel crazy, and probably look uncomfortable. How do you use it? Open up! Get your body involved! Project your voice! Let your passion come through! Remember, the more adrenaline you use, the less there is swirling around in your body making you feel nervous. One nice side effect is that you look more interesting and interested in your ideas. Hum...Less nervous and more engaging. Sounds like a pretty good trade.

Knowing is great, but doing is what makes change. You will not feel more comfortable in your next critical communication unless you practice and make these **choices into habits.**



Impact

Most people would agree that if you want to have real impact as a communicator, just feeling comfortable is not enough. A golf swing that hooks the same way every time will become comfortable but it will not lower your handicap. As you think about your effectiveness, remember that what really matters is what is happening for your listeners. Since your listeners have no idea how you feel (unless you show them) a communicator's comfort alone will not make him effective. On the other hand, if you practice the choices that work for your listeners long enough, you will become comfortable with them (just like a new golf swing!).

Take the words being said (your content) out of the equation and think about the last conversation you had that really had meaning for you. Other than the content, what made you glad you were there, or even truly sorry or upset or whatever real reaction you might have had. Now think back to when you were an audience member in a talk that had real meaning. One on one or one on a thousand there are a handful of reasons why we, as listeners, have the energy to listen to some people and not to others.

Your success as a communicator is determined by the reaction your **listeners** have to what you say. If your listeners aren't convinced by how you say what you say -- regardless of content -- they won't be convinced.

What do your listeners need to make them want to listen?

You are who you are.

The most interesting thing about you is your uniqueness as a person. Trying too hard to do it right, to be perfect; trying too hard to entertain or to "act like a professional" will only take you away from who you are and what makes you unique. Videotape yourself and ask yourself: "is that me?". If not, you will not have the impact you could have. What is missing may be one or several of the following:

Your Strength:

Your strength has to come through or your listeners will wonder if you really do deserve to be up there speaking. Do you look and sound comfortable? Are you in a hurry or are you OK taking your time? Expressing your strength does not mean you act like the boss or that you are barking orders, but it does mean you are aware of and comfortable with your own power.

What does a speaker look like who is comfortable expressing her strength? Her feet are about hip width apart and her weight is solidly balanced on both feet. She is comfortable expressing herself with her arms and hands, but when she is not using them they rest comfortably by her sides. She takes her time, pausing when she needs to relax and think. Her voice is strong enough to be heard by everyone. The absence of tension says "I belong up here."

**Your Commitment:**

If you do not show your commitment when you speak, your listeners will wonder if you care about your own ideas. A speaker looks committed when his body and voice say "these words are important to me". It's not the same thing as enthusiasm which may only say "I'm really really happy to be here!!". Real commitment is convincing because it says these words are important to me and I believe they are important to you.

What does a committed communicator look like? A committed speaker works hard with his mouth to form his words. His torso comes forward toward his listeners -- literally getting his heart behind his ideas. All of his movements seem purposeful and add to the meaning of the words. Many of my business clients struggle with expressing their commitment. Initially it may feel exaggerated, flamboyant or even phony. I am not trying to turn any one into the next Jim Carey, but when was the last time you saw someone present and said "he looked too passionate about his ideas."

Your willingness to see them one on one:

Most people in America say giving speeches is their number one fear. No wonder. Everyone's looking at you. You are all alone and it's probably an important situation. Ask the same sample about engaging in conversation and you get a different answer. Most of us love to talk. One of the most powerful choices you can make as a communicator -- one on one or one on a thousand -- is to make everything you say a conversation with one person at a time. It means staying with whomever you see first for a thought. Seeing something in acknowledgment -- a nod, a shift, a smile, a frown -- and then moving on to the next person you see. When you really talk to one person at a time, just like a conversation, you will not feel as alone because you will not be.

A communicator who talks to one person at a time moves from one person to another randomly. She looks spontaneous, conversational and natural. Since you are probably more comfortable one on one you will look and feel more comfortable as well. You do not have to see everyone for this choice to have real impact. As you first experiment with this choice (especially if you are used to simple eye contact), be prepared. It will probably take more time than you expect to get something back from your listener. Some listeners will not give you anything back. That's OK. It's not a competition. You are offering your ideas to as many people as you can see, but you cannot make them respond.

Remember, it's your job as a communicator to get your ideas to them in a way they can use them. It's not the listeners' job to come and get them from you. If you are doing it right, it's hard work. That's why you become excited (nervous) before you give a talk. Your body knows it needs extra energy to do the work. Use that energy and you will feel great and the audience will hear your words. Success!!