

# *public speaking tips*

## From a Graduate of the Scared School of Public Speaking

---

Cindy Blackstock

I come from the “scared stiff” school of public speaking. I regularly transferred out of classes during my bachelor degree to avoid the dreaded “presentation.” Even the thought of talking in public made my knees shake and sent shock waves through my nervous system. Today, I give talks around the world and although I always feel a bit afraid I have come to understand that these talks are not really about me at all - they are about the messages that I deliver of First Nations children and families. With the message out front and me in the background I clear space for myself to find creative ways of communicating. I learned a lot about public speaking from listening to others and making a number of mistakes so it is a special pleasure for me to share some of the things I have done to make the transition from scared stiff to public speaker:

### Tip Number 1

#### **Have a Message**

Notice I did not say have multiple messages. I think it is really important to be able to describe what you want people to know or do after your talk in one sentence or less. If you don't know your message they will not either. Remember no matter how eloquent you are no one will remember everything you say but if you keep reinforcing your message throughout the talk, your audience will take away your key point.

### Tip Number 2

#### **Who is your Audience?**

Do not deliver your talk the same way to different people – keep in mind who you are talking to and gear your message to their areas of interest so they feel a connection to the issue.

### Tip Number 3

#### **Think of your Presentation as a Story!**

When you think of your key messages what are the thoughts, experiences, feelings and examples that come to mind? Write these down and then sequence them so that one example builds into the next without being repetitive.

### Tip Number 4

#### **Use the Best Evidence!**

Use the best evidence to support your message – not just evidence you have come up with. Sorry academia, but there is nothing more boring, and lacking in context, than a talk based solely on the work of the presenter. Bring in other evidence that supports the message.

### Tip Number 5

#### **A Word about Anecdotes**

I love them – and use them in every talk but make sure they back your message instead of detract from it. Find moments in everyday life that help reinforce your message. For example, I am a frequent flyer and one thing that frustrates me are people who recline their seats back so that the seat back jams into my knees and I get a good view of the top of their head for eight hours. This is a good anecdote to use when explaining how one person's pursuit of comfort can come at the price of another person's knees... so we all need to be mindful of each other as we share this finite planet. People remember stories much better than statistics and research – use both in your talks.

### Tip Number 6

#### **Give People Something to do after your Talk**

I have seen so many great presenters line out the issue only to leave a motivated audience with nothing they can do about it. Think about your message and then come up with at least 3 things people can do that do not cost any money and take less than 15 minutes to help move the cause along. These can be things as simple as going to a website to learn more information or making others in their network aware of your message. Make sure these things really do make a difference though – don't waste people's time with pointless activities.

### Tip Number 7

#### **Be a Good Debater**

I actually hang around people who totally do not support First Nations in order to hear their arguments. I then take these issues, recognize them in the presentation and refute them with evidence. For example, the stereotype that First Nations already get more than everyone else is completely false but widely held so I acknowledge the stereotype and use research evidence to refute it.

### Tip Number 8

#### **A Word for Organizations**

I actually break the typical pattern and rarely ever talk about my organization (even though I am very, very proud of our work.) Instead I focus on the First Nations children and show how our organization makes a difference in the lives of children and young people instead of just describing various programs we have. This keeps the focus of our mission at the center. This is a personal bias, but when I go to talks and the first thing the organization shows is their own mission statement, picture of their office, and organizational chart, I tune out. I want to know about why you exist first, who are you there for?



## Tip Number 9

### Workshop or Keynote?

These are really two different animals. The workshop is much more interactive but will generally require you to set the stage by identifying the key message, laying out your rationale as to why it is important and then providing people with some opportunity to see how your “message” would play out. Make yourself a mini-agenda for your workshop to help keep you focused and throw in a few prizes for participants as that always is a hit 😊 Keep in mind that at a workshop you will generally attract people who are interested in your message and those who need to hear it most may not self select into your workshop – which is where the keynote comes in.

## Tip Number 10

### The Value of the Keynote

Personally, I don't do many workshops for two reasons: 1) my work is based on racial equality for First Nations children and families, and 2) I need the unconverted to hear my message. The keynote is the perfect stage for this type of situation and to be honest I find them less stressful to do than the workshop as I get to tell the story without interruption and then leave people to respond to the whole message. To deliver a keynote well you need to have a compelling message, you need to change the way people feel so that they can change the way they think and you need to give people something they can do to help. I use a lot of music, photos and art in my keynotes along with the usual research evidence to back up the cause so that I reach people at cognitive, emotional, spiritual and physical dimensions.

