



Speak your heart and allay your inner fears

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According to a Deloitte report this year, by 2030 two-thirds of jobs will be so-called soft-skill intensive.

While we typically hear about technical skills shortages, the report found the most in-demand skills required to navigate the future of work are not just those of the "hands" but the subtle communication skills that relate to the "head" and the "heart".

Verbal communication is more than a helpful skill, it's a critical necessity required in 70 per cent of jobs in Australia.

But the fear of public speaking, we have been told, ranks higher than the fear of death. The problem with this claim, which has shaped the narrative around public speaking, is that it has its origins in unreliable and widely criticised research carried out more than 45 years ago.

In RH Bruskin's American study, reported in the London *Sunday Times* in 1973, participants were asked over the telephone to name the things they most feared.

The results found that, where 40.6 per cent of respondents indicated speaking before a group, only 18.7 per cent named death, which ranked seventh.

If you've ever browsed the internet for public speaking tips before a big presentation you will almost certainly have come across comedian Jerry Seinfeld's take on these findings in his joke that most people would rather be the guy in the casket than have to stand up and deliver the eulogy at a funeral. One big issue with the Bruskin study was that participants were not asked to rank their fears or even to select their top fear.

Speaking before a group may have been the most selected fear but that isn't to say it was the highest ranked fear.

When Karen Dwyer and Marlina Davidson attempted to replicate the study in 2012 they found an even higher rate of participants (61 per cent) reported a fear of public speaking. However, unlike in the earlier study, the researchers then asked participants to choose their top fear. Death scored higher.

How often do we accept preconceived ideas and theories without question? Is it really true

that it takes seven years to digest gum or that it's dangerous to swim within an hour of eating?

It's hardly surprising, given the perception of public speaking, that people approach it as inherently stressful.

As in so many areas, our thinking about the activity largely shapes our response to it.

Clearly, public speaking has an image problem that needs to change and the current narrative will only fuel our fear rather than free us from it.

Fear of flying combines at least two common fears — fear of confined spaces and fear of heights. To counter the fear we are assured air travel is safer than driving. It's this narrative that convinces even the more

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anxious travellers to allow themselves to be locked in a tin can and hurled through the air at more than 10,000m.

What would it take to change the narrative on public speaking from one based on a morbid fear to one that recognises a unique opportunity to lead and inspire?

What if you begin to think of speaking to a group as less about performance and more about service? What if you seize every chance you have to stand in front of your team or organisation as an opportunity to lead?

Public speaking is an opportunity to leverage your platform to accomplish collectively in a few moments something that might take weeks or months to accomplish individually. But we will never see it that way while we buy into an unhelpful narrative.

The ability to gain control over your thoughts and develop better thinking is every leader's most potent secret weapon.

Next time you're presented with the chance to stand up and speak, remember you have a choice between seeing it as something to fear or as a valuable opportunity.

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