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How Warren Buffett And Joel Osteen Conquered Their Terrifying Fear Of Public Speaking

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Billionaire investor Warren Buffett was “terrified” of public speaking. He was so nervous, in fact, that he would arrange and choose his college classes to avoid having to get up in front of people. He even enrolled in a public speaking course and dropped out before it even started. “I lost my nerve,” he said. At the age of 21, Buffett started his career in the securities business in Omaha and decided that to reach his full potential, he had to overcome his fear of public speaking.

Buffett enrolled in a Dale Carnegie course with another thirty people who, like him, were “terrified of getting up and saying our names.” Buffett revealed his early insecurity in [this interview](#) for Levo League, a career website for young women. The host asked Buffett, “What habits did you cultivate in your 20s and 30s that you see as the foundation of success?” Buffett answered, “ You’ve got to be able to communicate in life and it’s enormously important. Schools, to some extent, under emphasize that. If you can’t communicate and talk to other people and get across your ideas, you’re giving up your potential.”

Buffett is not alone and neither are you if you’ve ever gotten the jitters about speaking in public. In my experience coaching executives on their communication and presentation skills, I can tell you that many, if not most, wealthy, famous, and successful business leaders currently struggle or have struggled with speaking in public. I’ve also discovered that there are three effective ways to deal with the fear of public speaking.

1. Manage your fear. Academic researchers in the field of communication tell me that it’s nearly impossible to rid ourselves completely of the fear. It’s natural and ingrained

from thousands of years of evolution where human beings needed to be accepted in social groups in order to survive. Our primitive ancestors who didn't care about the impression they made on others were cast out of the tribe or village. That's not a good thing when a tiger is lurking around the corner. In other words, it's perfectly acceptable, natural, and understandable *to want to be liked*. In fact leaders who are not nervous at all about speaking are often unsuccessful at delivering presentations precisely because they don't care about how they come across. Successful public speakers learn to *manage* their fear and not to eliminate it.

2. Reframe your thoughts. The world famous minister, [Joel Osteen](#), sells out places like Yankee Stadium and speaks live to 40,000 a week who visit Lakewood church every Sunday (the mega-church meets in Houston at the former Compaq Center). Osteen says the week before his first sermon in 1999 marked the worst days of his life. "I was scared to death," he says. At the time he knew very little about speaking or preparing a message. In fact he was perfectly content to sit behind the video camera during his father's sermons. When his father passed away, Osteen's wife and family encouraged him to take the stage. Osteen did not overcome his fear for a long time. The conversations he heard didn't help. "I overheard two ladies say, 'he's not as good as his father.' I was already insecure and—boom—another negative label." Words, he says, are like seeds. If you dwell on them long enough they take root and you will become what those words say you'll become—if you let them. Osteen says negative labels—the ones people place on us and the labels we place on ourselves— prevent us from reaching our potential.

I find that leaders who are nervous about speaking in public say the most awful things to themselves—words that they would never say to anyone else. I've heard leaders say:

I'm terrible at giving presentations.

I got nervous once and it ruined me. I'm a horrible public speaker.

Nobody wants to listen to me. I'm boring.

If these are the type of phrases you repeat to yourself day after day, it's no wonder you get nervous! You can't control what other people say about you, like the two ladies that Osteen overheard, but you can control how you frame those comments and you can most certainly control the things you tell yourself. Osteen said those negative labels played in his mind again and again: *You're not good enough. You don't have what it takes. Those women are right; you'll never be as good as your father.* Osteen's confidence grew as he replaced those negative labels with words of encouragement, empowerment, and strength. "Wrong labels can keep you from your destiny," he says.

3. Do what you fear. A lot. Professional golfers get nervous standing over a 3-foot putt to win the tournament. They've managed to control their nerves, however, because they've practiced the shot thousands of times. They rely on muscle memory to help them manage their nerves (again, not to eliminate those nerves completely). It's the

same with public speaking. The more you speak, the more comfortable you'll be. If you only give one presentation every six months, of course you'll be nervous. It feels unnatural because you don't do it that often.

Enrolling in a public-speaking course was a good first step to helping Buffett build his confidence as a public speaker. The key, he said, was signing up to teach a night course at the University of Nebraska—Omaha. Buffett taught investment principles to students twice his age. He did it to force himself to stand up and talk to people. Once Osteen decided to be the new pastor of Lakewood, he was forced to preach every week. Both Buffett and Osteen improved their public speaking skills over time because they did it over and over again.

You're only as successful as your ideas. Landing a dream job, persuading investors, inspiring employees, and attracting customers all require the effective transmission of those ideas. Don't let your nerves get in the way of achieving your full potential. More important, if you recognize that your nerves are a problem, take bold steps today to bring them under control so they enhance—and not harm—your career.

*Carmin Gallo is the communications coach for the world's most admired brands. He is a popular keynote speaker and author of several books, including the international bestsellers **The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs** and **The Innovation Secrets of Steve Jobs**. His new book, **TheApple AAPL -0.82% Experience**, is the first book to reveal the secrets behind the stunning success of the Apple Retail Store. Carmin has recently launched an eLearning course titled, New Rules of Persuasive Presentations. Follow Carmin on Facebook or Twitter.*