



# Royal Bank Letter

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## *Giving a Performance*

*You never know when you might be asked to appear in public these days, at any event from a wedding banquet to a sales presentation.*

*Whatever the occasion, it helps to think of it as a theatrical venture, and to follow the old theatrical maxim: Leave nothing to chance...*

It all begins in primary school when your class is putting on a Christmas pageant. The teacher in charge patiently runs you through several rehearsals, and you stumble over your lines in them all. Your classmates titter, your face grows hot and red, and you want very badly to go to the bathroom — and wish you could stay there until the dreaded event is safely over. But you bite your lip and stoutly carry on.

When the awful evening arrives, there you are in a ridiculous costume, looking out over a darkened hall at the faces of the audience, convinced that they have come to see you prove what a silly fool you are. In a sweat, you stumble forth and manage to croak out your lines without getting them garbled. Then suddenly it is over, and you find yourself taking a bow to fulsome applause.

Thus you are introduced to the frightening yet gratifying act of appearing in public. From that moment on, you are subject to being called upon to stand and deliver before a group. In high school or university, you might have to give a paper or demonstrate an experiment. At work, you might be required to conduct workshops or lead training sessions. In your social life, you might be asked to tell a few jokes at a retirement party for a friend.

And every time you are faced with such a task, you are liable to feel that same old apprehension that you will never be able to carry it off without disgracing yourself. You may try to get out of it, protesting that you are awkward among strangers and basically shy. But often, you cannot refuse because of what is expected of you. A “command performance” comes

when you are unable to turn down an invitation from a close friend, relative, fellow volunteer, or boss.

The fact that you have earlier made it through public appearances with reasonable success means nothing. Your trepidation is just as strong as when you were a kid. The fact is that you are scared to death of leaving yourself open to public humiliation. Call it nervousness, stage fright, audience anxiety, performance panic or whatever you like — what you really feel is a particularly powerful form of fear.

In dealing with your condition, it helps to realize that it does not make you inferior or unique; it is both natural and common. Instructors in public speaking classes testify that more than 90 per cent of students suffer from stage fright when they start out. It strikes even the most experienced professional performers. At the height of his fame, having been in show business since the age of three, Sammy Davis Jr. told an interviewer: “Every time I walk on, I’m thinking, ‘Oh God, is this *it*? Is this the time I fail?’”

As the man billed as “the greatest entertainer in the world” implied, stage fright is essentially a fear of failure, mixed in with a fear of other human beings. The thought of failing in a public appearance rubs on that tender streak of inferiority we all have deep in our personalities. It is more than a mere matter of failure; it is exposing our weakness to people we feel to be stronger and better than we are. All our inadequacies are, so we think, held up to well-deserved ridicule. All the defences we normally present to the world are stripped away.



The most terrifying single prospect is that we might hit a mental blank and “freeze” in front of the assembled multitude. In sleepless moments we can visualize ourselves standing there tongue-tied while strangers in the crowd point, laugh and jeer, and our friends turn away from us in shame. Doctors who have studied the phenomenon of blanking out on stage say that it is a genuine form of temporary paralysis. It is akin to what happens to small animals when they are cornered by predators; they become immobilized by panic.

In the days leading up to a public appearance, the natural reaction to our fear is to suppress and deny it. Friends will tell us (or we will tell ourselves): “Try

*Be assured that the audience is usually cheering for the performer*

not to think about it and everything will be all right.” But ignoring fear does not make it go away; it only pushes it into hiding, waiting to ambush us at a crucial moment.

In this case, it may pounce in the middle of a spoken line, when we freeze like a trapped rabbit and our worst nightmare becomes reality.

There is only one way to prevent fear from thus abusing us, and that is to recognize it, accept it, and factor it into our planning. Once we have come to terms with it, we can put it to work in our own cause.

The effects of fear on both the body and brain can turn it into an asset when it is consciously used to its best effect in putting on a performance. The shot of adrenalin that comes with it raises our intensity, and that intensity captures the attention of the audience. Fear concentrates the mind, lending a clear, sharp focus to the message we want to convey.

It is easier to put fear to work for you if you realize that people in the audience are not half as conscious of it as you are. When you hear your own voice going out over the microphone, it sounds as if it is quavering wildly; but ask friends in the room afterwards what they heard, and they will tell you that you sounded just fine.

In the dreaded event that you do freeze or forget your lines, the best course is to recollect any lines you *do* remember and deliver them out of sequence. You can always try to back-track when the lost words pop back into your memory; but if they do not, all is not lost.

