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Learning Outcomes

- Discuss the importance of public speaking in a business setting

What is public speaking but a dressed up—or not, depending on your audience—version of the basic skills we’ve been using since we first began forming desires and shaping the words and gestures to communicate those desires? Ah, life was simple then; a baby pointing and reaching towards a bowl of grapes or a toddler repeating “more milk” until they get what they want. Then again, one fundamental dynamic hasn’t changed. As Stevie Wonder put it, “If you don’t ask, you don’t get.” This is true not only personally but especially professionally. If you want the sale, contract, funding, job, project, or promotion, you have to be willing and able to ask for it in a clear and compelling manner. Often, you’ll have to do so in front of a group of deciders—those who will determine the response to your request. Welcome to public speaking!

What has changed is your potential—your potential to connect, to create or co-create and, given technology and social media/sharing, your potential reach and impact. In a statement echoed in virtually every career and leadership book and blog, the *Toastmasters International Guide to Successful Speaking* notes, “There is perhaps no greater skill [to] help you build your career or business than effective public speaking.” As a testament to the tradition and enduring power of oral speech, the primary motivations for speaking are the same as they were in ancient Greece. In [Aristotle’s treatise on the art of persuasion titled *Rhetoric*](#), he identified three primary motivations: to inform, to persuade, and to inspire. Practically speaking, public speeches often include more than one element. For example, communicating a risk or potential opportunity may be done in conjunction with building support for a change in business practices or a proposed initiative.

Public speaking is also an exceptional, and cost-effective, way to build your brand and network within your organization, profession, or industry and/or to build good will for your company in the community. Whether you’re pitching a product, service, idea, company or person (including yourself), public speaking differentiates you and your message from the promotional noise and general chatter. As professional speakers and authors Jeff Slutsky & Michael Aun note, public speaking “literally puts you on a pedestal.” Indeed, the average audience member assumes that since you’re speaking on the topic, you must be an expert. Of course, the impression they leave with depends on the quality of your speech, but the bottom line is that being a speaker gives you a level of credibility that would take a significant amount of time to cultivate otherwise. Speaking allows you to develop a reputation as a thought leader or community leader, raising your visibility and perceived market value. That’s not something a cover letter and resume or pitch is likely to do—if it even makes it through the filters.

Practice Question

You've been monitoring business employment and career trends and have decided to develop a personal brand that allows you some measure of creative and financial independence. What action represents your best next step?

- Submit a pitch to speak at a industry or professional conference.

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