

leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

JANUARY 2011



letting your voice be heard

DID YOU KNOW THAT ACCORDING TO RECENT SURVEYS, MORE PEOPLE FEAR PUBLIC SPEAKING THAN THEIR OWN DEATHS?

(Public Speaking Tips Network, 2010).

Speaking in public is a significant part of being a professional social worker. Public speaking can take on many forms ranging from addressing a large audience standing from behind a podium, to dialoguing while sitting at a conference table with well-known colleagues, to consulting one-on-one with a judge in his or her private chambers.

Many professionals struggle with feeling comfortable and confident speaking in public. Discomfort with public speaking can lead to a great amount of stress and an inability to effectively perform the responsibilities of your job.

Feeling confident in letting your voice be heard strengthens your ability to advocate for yourself and further your career. Consider these approaches when presented with opportunities to speak:

» RELAX

Taking deep breaths and calming yourself before speaking out loud can help you deliver an efficient and effective message. Toastmasters International suggests the speaker not apologize for his or her nervousness, saying that the audience probably does not even notice (2010). A relaxed demeanor on the outside can help foster calmness on the inside.

» KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

Will you be speaking to 100 people or just one person? Are you speaking to novices or experts? Knowing your audience will help you prepare the appropriate material. Knowing your audience can also help you prepare mentally! Typically, the more people in the audience, the more comments and questions you will have. It is important to factor this dynamic into your time management.



National Association of Social Workers
750 First Street NE, Suite 700
Washington, DC 20002-4241



It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.

~Mark Twain

» **MAKE EYE CONTACT**

Public speaking is about connecting with your audience (PSTN, 2010). Eye contact with a few people in the audience can garner comforting smiles. It can also help the audience feel more linked to you as the speaker. In a small group, one trick is looking at the bridge of someone's nose. You will look as though you are making eye contact.

» **PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR BODY LANGUAGE**

Allow your body language to assist in your communication. Gesturing can have amazing impact in public speaking as it helps emphasize a public speaker's point (PSTN, 2010). At the same time that body language can aid in your presentation, it can also hinder your message. For example, it is important to pay attention to the way you stand. Standing with your legs crossed can look unprofessional and can cause imbalance. It is also important to be mindful of rocking or moving your arms or legs. This can communicate nervousness and can be distracting. Standing straight and employing good posture is a great way of exhibiting confidence.

» **GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE**

Get out of your normal routine and take some speaking risks! Whether it is attending a class, starting a conversation on the elevator with a stranger or preparing a presentation by rehearsing in front of a mirror, practice will help you gain the confidence to feel more secure in public speaking. You can take a class geared towards public speaking, role-play with co-workers, or simply voluntarily raise your hand to speak at meetings. This practice will help you feel more comfortable and confident in letting your voice be heard on a more regular basis.

» **JUST SAY SOMETHING**

During meetings or discussions, saying something in the beginning paves the way to continue speaking. It is easier to say something simple at the beginning to establish oneself as a partner in the dialogue (NASW, 2009). As the

conversation becomes more substantive, the discussion tends to include those who have already made their voices heard and it may be more difficult to join the conversation at a later time period.

» **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

With all things, practice makes perfect. The more we do something, the easier it becomes. Visualizing positive responses such as smiles, clapping and agreement can help boost your confidence.

RESOURCES

National Association of Social Workers Center for Workforce Studies provides information on the social work workforce. This information includes helpful resources to enhance professional skills.

www.socialworkers.org

Toastmasters International is a non-profit organization developing public speaking and leadership skills through practice and feedback since 1924.

www.toastmasters.org

REFERENCES

National Association of Social Workers (2009). *Tips for Navigating Organizational Outreach and Representation at NASW: A Guide for Senior Practice Associates*. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers.

Public Speaking Tips Network (2010). *Public Speaking Tips*. Retrieved on December 10, 2010 from www.publicspeakingtips.org/public-speaking-tips.html

Toastmasters International (2010). *10 Tips for Public Speaking*. Retrieved on December 10, 2010 from www.toastmasters.org/MainMenu/Categories/FreeResources/NeedHelpGivingASpeech