

The mind is an amazing thing;
it starts working the moment you are born,
and never stops until you get up to speak in public.

—Author Unknown

1 CHAPTER

The Freeze

Picture a young man standing behind the stage—nervously waiting. His palms are getting sweaty, he can feel his heart beating faster, and his right eye begins to twitch. He is listening to the speaker, the Master of Ceremony, at the front of the stage. The speaker is telling the audience about the excellent work the young man has done in the insurance business. He is listing the young man's accomplishments in terms of the number of policies he sold resulting in impressive numbers on production, premium, and applications.

This young man is standing at the back of a stage in Mexico City because he is about give the speech of his life. Other than some classes in high school in his youth, this is his first time in front of a live audience.

Suddenly, he hears his name announced and then, a loud applause. Quickly, gathering himself with a deep breath, trying to show enthusiasm, he bounces up onto the stage—the stage is huge. It is about the size of a school classroom; however, to him, it seems like the size of a jet airplane hangar.

The podium is across the far side of the stage and as he briskly approaches it, he looks to his left. There in that big auditorium, on the back wall—which is two stories tall—is a huge photograph of him, floor to ceiling. At the top of this gigantic photograph, for everyone to see, is a filmstrip, and the caption in the filmstrip reads: “Coming Attractions.” After he looks at the picture, he glances out into the audience and instantly his face becomes as white as a ghost.

His pace slows to a crawl. He steps up to the podium; he puts his hands on the lectern; he looks out into the audience (his eyes are huge) as they quickly end their applause, and quiet down; he stands there with a look of fear on his face. By now, the fear is consuming him. He has an overpowering urge to run out of the building. His heart is beating so fast he can actually see his tie move.

He leans forward close to the microphone and says, “I ah, I ah,” and then he stands straight up and looks to the side of the stage trying to hide his fear. He is desperately trying to think of something to say; but his mind is blank. He leans forward again, close to the microphone, and utters again, “I ah, I ah.” In this second attempt at speaking, he is unconsciously thumping his hand against the side of the lectern. The microphone is right there and everyone can hear this loud thumping throughout the entire auditorium. He tries again, “I ah, I ah, uh, uh, uh.” He then takes a step back, draws a deep breath, and reaches into his suit pocket. Reaching inside his pocket, he pulls out some papers—his speaking notes. He is so nervous he begins to see “stars.” Standing there, lightheaded, with the papers rattling due to the uncontrollable shaking of his hands, he is starting to freak out.

However, he presses on. Again, the microphone is there on the podium; like his thumping, the microphone is amplifying the rattling of the papers throughout the auditorium. In the audience—roughly two hundred people—clearly everyone wants him to do well; everyone surely is hoping—“Please say something.” He puts the papers down flat on the podium, smooth them out with his hands, slowly leans forward, and looks at his notes. He can not clearly see any of the words—not a single one, so he leans closer, so close to the papers that his nose is almost touching the papers, and he still cannot read a single word. Completely bewildered, he utters, “Oh shit.”

The microphone picks up his expletive—everybody hears him. Suddenly, he straightens up, looks to the side again while everyone in the auditorium is quiet, waiting for him to speak. You can hear a pin drop. By now, everyone is feeling the tension and silently pleading, “Oh please say something, please say something.” He could not get a single word out. After a painful two or three minutes of this embarrassing experience, he steps back—out of breath—lets out a deep sigh, turns, and walks off the stage.

This was the worst case of stage fright I have ever seen. It was the worst possible thing that could happen to anyone delivering a speech. How did he come to that point of walking off a stage in that embarrassing moment?

This young man was an insurance agent completing his first year in the insurance business. He was 24 years old when this “freeze” happened back in 1976. He had sold more policies than any first year agent in his District. This high production in sales created lots of attention from the company executives and resulted in an invitation to speak at the Company’s business convention in Mexico City. All the top agents and their spouses, in the western region, were invited to attend this convention.

When he was asked to give his presentation, both his District and Regional bosses huddled with the young agent and together they hammered out a perfect speech. It was twenty minutes long and it was their best effort at speech writing.

For three months, the young man had practiced this speech by himself and on Fridays he would recite it to his District boss.

The day finally arrived for the Mexico City convention. While waiting for the plane at the Seattle (SeaTac) airport, unexpectedly, the Regional boss arrived. This was a surprise because he didn't come to Seattle often. Apparently, his sole purpose was to sit on the plane and listen to the young agent practice his speech. The regional boss wanted the agent to "shine" as a representative of the western region. They boarded the plane for the trip. On the plane, most of the agents and spouses were drinking tequila and enjoying a good time; however, the young agent was stuck practicing his speech with the bosses.

They arrived in Mexico City and settled in at the Santa Maria Isabella—Sheraton. Someone suggested he go check out the auditorium before the next morning because his speech was scheduled during the convention's opening gathering. However, he declined the suggestion in favor of going up to his room where he could continue to practice. The majority of the agents gathered in the hotel dining rooms and lounges enjoying their leisure time. The Conference began the following morning, and everyone witnessed the freeze—the most embarrassing moment of the young agent's life.

What do you think happened to this guy? You might think of many things. Here are a few. When he got back to Seattle, he quit his insurance job—clearing out his office in the middle of the night so he didn't have to face the other agents. He decided to never give a speech or any type of presentation again. He simply buried himself in his new job—selling appliances at a Seattle department store.

It took me 14 years to come to terms with that embarrassing event in Mexico City—I may never get over it. Yes, that's right, you figured it out, the young agent was me! That experience debilitated me for a long time and to this day, it still affects me. I will always have some degree of stage fright.

Don't you agree it is ironic that I failed in the worst possible way at public speaking, had this traumatic experience, and never wanted to try speaking in front of a group again—EVER—and now, here I am, several years later, teaching public speaking? Since I started studying the fear of public speaking, I have taught over 6,000 students to successfully harness this "stage fright."

Questions for Discussion

1. What is your horror story of public speaking?
2. How did you handle it?
3. What would you have done differently to have a better result?
4. Did you withdraw to never speak in front of a group again? Why or why not?

