



# FireOpsOnline.com

Officer Development Series – *Leadership Skills*

---



## Public Speaking

By Deputy Chief Frank Viscuso

An officer is often asked to speak and present in public – sometimes without a chance to prepare. Because of this, it's important to develop adequate communication skills.

When it comes to speaking in public, having a vast knowledge base on the topic you are covering is essential, but without good communication skills, the thought of giving a live presentation can be daunting. Everyone knows the #1 fear in America is public speaking... many people don't know that the #2 fear in America is death. I remember having breakfast with a friend one day when he jokingly said, "Don't you find it odd that most people would rather be the dead guy in the box, then the guy giving the eulogy." I pretty sure that was the first time coffee came out of my nose.

The cold, hard fact is that a person with an extensive knowledge base but poor communication skills is at the mercy of the lesser educated person who knows how to communicate a message in a clear and confident manner. This also holds true for firefighters who are taking promotional exams. Knowing the right answers is only half the battle. You also have to be able to communicate the way a leader would. With that in mind, below are some pointers that will help you prepare for speaking in front of others.

## Making the presentation

Imagine you are entering a room where you are expected give a ten or fifteen-minute presentation (maybe to a group of coworkers, the public, or the upper management of your organization). Although the scenario and audience may change, there are “absolutes” when it comes to making a solid presentation.

Good study habits and strong work ethic will arm you with the knowledge base I mentioned earlier, but if you are serious about elevating yourself above the crowd and overcoming handicaps that most people have, then you should be aware of the subconscious aspects of an oral presentation.

### Subconscious aspects

When you are speaking, it's not only your words that are people are listening to; it's also your voice, your body language, and your appearance. Here is a quick breakdown of all three:

- Your voice – *How* you say something is as important as *what* you are saying. It's essential to present yourself as in a confident—but not cocky—manner.
- Body language – This is a subject in its own right and a topic in which much has been written and said. In essence, your body movements express what your attitudes and thoughts *really* are. On the following pages, you will find tips on body language from the publication *How to read a person like a book*.
- Appearance – First impressions influence people's attitudes toward you. Dressing appropriately for an occasion is extremely important (for firefighters, this means a neatly pressed uniform). Being well groomed is also important. It's hard to take a person seriously when they look like they just crawled out of bed.

As with most personal skills, speaking in public requires *practice*. It's hard to practice and hone your skills when you are unaware of common mistakes you may be making. This leads us into body language.

Consider this; words are not the only way people communicate when they are speaking. Beyond the *ums* and *ahs*, there are gestures and expressions that tell stories. With very few exceptions, people consistently, but unknowingly, communicate their inner feelings quite openly. Each gesture is like a word in a language, and whether you are aware of it or not, we all subconsciously speak that language.

Consider this for a moment. Everyone has a distinctive walk that makes them easily recognizable to their friends. In the book titled *How to read a person like a book*, the authors speak about Gesture clusters, which enable people to read you. These clusters are a grouping of individual gestures that tell a story about you, and if you're not careful, these clusters will cause your audience to judge you rather than listen to the words that are coming out of your mouth.

Here are a few Examples:

Imagine a man who is sitting rigid, in an upright position with ankles locked. His eyebrows are raised and his hands are clenched together making one big fist, and he is rhythmically messaging one thumb against the other. Alone, these gestures are not very telling, together; however, they send the message that this man is **NERVOUS**.

Now imagine a woman who is sitting across the table from you who is unable to make eye contact. Instead, she is looking at floor, her shoulders slumped. The woman is trying to tell you something, but she is clearly struggling to come up with words. It's obvious this woman **LACKS CONFIDENCE**.

In a third example, without saying one word, it's clear that the person who turns their back on you while you are talking and slams the door as they walk out of the room is **ANGRY**.

You must be aware of what your body is saying. You should also be aware of single gestures that send a strong message to others. In order to comprehend the full meaning of the gesture-cluster and determine the congruity of its components. Take for example, a person with arms folded high on their chest. This gesture is synonymous with stubbornness (think of a Baseball Umpire who is being yelled at by a manager). Let's look at several other types of nonverbal communication that are easily recognizable and often encountered:

- Frown: Displeasure or confusion
- Raised eyebrows: Fear, envy or disbelief
- Hand to cheek: Nervous, critical, pondering, or listening intently
- Inability to make eye contact: Hiding something
- Touching/rubbing nose: doubt
- Covering your mouth: Hiding something
- Pinching the bridge of your nose, eyes closed: self-conflict
- Clearing your throat (more than once): typically means anxious or apprehensive. This; however, is more than just a subconscious gesture. Mucus forms in the throat when a person becomes anxious or apprehensive. The natural thing to do when this occurs is clear your throat. The key is to prepare well enough so that you are 'less nervous'.

Gesture clusters, together, will tell you a lot about a person, but when it comes to single gestures, facial expressions tend to be the dominant body gesture. When giving a presentation while sitting at a table, consider the fact that most of your body will be hidden behind the table. If you are sitting upright, which you should be, your facial expressions will be the most obvious gestures.

