Speak up

It's an essential skill for any communicator: the ability to stand up in front of an audience and present. You have to make your case, gain support and spread the word - but public speaking is also one of our greatest fears. Presentation guru Charles Serio tells *InsideOut* how we can all overcome our anxiety.

You're about to stand up and tell the board about your latest comms strategy but... your mouth goes dry, your hands start sweating and you're not actually sure you can remember a word of your painstakingly-prepared presentation.

To a greater or lesser extent, we've all been there. It's called glossophobia - the fear of public speaking – and it regularly comes near the top of any survey of our greatest phobias.

"In the last one I saw, the greatest fear was losing a loved one – that makes perfect sense," says Charles Serio, who has coached presentation workshops across the world since 1995. "The second biggest fear is speaking in public... that's higher than the fear of dying or being buried alive, which is madness."

It's clear that just about everyone has a fear of putting their head above the parapet and being judged. But presentation skills can be managed and turned around with the right help.

"For a start, it's good to realise you're not the only one who's worried about this," says Charles. "Everyone gets nervous – if you didn't, it would either be because you didn't care or you were so arrogant it would be impossible to change your ways."

A Charles Serio workshop – and he's run them for everyone from *The Guardian* and Nokia to Ford and Unilever – helps people who have to present as part of their job to accept reality and connect with their audience. He deals with gaining confidence, body language and the equal status of the speaker and audience. ▶

He has developed his programmes around the five issues that prospective public speakers worry about:

1. Confidence
2. What do I do when I lose my way?
3. What do I do with my hands?
4. What if the audience doesn't respect me?
5. I worry about 'death by PowerPoint'

Confidence

"Confidence is the big one," he says, and he combats the lack of it by ensuring people understand three 'givens'. If you're speaking in public:

- you will be seen
- you will be heard
- confidence is something you do.

"Accept the givens," insists Charles. "The reality is you're going to stand up and give a presentation to a group. So, rolling your head back or putting your hands in your pockets won't help – you *will* be seen.

"You will also be heard. So mumbling and speaking at a million miles an hour doesn't change the reality. For good or bad, you *will* be heard and you can work on the technical side of your voice."

He also insists confidence is about the things we do. "It's not some trait like having brown eyes," says Charles. "Confident people do confident things.

"For instance, knowing your presentation involves graft, so you go over it to make sure you know it. But, at the point you know it well enough, put it aside. That's the confident thing to do, rather than keep tinkering with it until the last second."

Not losing your way

You must lead the presentation. "Think about your main topics and then think of the pillars that support your main argument," explains Charles. "The pillars hold it together, and the topics will fall into each category. That way you always have forward momentum, you always have somewhere to go next."

Charles Serio

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What do I do with my hands?

Think: hands, feet and head. "I create a neutral body shape – hands at my side, feet both in touch with the floor, and the top of my head parallel to the ceiling," says Charles.

"If I lose my body language and start rocking back and forth, or put my hands in my pocket, I know my neutral position. I wouldn't do the whole presentation that way – but I return to that as a kind of re-boot."

What if the audience doesn't respect me?

"Often people want to know what to do with hostile audiences, how to maintain an equal status with them," says Charles. "My mantra is 'I'm no better and neither are they'."

This overlaps with other issues. For instance, if you want equal status with your audience, you have to keep your body shape. "Hands in pockets screams low status, it says 'I don't want to be looked at or heard'," explains Charles.

But you have to give respect too. "Each and every person in the audience is equally important, so give them eye contact," he adds. "Look at people – just spinning your head round occasionally is not eye contact." Dress and grooming also ties into equality of status. "As internal communicators you'll probably know what people will be wearing," says Charles.

"If they are old-school suit and tie, I am old-school suit and tie. If they're smart casual, so am I. It's a way of making them think from the start, this guy is one of us."

'Death by PowerPoint'

"PowerPoint gets a bad press but it's not PowerPoint that's the problem - it's our problem," says Charles.

"The main focus of any presentation must be on the presenter. The presenter is leading the session, otherwise we'd send emails with a selection of slides and say here's the presentation.

"If you're using PowerPoint or some other supporting tool well, it's just that – a support to you."

He recommends always introducing a point BEFORE showing any supporting slide. "That avoids the split focus where everyone is reading the slide and not listening to me," he says.

"That's death by PowerPoint. It happens if we make PowerPoint more prominent in the presentation than we are."

Charles adds: "The great news is I have never seen a presenter so bad that I've suggested they look for another job."

More details on www.charlesserio.com