

“Knowledge is the Antidote to Fear.”

When I was in the fourth grade, I was in the school play. It was mandatory and I hated it. Even though my part was playing a cheerleader and I had no lines, the thought of being in front of a group of people made me sick. Literally. I never made it to the actual performance, choosing rather to throw up on the kitchen floor about an hour before show time.

As I worked my way through school and started my career, I managed to avoid having to speak publicly. If I had to do it, I ended up reading from my paper at about 400 words per minute; never looking up to see my audience. In fact, if they were to go to the restroom en masse, I wouldn't have noticed. However, I realized this could eventually hold me back from something I wanted to do.

That day came when I volunteered for a team charged with changing the culture in our 40-person department. We would eventually have to roll out our ideas during a two-day offsite meeting that we held in the ballroom of a large hotel. PowerPoint slides, videos, breakout teams, the whole kit-n-caboodle.

When the student is ready, the teacher appears. A few months before the big meeting, my company offered a seminar on public speaking. We had a great instructor who gave us fabulous advice, tips and practice. All of that was great, but the best piece of advice I picked up is the quote at the top of this article, which was said by Ralph Waldo Emerson. I've had it on a post-it note stuck to my desk for years now.

I realized that as long as I knew my material inside and out, how bad could I mess up? As long as I could speak clearly, loudly (not a problem for me!), and manage to not trip over my feet, what could possibly go wrong? What was I afraid of? Someone asking a question I couldn't answer? Forgetting what I was supposed to say? Well if I knew my stuff, those issues would go away. And you know what? As long as you know your topic, audiences are very forgiving (probably because most of them cringe at the thought of public speaking, too).

What are you afraid of? Spiders? Water? Looking silly at a wedding because you can't dance? Do some research, take a lesson, and begin to understand your fear. Once you know what you're facing, it's not nearly as scary as it was.

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