

WHEN BAD SPEECHES HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE

How to recover from a disappointing presentation.

By Christine Clapp, DTM

As a senior at a New York high school, Morgan McCauley was elated when she learned she had won a prestigious National Honor Society leadership award. But elation soon turned to terror when she found out

she would have to give an acceptance speech at a school awards assembly. Though Morgan carefully scripted and practiced her speech, things went from bad to worse when she was introduced at the event. Wearing a cast for a sprained ankle, Morgan tripped as she left her seat. Then she fell on the stairs leading from the podium to the lectern. When she finally got to the lectern, the teenager looked up at the large crowd and mumbled, “Oh my gosh, there are so many people here.” The words were picked up by the microphone; Morgan started to cry.

you hoped or that you weren’t proud of. How, then, can you recover from a bad speech and prevent the experience from eroding your confidence?

Don’t allow a bad experience to paralyze you with fear.

Put It in Perspective

As deflating as it can be, giving a bad speech is nothing more than an “off” performance. It doesn’t mean you are a bad person, a terrible speaker, a subpar employee or (insert your own putdown here). After all, bad speeches happen to good people. Remember to keep things in perspective and separate the person from the performance.

Analyze What Went Wrong ... and Right

If you need to, wallow in disappointment for a day or two. Then, focus on studying what happened during your presentation so you can learn from the experience.

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Perhaps you have had an experience like Morgan’s, which she described as “scarring.” But even if you haven’t, you likely can empathize with giving a disappointing presentation—one that did not go as well as



As difficult as it will be, and no matter how strong the temptation to avoid thinking about the speech again, examine evidence to identify what went wrong. Lisa Braithwaite, a public speaking trainer and coach from Santa Barbara, California, encourages speakers to review their speeches in the form of video or audio. “It’s easier to analyze [your speech] when you watch or listen than to trust your memory,” says Braithwaite, adding that when we replay such a speech in our minds, “we tend to blow mistakes out of proportion and to be really hard on ourselves. It’s hard to be objective.”

But don’t stop with your analysis of what went wrong. “When we get down on ourselves, we need to remember what went right,” Braithwaite says. “Look at the

presentation and realize that a lot went well. Find the high notes and remember to repeat them next time.” If there is no recording of the speech, look to session evaluations or solicit feedback from a neutral audience member to analyze your presentation.

Also, be specific with your observations. Rather than noting the general use of filler words, identify which ones you used (“ah” and “you know”), how many times you used them (the former 12 times, the latter 10), in what context they were used (where in your sentences were they uttered?), and how the behavior impacted your presentation (e.g., It made me look unprofessional and as if I didn’t know my material). The more detail you include, the more successful you will be with your plans for improving.

Troubleshoot

After you identify what went wrong, analyze why it went wrong. Susan Trivers, past president of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the National Speakers Association, says a lack of preparation is often to blame. She urges speakers to honestly assess themselves by verifying how much time they actually spent preparing. “Try to quantify it,” says Trivers, an executive speaking coach and author of the Great Speaking Coach blog (susantrivers.com).

Other times, psychological or situational factors may be the cause of the problem. A variety of factors can influence the outcome of your speech, including speaking to a group that is larger than normal for you, being distracted by a personal problem, not getting a good night’s sleep, skipping breakfast, having a cold or running late for the presentation.

Craft a Plan

After you identify all the factors that contributed to a lackluster performance, come up with specific strategies to prevent them from recurring. Rather than saying that next time you will more carefully analyze the audience, define exactly what that means. For example, you could resolve to:

▶ Read the text on the organization's website at least two months before the presentation, especially the parts pertaining to the organization's mission and its recent work. Also, read about the conference where you are presenting.

After giving a weak presentation, consult with your Toastmasters mentor.

- ▶ Research recent news accounts written about the organization and its key members at least two months before the presentation.
- ▶ Have a conversation with the event organizer at least two months before the presentation.
- ▶ Talk to at least four audience members about their needs and interests at least six weeks before the presentation.
- ▶ Craft the thesis and main points of your presentation based on your analysis of the audience, at least a month before the presentation.