When veteran performers gather, they tell stories about how they recovered from a mental blank by skipping ahead in the script and carrying on as if

nothing had happened. They remark on how frequently audiences seem unaware of such gaffes.

Of course there are mistakes so obvious that they cannot be ignored, but audiences are usually inclined to make every allowance for them. In fact, people in the audience are usually internally cheering for the hapless performer, because they can imagine being in the same uncomfortable spot themselves.

The spectacle of theatre-goers booing and throwing rotten fruit at actors makes for amusing scenes in comedies about life on the stage, but it seems never to have been as common as depicted. “It is remarkable how virtuous and generously disposed everyone is at a play,” William Hazlitt wrote in the 18th century, when theatre-goers were a lot more rowdy than they are today.

In any case, very few of us are ever likely to be “on stage” as such, unless we belong to a company of amateur players. More often, our public appearances are in the context of our occupations or social and volunteer activities. Some professional people appear routinely in the public eye — teachers, courtroom lawyers, clergy men and women, television personalities, etc. Others, such as technical and sales people making presentations, must appear fairly regularly in front of groups. Still others occasionally have to stand up before seminars, quality circles and the like.

Whatever the reason for a public appearance, it pays to think of it first and foremost as a performance. Interviewed in a Wall Street Journal article on corporate meetings, Frances Rubacha, director of sales for Radio City Music Hall, said that “managers must realize when dealing with groups that all the rules of theatre apply.” It may seem out of context to regard the dissemination of practical information as a theatrical show, but looking at it that way might help you to inject some creative juice into it. Indeed, the more seemingly dull the material, the greater the need for creativity in putting it across.

Thinking like a theatrical producer opens one’s mind to all the possible ways in which a particular message may be conveyed most effectively. Professional producers use props, scenery and music for maximum impact. The equivalents in amateur circles are audio/visual aids, which serve the same general purpose of supporting and enhancing a show.

It may well be that the objective of a public appearance is best met by a conventional speech, a subject earlier covered in this publication. (See “Speaking In Public,” RB Letter November/December



1992.) For example, it would not seem appropriate to use audio/visual material in a formal after-dinner address. In other situations, however, would-be speech-makers may be well-advised to examine how they can make the most of all the resources available. This is particularly true of those managers and experts who apparently feel that what they have to say is so supremely important that it does not matter how ineptly they say it. They seem to think that their audiences will find their message equally worth retaining whether it is packaged in gilded gift wrapping or a brown paper bag.

The prime objective of any public appearance should be to ensure that it has precisely the effect on the audience that is intended. "Presenters" (for lack of a better word) are more likely to achieve that purpose if they use the most appropriate tools. By ensuring that audiences *see* as well as hear their message, they greatly increase their chances of having it remembered. If the message involves persuasion, the chances are increased of influencing the audience as desired.

Psychological tests have shown that 87 per cent of lasting sensations are experienced visually. When, as on projected slides, words are displayed visually and repeated verbally, retention is increased. The use of non-verbal sound — music or sound effects — gives a further subliminal boost to retention. Think of how often you have left a cinema humming the theme song of a movie while the scenes it accompanied run through your mind's eye.

The list of audio/visual aids stretches from old-fashioned chalk boards through slick professionally produced videos to three-dimensional images delivered via computer. In between come flip charts, marker boards, overhead projectors, film and slide projectors, audio tape recorders, models and maquettes. Each has a different function and comes with a different price tag. Like theatrical producers, presenters must decide which techniques, or combinations thereof, will have the greatest impact within their budgetary means.

The primary thing to be said about A/V aids is that they are just that: aids to your personal performance. You could, of course, simply run a film or video and be done with it, but that is unlikely to achieve the express effect you are aiming for. "It is not wise to rely on visuals alone, no matter how graphically they

*Audio/visual aids work best when they are combined with live talk*

make the point," writes American sales educator Frank Brennan. Aids are used to their best advantage, he says, when they are interspersed with live talk.

The use of A/V aids is like the stagecraft in a play, adding flavour and substance to the human players' performance. Some might argue, however, that there is no place in the world of amateur public engagements for the values of the professional stage. The stage, they will say, is a place of illusion and artifice; speeches and presentations, on the other hand, usually deal with facts or factually based arguments. To write out a script and rehearse it like a professional player may smack of falsity to people who pride themselves on their wholesome simplicity.

These straightforward individuals like to think they are exactly the same "plain ordinary people" on a public platform as in the privacy of their homes. This rugged consistency is responsible for the worst advice a public speaker ever had: "Just go out there and be yourself and you've got nothing to worry about." It carries the assumption that no very strenuous planning or preparation is necessary; that all you have to do is tell people in your own words what is on your mind, and your sincerity will make them pay attention and retain the thoughts you want them to retain. It is a toss-up who loses most from such fine naturalness, the speaker or the listeners.