## Tip Number 11

### A Word about PowerPoint I love it!

I love it! I use it all the time – it is a great way to teach people through images instead of relying strictly on words. It actually helps me with the stage fright I still have as it gives people something to look at and it also is a helpful outline for me to keep me on track and on time. That said, I have seen it used badly – with people putting way too much text on the slide and reading it verbatim. The slide should augment your message – not be your message. I recommend not using anything other than 24 font, incorporate pictures that tell the story of your message and do not read the slide word for word. Keep in mind groups like the CNIB have very helpful tips on how to make your talks accessible to persons with disabilities. I try to keep this in mind when preparing my own talks.

## Tip Number 12

### Other Tips from a Recovering Scared Stiff Presenter

I try to never say never in talks but here are a few things that I try to avoid as I think they take away from the message:

- **Don't apologize, admit your super nervous or say “I just found out I had to talk!”** Even if you are super nervous or if this was just sprung on you – start talking about your message. The first and last words you say have the most impact on the group—let those words be about your message. This actually helps me with the stage fright issue – as the focus is then on the message and not on me.
- **Be prepared.** Have all your materials done ahead of time whenever possible and show up at least ½ hour before your talk to deal with any technical issues and welcome participants. Make sure to tell conference organizers what equipment, if any, you will need when you book your workshop – try not to spring last minute equipment requests on them as they may not be able to accommodate you.
- **Don't tell jokes unless they reinforce your message.** Humor has great power – if it relates to your message and you are a good joke teller. Do not tell a joke to “break the ice” if it is not totally related to your message. Jokes that are unrelated or told without the jokester's flair end up breaking the message versus breaking the ice.
- **Dress for success and think about not using a podium.** Keep in mind that when you are doing a talk you are the ambassador of your message so dress respectfully and also keep in mind any implications technology may have for your dress. For example, I try to never talk behind a podium - it is not my style as I talk through body movement as well as voice so I always have to plan for a portable microphone. That means you need to wear something with a solid waistband to clip the microphone to and also a button up jacket/sweater so you can cover up the little wire that runs from the waist pack to the lapel microphone.
- **Don't over talk.** Many people give way too much information or keep pressing their point well after it has been made. Your job is not to think for the workshop participant – but to leave them with enough good information to keep them thinking about your ideas after the event.
- **Be on time.** Do not go over time in a workshop or presentation. This is particularly important if you are on a panel where there are a number of people who want to share their ideas. Put a watch in front of you if you need too. I always write down my core message (which I begin and end my panel talk with) and then about three other key points to reinforce the message and then judge my time accordingly.
- **Don't back out.** I do about 50 talks a year and I can think of less than four or five times when I have backed out of a talk in the ten years I have been doing them – and that was due to either emergency situations, weather travel delays or in one case a meeting I simply could not cancel. Keep in mind conference organizers have made space for you to delivery your message and people are planning to come to hear you so respect their time and effort by doing the talks and workshops whenever you agree to them. If you do have to cancel – make sure you give the organizers as much time as possible. I always keep the organizers name, email and phone with me when I am travelling to the event just in case something happens and I cannot make it.
- **What about money?** If you want a speaker's fee or travel expenses/arrangements make that clear to conference organizers when you first submit your proposal to talk. Do not ask for either of these things at the last minute as conference organizers have to budget for these expenses.

## Tip Number 13

### Be Yourself!

All of us have to do presentations in our work – even those of us who are scared stiff so don't add the extra stress of trying to be someone else. Audiences relate to people who present authentically. Think about when you communicate the best, ask your friends for feedback on that same question, and then build on that style for your talks.

## Tip Number 14

### If George Bush can do it so can you!

At those moments when you are feeling a bit insecure about your public speaking style – listen to some of the leading politicians in the world. Obama aside the bar is not that high. If George Bush can do it so can you.

## Tip Number 15

### The Value of Bath Bombs and Other Forms of Self Bribery

I love the expensive bath bombs with all the flower petals in them so will bring them out when I have had to do a talk that is stressful. So after your next talk – treat yourself!

*Good luck and I will see you out on the  
speaker's trail!*