

# Speaking Like a Pro: How to Find Your Voice and Rule the Room

by Michael Parrish DuDell





It's 2 p.m. on a Wednesday afternoon, and all eyes are on you. As you gaze out onto a sea of curious onlookers, you begin to feel an overwhelming sense of panic. Your body goes stiff; your words disappear. **The pressure is on.**

**In 2016, public speaking is still ranked as one of the most common and pervasive phobias.** In fact, in the U.S. alone, nearly a quarter of the population considers it their greatest fear. At the same time, however, the ability to communicate effectively has never been more valuable.

**In a famous survey performed by Harvard Business Review,** subscribers rated “the ability to communicate” as the most important factor in making an executive promotable — more so than ambition, education and even the capacity for hard work. While this data may seem surprising at first, it makes sense when you consider the high cost of the alternative.

**According to SIS International Research** — a global market research firm — 70 percent of small to mid-size businesses claim that ineffective communication is their primary problem, costing the organization more time and money than anything else.

As a professional speaker, I’ve spent nearly a decade delivering keynote presentations and interactive workshops designed to help organizations and leaders build future-focused companies and connect to a new generation of consumer. Over the years, I’ve discovered a handful of powerful practices and principles that can help anyone find their voice and rule the room. Here are four of the most impactful:



## 1. Embrace the Fear

It's important to understand that no matter one's skill or comfort level, almost every speaker grapples with some degree of nervousness when addressing a crowd. Accepting this idea is the first step in moving beyond the fear.

For many, the terror associated with public speaking has little to do with the act itself. The real trigger stems from the threat of potential failure, which arguably is the root of almost any insecurity. Therefore, the goal must not be to conquer the fear but instead to manage it in real time.

When you allow yourself to experience these emotions and embrace them for what they are, you automatically remove much of the anxiety that subconsciously fuels the dread. This in turn allows you to channel the nerves into a productive and positive source of energy.

To help facilitate this process, I practice two or three minutes of tactical breathing — a method often used in combat situations to reduce stress and promote relaxation. The process is fairly straightforward: breathe in through your nose for four counts; stop and hold the breath for four counts; breath out through your mouth for four counts; stop and hold your breath for four counts. As you repeat this exercise, you'll notice the anxiety slowly begin to dissipate.

So the next time you begin to feel that panicky, lightheaded sensation, pause for moment and acknowledge the reaction. Only then will you be able to move beyond the negative emotions and regain your focus. Soon, the fear that once held you back will begin to catapult you forward.



## 2. Prioritize Connection Above All Else

It's common for inexperienced speakers to overcomplicate both the preparation process and the performance. This results in speeches that are chock full of intricate data, scattered ideas and elaborate concepts. Although the art of presenting is a complex one, the goal is actually quite simple: establish a meaningful connection with the crowd.

It doesn't matter how informative your content may be, if you cannot create a bond with the audience your message will remain largely unheard. To do this, you must first be willing to abandon some of the perceived formalities associated with the role of speaker and adopt a more human, peer-to-peer approach. You must also be willing to remove many of the emotional and physical barriers that stand between you and your audience.

Perhaps the most common example of such a barrier is the dreaded podium. These large monstrosities serve no purpose but to provide the nervous lecturer with a false sense of safety and security. The reality, however, is that hiding behind a lectern is one of the best ways to alienate your audience. It's essentially a wall that separates you from them.

A similar barrier is established when one relies too heavily on a script. No matter how charismatic you may be, reading verbatim off a page of notes will always weaken your impact because it undercuts your ability to engage. However, if you feel as though some type of script is absolutely necessary, stick to a single page of bullet points.

By taking full physical ownership of the space and allowing yourself to share your story openly and without constraint, you'll demonstrate a rare kind of bravery that elicits respect, curiosity, and control – three attributes embodied by any compelling speaker.



### 3. Practice 360-Degree Listening

Being a great presenter is about more than just talking. In fact, the best speakers are those who can deliver a message while simultaneously listening and reacting to real-time feedback.



Think of your audience like a living and breathing organism. Every word you deliver, each idea you express, elicits either a positive or negative response. While the content itself may remain fixed, the job of the speaker is to calibrate his or her tone and delivery in a way that most resonates with the crowd.

As a professional speaker, I spend a good portion of time giving talks at conferences and organizations across the globe. No matter what subject I may be discussing, the first two minutes of every speech is almost always identical. This is a strategic decision designed to quickly and efficiently establish a baseline assessment.

In those initial 120 seconds, I'm not actually thinking about the words I'm reciting. Instead, I'm carefully examining the crowd and making mental notes about their general disposition. What makes them react or recoil? Who do I have on my side and whom will I need to win over? What is the approximate energy level in the room and what must I do to maintain or enhance it? These are just a few of the questions I try to evaluate from the very start.

Throughout the rest of the speech, I make sure to listen as much as I talk. I watch body language, monitor reactions and note moments that seem to generate the greatest interest. This practice will allow you to establish a deeper connection with the audience and present ideas in a way that is both hyper relevant and deeply lasting.

## 4. Assess Your Performance

After delivering a presentation, it's important to pause for a few moments and evaluate your performance. Although this type of critical assessment can often feel exasperating, it's a crucial part of improving your speaking skills.



I use a simple yet powerful method that's built around three key questions: What did I achieve? What did I learn? What will I do better next time?

It isn't accidental that this process begins by pinpointing any and all major accomplishments. Many find that identifying success is often more difficult than picking apart the flimsier moments. This is true even for seasoned veterans who've made a career out of speaking. By uncovering these small victories from the start, you'll increase your confidence and bolster the overall process.

To begin, identify the three best moments from the speech. What were some of the unanticipated triumphs? When did you feel the audience was most engaged? Where did you notice the greatest improvements? Record your answers on a piece of paper; you'll want to review them later.

Next, write down the key lessons you learned from the experience. Were the assumptions you made correct? Did the presentation help clarify something valuable that was previously unknown? It's likely that many of these learnings will be immediately applicable in other areas in your life and career, as well.

Finally, record the moments you felt were the weakest. Are there any patterns or trends? Was there a particular challenge you didn't anticipate? If so, what were they and how can you prepare better next time? While there's never a need to be overly critical, making

productive observations is the most effective way to stimulate real, measurable improvement.

Whether addressing a handful of colleagues or a crowd of thousands, mastering fundamental presentation skills and improving your speaking abilities is an investment worth making. Not only will it lead to more confidence and charisma, it can help boost your credibility and open the door to new opportunities that might otherwise have never been possible.

## About the Author



Michael Parrish DuDell is an entrepreneur, international keynote speaker and the bestselling author of “Shark Tank Jump Start Your Business” – the official business book from ABC’s hit show Shark Tank. Recently ranked as one of the top three most popular business authors by Amazon, Michael is a recognized Millennial expert and business pundit who’s been featured in numerous media outlets, including CNBC, Bloomberg TV, CNN, The New York Times, WABC, Business Insider, Yahoo and Forbes, where he is a regular contributor. From helping Seth Godin launch a publishing company to working with GE on the relaunch of, Michael has collaborated with some of the most innovative brands and influential thought leaders in the world. Learn more at [MichaelParrishDuDell.com](http://MichaelParrishDuDell.com).