A better piece of advice would be: "Just go out there and be yourself, only more so." It must be remembered that communicating with a small group of intimates and communicating with a big group of strangers are two different things; some adjustments in approach are inevitably required. This is not to suggest that you should present an audience with a persona other than your real self; that would be detected and noted with disapproval. Rather, "being yourself only more so" entails amplifying your true personality to fit the scale of the task, in the same way as a microphone amplifies your voice to reach everyone in a large room.

The voice and the microphone are, in fact, good places to start in the development of a public personality suitable to an era when everybody is used to watching polished performers on television. You should know, for instance, that talking into a microphone is not just talking; it makes your voice sound louder and distorts it slightly. A microphone is

*Protecting yourself against the second worst nightmare of being on stage*





not kind to people who speak loudly and quickly. It makes them sound like Donald Duck.

No matter what your normal pace of speech, you can hardly go wrong by slowing it down markedly. Not only will a slower pace enable you to pronounce each word distinctly, it will also help you to control your nervousness. The best way to slow down your speech is to slow down your breathing, and the best way to do that is to breathe deeply from the diaphragm. Deep, deliberate breathing also has the effect of relaxing your nervous system, allowing you to proceed calmly. It protects you against the second worst nightmare of being in the public spotlight, which is running out of breath in the middle of a line.

Any successful presentation, it has been said, is 90 per cent preparation and 10 per cent performance.

*Voice of  
experience:  
'Every tiny  
thing' should be  
rehearsed*

Anyone seeking a first-class performance must first abandon the notion that careful preparation somehow detracts from one's naturalness. On the contrary, your delivery will be perceived as more

natural when you are more confident. And you will be more confident when you are thoroughly prepared.

The preparation begins with thinking out and writing a script containing exactly what you want to say, in language that is sure to be understood by your particular audience. You should then voice it into a tape recorder to hear how it sounds, revise the rough and unclear parts, and make certain that it is the right length. (If in doubt, err on the side of brevity.)

If you are using an overhead projector or the like, you should then prepare the graphic material for the slides, avoiding the common mistake of attempting to communicate too much on each slide; do not make them too wordy or the graphics too fussy. Ideally, you should memorize the script to avoid the awkwardness of reading from a sheet of paper. This can be assisted by writing down key phrases on pocket-sized index cards to stimulate your memory at regular points.

Then, as in a Broadway production, it's on to rehearsal. Amateurs, in their self-consciousness, might want to start in front of a mirror. Much of the impression you make before an audience will come from body language. Try to practise physical gestures at spots in your presentation where those gestures would come naturally if you were talking in private. Presenters who actively work on their body language

avoid the danger of being seen as stiff, which makes the audience feel as uncomfortable as the presenter looks. After one or two rehearsals in front of a mirror, it is time to try it out on a live audience in the form of one's mate, friends or business associates.

A dress rehearsal may not be necessary, but care in dressing is. A basic rule is to dress in such a way that your appearance does not distract attention from your message. Experienced speakers have also noted that meeting rooms and halls today are often too well-heated. Light-weight clothes are called for not only for comfort, but so that sweat does not appear on your brow.

As the same Sammy Davis Jr. said, "Every gesture, every inflection, every tiny thing the audience sees, hears and senses about you makes a positive or negative impression." Therefore everything to the slightest twitch of an eyebrow should be planned and rehearsed.

The smallest and simplest things can trip you up. It has been remarked, for example, how common it is for speakers to make a joke and not wait for the laughter to subside, so that their next few words are inaudible. Some will make themselves look foolish by mispronouncing words, a flaw that can be rectified by rehearsing before friends and asking them to watch out for mispronunciations. Worse, some speakers will mispronounce the names of members of the audience, embarrassing both those people and themselves.

Others will make impressively thorough presentations, and then fumble an answer in the subsequent question period. If questions are to be taken, a crucial part of the preparation is to anticipate everything that might be asked, and have an answer ready. If you have not anticipated a question, do not try to bluff your way out of it. Follow the Talmud's advice and "teach thy tongue to say, 'I do not know.'"

The finer points of public speaking and presentations are covered in various books and seminars on the subjects. They differ in some details, but they all have the same general theme. And that is that you can leave nothing to chance if you expect to get your message across, the more so if you are nervous to begin with. If that is the case, you should channel your nervousness into psyching yourself up for the performance. And when at length the applause erupts, you can congratulate yourself on two achievements: you have made the desired impression on your audience, and you have won a victory over fear.

