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By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News

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In the UAE, where not all managers have fully adjusted to the sound of a female voice in the boardroom, some women understandably feel nervous about contributing to the decision-making process, and still more so when asked to make a formal presentation.

This is one manifestation of public speaking phobia (basically, stage fright), which afflicts nearly all actors at some time or other, and for which various remedies have been suggested, over time.

For some reason, most of the suggestions have traditionally come from male actors. Yet there is evidence that the female experience of the condition is somewhat different to that of the male, and susceptible to a different kind of cure.

One aspect of it is linked to the general tendency of a newly-appointed woman executive to feel insignificant and unimportant.

So the audience is automatically viewed as hostile and threatening, just waiting for the first opportunity to criticise her performance.

This can be classified as a 'fear of fear', and a fairly rational-minded woman might be able to be talked-out of it through reasoned analysis.

Unless she is actually fighting some personal campaign in a minority of one, her audience has no reason to be hostile. At worst, her audience may display indifference, but is much more likely to listen-in with interest, certainly in the opening stages.

One researcher recently asked a panel of women executives to share their experiences of 'business stage fright' in detail, and describe any techniques that seemed to work.

At first, they just mentioned the usual deep-breathing and vocal techniques - no different from how men would answer. But after more encouragement, they began to reveal some strongly personalised remedies, upon which they found they could rely, time after time.

One of them used 30 minutes of deep meditation, prior to the meeting, to give her a calm confidence that was quickly 'felt' by her audience.

Another was to replicate an inspiring piece of classical music in her mind,

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which lifted her into an entirely different mental state, as she faced the audience.

Others went further along this line, trying to achieve the 'confidence snapshot' of a moment when they had once felt totally content, with certain colours, sounds, feelings, all incorporated into one super-vivid memory.

Interestingly, these tended to be small-scale recollections, rather than grand events. They said it was possible to practise re-creating such moments to order, as the necessary preparation for a confident speech.

If you can develop techniques like these, you will cease to be troubled by the perceived problem of adapting a presentation aimed at just six people around a board-table and delivering it before a large conference hall audience.

The answer is that it only looks different from your own perspective. There is almost no difference in speaking to a boardroom of six directors or to a TV audience of millions. It really is a state of mind!

Key points in public speaking

- Women's tendency to 'feel insignificant' may affect speaking confidence.
- There seems to be a separate female experience of stage fright.
- Personalised solutions may be based on happy moments re-created.

The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.

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