

JOHN SMITH TRUST

INSPIRING LEADERSHIP ▶ PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE

Debate skills training with the English Speaking Union

Welcome everyone joining our workshop in partnership with the English Speaking Union to help you hone and develop first-class debating skills.

Being a clear communicator and an effective, persuasive public speaker is one of the most in-demand set of skills in the modern workplace.

This workshop is an invaluable opportunity for your own development, as well as to learn how to coach and train others around you in the skills needed for influential and engaging debate. These skills can be put to use in conversations at work and at home and are crucial in our increasingly polarised world.

The drive for individuals and organisations to develop public speaking skills is huge, but there are often barriers as many people find it scary – something to avoid at all costs. How then do we square this and enable people to engage with and develop these skills in effective ways?

Three key steps to developing oracy skills

These three steps can be useful to us as individual learners, as well as being particularly valuable when we're looking to teach, train, and develop others.

1. The goals set to evaluate performance should be specific and attainable. One of the biggest hurdles in developing public speaking or debating is that people see the task as a monolith - "I need to get better at *giving a speech*" - and in any field that makes learning challenging.

This is exacerbated by the fact that people often engage with speaking or debating at a time when they have a single large and important task. "I haven't done much public speaking before but now I have to give a best man speech or a key presentation - how do I improve?" That's a really challenging point to be at when learning.

2. It is important to make the atmosphere comfortable. Regardless of people's starting point, when we are trying to improve we will be trying new things and taking risks. And that means sometimes things go wrong. People who come into public speaking with existing worries or concerns are even more vulnerable to being put off by 'failures'.

So we need to create an atmosphere where people feel comfortable taking risks and chances. When we understand that making mistakes is how we learn the most then we can start embracing our stumbles rather than being embarrassed by them.

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3. It's important to make things enjoyable! Public speaking and debating can be fantastically fun. That's definitely true at the end point when you're good at it. What was once an adrenalin rush of nerves becomes a real buzz and everyone praises you afterwards. That's lovely and we want to build that in throughout the process of learning and improving.

How to tackle step one

The ESU uses four skill sets to break down the elements of good, persuasive oracy. These can be used to set specific and attainable goals. They are:

- reasoning and evidence
- listening and response
- expression and delivery
- organisation and prioritisation.

Identifying these skills is valuable as it allows us to assess performances much more effectively. We can clearly evaluate that a speech was good in one skill set but had weaknesses in another. This helps us set targets and goals for development, so we can be really focused on what needs improving. We can then engage in specific exercises designed to develop particular aspects of individual skill sets.

This more nuanced approach can be a great confidence booster. It's a rare person who doesn't have skills in some of these areas, so we can focus on strengths as well as areas for development.

Reasoning and evidence

Explanatory and argumentative skills are at the heart of any good persuasive speech. This is often an area where individuals can transfer skills they have developed in written areas of their work or study. However, people can struggle when they lack knowledge of the subject. A persuasive speaker:

- chooses relevant statements to defend
- defends statements using clear, logical reasons
- supports their arguments with well-explained evidence.

Listening and response

This is where debating becomes more than just public speaking, and real interpersonal communication happens. There are far more people who claim to be good at listening than actually are, so it's invaluable to develop. It's important to remember that listening to

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support is as important often as listening to disagree. A persuasive speaker:

- demonstrates attentive listening by engaging with the ideas of others
- responds to others with precise analysis or questioning, supporting or challenging their ideas
- uses good judgement to select and respond to the most important arguments in the debate.

Expression and delivery

This is perhaps the area that people worry about most when they think about speaking or debating, although it's only one out of the four relevant skill sets. But it's true that the very best, most memorable speakers will have good skills in this area, although there's no one right way to do it. There are lots of simple small improvements that can make a vast difference to comfort and confidence. A persuasive speaker:

- speaks with confidence, as indicated by voice, body language and the use of notes for reference (rather than reading a script)
- engages the audience with variations in the tone and volume of their voice
- chooses vocabulary and sentence structure carefully, to maximise their rhetorical impact.

Organisation and prioritisation

A longer speech isn't always a clearer or better speech, and in debates time will be limited. The speaker who can get across the important information without too much padding, and do so in a clear, structured way tends to be a successful debater and popular meeting attendee. A persuasive speaker:

- presents their reasons in a clear, well-structured manner with arguments that are easy to follow, and ideas may be grouped by theme
- gives priority to the main arguments, and spends less time on those that are not as important
- has a structure which is clearly communicated to the audience, perhaps including an introduction and conclusion.

Steps two and three

As for the steps to create a comfortable and constructive environment that is also conducive to fun, that's something the ESU works in through the type of exercises chosen and the approach to discussion and feedback. These are things that we will be looking at in particular detail during the sessions and hopefully doing and enjoying ourselves!