Top sales people are well aware of the fact that a person's facial gestures are telling a story. When dealing with a prospect whose eyes are turned down and face is turned away, the sales person knows he is being shut out. The same sales person will recognize that the sale is virtually made when the prospects head is shifted to the same level as theirs and they are sharing an enthusiastic smile.

## Quick reference speaking tips:

Here are 8 tips to help you deliver your message in a confident, professional manner.

1. Speak clearly and be natural.
2. Don't shout or whisper, make sure everyone in the room can hear you.
3. Don't rush your words or talk deliberately slowly. It's okay to pause at key moments to emphasize the importance of a particular point you are making; however, don't overuse this technique, and be aware of your time constraints.
4. Don't try to be a flashy speaker. It is okay to change your delivery (speed, pitch of voice, etc.), but don't overdo it. This may work for motivational speakers, but it rarely does for anyone else who is giving a presentation.
5. Keep hand movements to a minimum. Again, it's okay to sparingly use your hands to emphasize points, but don't indulge in too much animated hand waving. This can be irritating and distracting.
6. Make eye contact. You can look down at your notes, but look at the people you are speaking to as much as possible. If there is more than one, don't fix on one individual. Eye contact projects confidence.
7. Avoid nervous body movements (as described above).
8. Don't ramble. Make your point then move on to the next point(s). If you are asked question, your answers should be concise and to the point.

## Presentation Aids

Props and presentation aids can be valuable tools depending on the scenario. If you are speaking about new tools, you will obviously want to display the tools so everyone can see what you are talking about. If you are using a powerpoint, make sure you rehearse your presentation using the projector and a screen. Often times, presentations that look great on the computer monitor don't look as good when projected onto a screen.

## Promotional Exams:

When taking a promotional exam, you will probably not be provided any presentation aids other than your notes, which should be used for your reference only. You may also be allowed to have a pen and stop watch on hand. If so, place all three (your notes, pen and stop watch) in front of you in an organized manner. When you walk into the testing room, the assessor may hand you notes and ask if they are yours. Quickly scan through them and make a mental note of what pages you have (if more than one). Place your pen and stop watch on either side. If you are permitted to use a stop watch, it will be for you to keep time. When the assessor signals that your testing period has begun, start the timer. This is something you should do whenever you are giving a timed presentation. It will allow you to stay on track and not go beyond your allotted time. Occasionally glance down at your watch to keep track of time. This is the same procedure you want to follow when practicing for your presentation. You don't want to fumble around, trying to find the start button at the beginning of your presentation. This will make you look unprepared, unorganized, and nervous. All of which will negatively affect your overall presentation.

A bit of advice! Unless your last name is Hilton or Trump, success in any arena is not handed to a person on a silver platter. If you are serious about advancing your career and achieving higher ranks, the first thing you should do is to identify the reason or reasons *WHY*. In other words, what is the driving reason why you want to be a lieutenant, captain, battalion chief, deputy chief or whatever other position you desire? Your answer may be self-fulfillment, money, or simply because you know you would make a great officer. The important thing is that you have an answer – a reason. Without it, you will likely find a reason why preparing, or studying, is more of an inconvenience than a necessity.

Once you identify that reason, and have dedicated the necessary time reading the appropriate books (which is essential) and attending educational seminars (which is highly recommended), you can focus on three key things:

1. Practice,
2. Practice, *and*
3. Practice.

You don't want to make the mistake that so many others do, which is, showing up on exam day unprepared. If the first time you give an oral presentation is on the day of your test, you are not playing your hand well. Instead of "winging it", prepare as if your career depends on it. I admit to taking a mock test every day for more than 30 days leading up to my Deputy Chief's exams. On the day of the test, I was fully prepared to review my scenarios, organize my notes, and give my presentation.

What exactly are you preparing? In the shortest possible answer, you are preparing to hit the main points that will provide you with the best possible score, and you are preparing to deliver your message in the most professional manner possible.

### Rehearsing your presentation

The best way to rehearse for a presentation that you have to give (either for a promotional exam, or to a large audience) is by video- or audio-taping yourself as you practice. Ask a study partner or family member for help. You may find it difficult to watch or listen to yourself at first. After all, we are all our own worst critics. This step; however, is crucial because it will enable you to make adjustments and fine tune your presentation. Look for subconscious body movements and facial expressions on the video tape. Listen for voice inflections and verbal flaws (such as *ums* and *ahs*) on both a video and audio tape. Don't get upset if you aren't perfect – you won't be – just remember that you only improve with practice.

Here is a simple daily ritual that you can use to help you prepare in the days leading up to a presentation:

1. Study your topic: You can NEVER have enough knowledge.
2. Practice your delivery: Ask a friend, co-worker, or family member to listen. Tape your presentation so you can assess yourself.
3. Make adjustments to improve your presentation.
4. Repeat steps 1, 2 and 3 daily from now until your presentation. The more comfortable you are on the day of your presentation, the better off you will be.

Fireproof Tip: Leaders must be good at communicating. When it comes to giving a presentation, knowledge is power... but ONLY if the presenter is a strong communicator who knows how to deliver a message. This can only be acquired through practice. Don't pass up the opportunity to speak to small groups whenever possible. This is a great way to hone your skills.

