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GIVING SPEECHES: HOW TO BE FUNNIER

Turn Embarrassment and Mistakes into Audience Laughter

The brilliant comedian Mel Brooks once said, "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you walk into an open sewer and die."

As speakers we know it's better to be funny. The question is...how do we find the humor?

One answer is to look for disaster.

When bad things happen to good people, it often becomes the best material for a speech.

People love to laugh, and if you can find what's funny about a difficult situation, you make everyone feel better.

Mishaps happen to everybody. They happen every day. If you start to look at the other side of an irritation, disappointment or misfire, you'll see endless opportunities to entertain people.

This kind of humor scores big points with the audience. Good humor relaxes the audience, lightens up even the dullest topics and makes you look like a genius.

Speaking is also a lot more fun when your audience is laughing and smiling. You enjoy being there and want to go back for more.

I hear what you're thinking. "Sure, it's great to be funny. But I'm not funny." And I'm not suggesting we're all Robin Williams. Yes, humor can miss the mark. Many speakers miss the mark when they make jokes at the expense of other people. That can be worse than not attempting humor. You can lose credibility.

So how do you make sure you get a room full of laughs rather than a room full of blank stares?

A client shared a story about a conference where he spoke. He had a terrible trip there. He suffered through a three hour flight delay, car service to the wrong hotel, and a room next to 40

high school kids on a field trip. After a stressful trip and a bad night's sleep, he just couldn't focus.

He started his speech and couldn't remember key lines. He reverted back to his notes. The audience became agitated.

So he made an unorthodox decision. He stopped and talked about his travel mishap. The audience roared. Several had been on the same flight. He turned it around. The audience forgave him for being a little "off."

Is it challenging to find those funny slices of light comic-tragedy? Not when you start thinking of bad news as good speaking material! Once you get into the habit of seeing what's funny in a mistake or a mishap, you'll find yourself thinking "This is great material!" before you've finished suffering.

A few months ago, I decided to have my hair straightened. The effect was not what I had intended, at least at first. I looked like broom Hilda – I couldn't wash my hair for 48 hours, and it was flat as a pancake. In places, I looked like I was going bald.

My timing couldn't have been worse, because the night after my day at the hair salon, I was scheduled to emcee an event. I couldn't spray, curl or even touch up my hair; and in the audience that night would be many prominent business executives I knew.

I briefly considered canceling, or calling in sick, but discarded that idea; it was out of the question to let them down. So I thought, how can I turn this into something funny?

When it came time to introduce myself on the panel of authors, all of whom were talking about their books, I decided to say something about what I knew was on many of their minds; why I looked so strange. So, I said, "I'm Suzanne Bates, author of *Speak Like a CEO*. Before I wrote the book, I had curly hair." The audience got a good laugh out of that!

What was perfect was the humor was at my expense; one of the rules of business humor; it's always better to laugh at yourself. Self-deprecating humor can really turn things around – and it also empowers you. Once you've addressed an issue it's off the table and you can move on to the topic at hand.

One thing I've learned – audiences will forgive you if you forgive yourself. Have a little fun at your own expense; make light of embarrassing mistakes. Nobody's perfect, we all know it, and when we can acknowledge it we win kudos.