Specificity is crucial. Identify what your plan for improvement entails and when you will complete each component in preparation for your next speech. Each item should be one you can act on—and can do so within a limited amount of time.

To address a lack of preparation, Trivers recommends crafting a budget that allots more time for

practicing your next speech. For example, after determining the total amount of time you want to dedicate to the speech—say, 10 hours—block out one-hour increments on a calendar in the weeks leading up to it.

Trivers advises her clients to allocate 40 percent of their total preparation time to crafting the material and the other 60 percent to practicing and rehearsing. She defines practice as the time for the speaker to learn the material. “Talk through it out loud. Hear how it sounds,” she says. “The emphasis is getting it into the speaker's brain and body, and

making edits.” Then, rehearsal starts. “When content is flowing, think about the audience, and connecting with them,” she says. “Consider delivery style, getting comfortable looking at people, movement around the stage and vocal variety.”

Though it sounds simple, Trivers estimates that most speakers end up spending 80 percent of their time crafting material and not nearly enough on practicing and rehearsing.

Get Back on Stage

Now that you have identified what went wrong with your speech, why it happened and how you will go about preventing the same problems from occurring again, it's time to heed the advice of this timeless axiom: When you fall off the horse, get right back on the saddle. Don't allow a bad experience to paralyze you with fear. The best way to prevent this is to run, not walk, to the stage and do another speech.

It is not necessary for you—or not right away, at least—to repeat the same type of speech or speak in the same kind of situation. If you bombed a manual speech at a Toastmasters meeting, change it up at the next meeting by serving as grammarian or responding to a Table Topics question. Also, think about potential opportunities for speaking in your professional or personal life, such as providing a speech of introduction at a work conference, giving a toast or reading a passage of scripture at your place of worship.

The goal is to rebuild your confidence as a speaker. But even if it takes a series of baby steps to get you back to delivering speeches at Toastmasters or other venues, that's okay. What is important is that you start taking those steps within a few weeks of your disappointing presentation. The longer you wait, the steeper the climb.

Measure Progress

After each presentation, track your progress. Be proactive in recording your speeches and in getting feedback. Figure out which strategies you used to prevent lackluster performances in the past. Your confidence will increase as you see evidence of improvement. To become an even better speaker, identify the strategies that did not work, and modify them. Careful review of your presentations will help you identify areas that still need work.

Consider a Coach

After giving a weak presentation, consult with your Toastmasters mentor, if you have one. If you still want more help, consider hiring a speech coach. Trivers, the executive speaking coach, points to the

experience—and outside perspective—that coaches can offer.

“People focus on climbing the career ladder by getting a master’s degree or certification in their area, but they rely on speaking skills they learned in one class as an undergraduate,” she says.

Think about it in terms of any other experts you hire to improve your professional image, such as those who tailor suits, design business cards or write resumes. It is just as important, if not more so, to invest in an expert who can help you feel proud of your speeches and project more confidence every time you communicate in your professional and personal life.

Believe in Comebacks

If you are nursing a few wounds after delivering an off speech, remember: It is possible to recover from a disappointing performance, or a disastrous experience like Morgan’s. After that traumatic high school assembly, Morgan went on to earn her undergraduate degree from Wesleyan University in Connecticut, where she struggled through required class presentations. In the fall of 2012, she began her professional career as a legal assistant at a large law firm in Washington, D.C. To improve her confidence as a speaker, the young woman completed a series of small-group public-speaking classes taught by a coach.

“I’m a little more comfortable, especially in small groups, but I still get freaked out by the idea of speaking to big groups,” Morgan admits.

Her next goal: visiting a few Toastmasters clubs near her downtown office. **T**

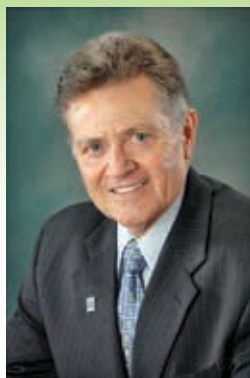
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