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Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Education and Training Service

Speaking at Union Meetings

The type of meetings we have in mind are general members' meetings with more than ten people in attendance. These notes are relevant where you have an opportunity to think beforehand about what you are going to say and to spend some time on preparation.

Sometimes you may have to speak 'on the spur of the moment' in response to information, a statement or an event. In these circumstances, you should try to get your thoughts together before you speak, rather than simply 'thinking out loud'.

The most important point about the 'spur of the moment' type of situation is to say what's on your mind. Don't leave it to someone else. These 'spontaneous' contributions to meetings can be very effective. People usually can recognise when someone is speaking 'from the heart'! Sincerity, honesty and conviction are much more important for effective speaking than 'polish' and presentation.

Hundreds of books have been written and millions of pounds 'earned' telling people **how** to get their message across. While good presentation can help, for the trade union movement **what** people say is more important than how they say it. A speech is effective if the audience remembers most of the points made by the speaker.

methods of delivering a speech

There are four main methods of delivering a speech:

- Writing out a speech and reading it.
- Writing out a speech and memorising it.
- Speaking without preparation.
- Speaking from headings.

writing out a speech and reading it

The main advantages of this method are:

(a) It imposes a discipline on the speaker - it makes you think about what you are going to say and put a beginning, a middle and an end on your speech.

(b) It prevents you from worrying that you will forget what you want to say when you start to speak. It gives beginners an opportunity to practice standing up in front of an audience without being afraid of getting a 'blank'.

(c) When you have to communicate a lot of facts and figures (for example, details of a new bonus scheme) it may be necessary to read out the details word for word.

There are also some disadvantages in reading out a speech:

(a) We do not speak as we write and, therefore, a written speech may sound 'artificial'.

(b) It is not possible to look at your audience if you have to keep looking down at the words on the page. This can be partly overcome by making eye contact with your audience between sentences or paragraphs but there is a risk that you could retreat into your pages and away from your listeners.

To write a short speech and read it is much more desirable than to sit back and say nothing when you have something to contribute to a discussion or debate.

writing out a speech and memorising it

Learning a speech 'off by heart' is not an effective method. Instead of reducing the speaker's nervousness, this method may have the opposite

effect. As the time to speak comes nearer the fear of forgetting what has been memorised may exaggerate the nervous feelings that most people have before they speak.

If any change is necessary, or if heckling or other interruptions occur, the association of ideas by which the sentences are remembered may be lost. Even without interruptions a memorised speech may be forgotten. Memory is not always reliable. There are no strong arguments in favour of memorising a speech.

speaking without preparation

As well as those occasions where there is little or no opportunity for preparing to speak, there will be situations where preparation is not necessary. Some examples are:

(a) To get information or clarification on something that has been said or reported to the meeting. This kind of intervention can be very important as several people may need the information but are reluctant to request it.

(b) To give information that is relevant to the discussion. Decisions or

conclusions should be based on all the knowledge and information that is available. If you have information or knowledge that is relevant to what is being discussed you should give it to the meeting. The information may be based on your own experience.

(c) To express an opinion for or against a proposal that is being discussed. If you feel strongly about the proposal, that is a good enough reason to express your opinion. You don't have to make a speech in order to justify being for or against a particular point of view. Your opinion may influence other people and may encourage them to express their views on the issue.

(d) To make a suggestion for solving a problem that is being discussed. Again, if you have a suggestion to make, do not wait, hoping that someone else will express what is on your mind.

speaking from headings

This is an effective method. It involves a carefully prepared outline so that you know what ideas you want to get across before getting up to speak. The main points are written down as **headings** and you expand on each of these headings in your own words. This method ensures that you will not lose your way because the main points are written down, while allowing you to speak 'naturally' and maintain regular eye contact with your audience.

Because notes are important for the success of this method, it is worth making a few points about their use.

- Use cards rather than 'paper' - they are easier to handle;
- Number each card clearly and write on one side only;
- Write big, so the notes can be read easily;
- Write phrases, not single words;
- Number each main heading; if necessary add sub-headings and

distinguish each sub-heading, a, b, c, etc.

- Underline **main headings** so they stand out clearly;
- Never try to hide notes.

delivering a speech

The delivery will be relatively easy once the preparation has been done. A few points worth bearing in mind are:

- Identify each new point as you come to it, e.g., 'the second point I would like to make is...', or 'a second reason why you should support this motion is...'
- Use simple direct language, e.g. it is better to say 'Many self-employed are fiddling tax on a massive scale' than to say 'Tax evasion on a large scale is commonplace among several categories of the self-employed'.
- Be as brief as possible - short speeches are more effective.
- Have a beginning, a middle and an end:
Introduction: Tell people what you are going to tell them and why it is important.
Main Part: Give them no more than three main points.
Summary/Conclusion: Tell them what you have told them and what you want them to do. Repeat your message, but try not to make the repetition boring.
- Think about your closing sentences beforehand - otherwise you might end up repeating your speech all over again.
- Stand; hold your hands, etc. in a position that makes you feel at ease and relaxed.
- If there is a microphone, speak into it - no need to shout.
- When you are looking at the audience, try and look into the body of the crowd beyond the people nearest you.

nervousness

Almost every speaker feels nervous before and during their speech. It is very important to remember that the nervousness you feel **inside** yourself does not necessarily show on the **outside**. Even when a speaker does show signs of nervousness, what the audience sees is **much less** than what the person feels. This is the most important single point in these notes.

The 'ordinary' signs of nerves that come across in a speech (e.g. a 'quiver' in the voice) do not take away from its effectiveness. Indeed they may improve its effectiveness by, for example, communicating the strong feelings of the speaker, or the importance of the issue. There is little point in trying to 'fight' pre-speech nervousness - it may make matters worse. It is much better to use the 'edginess' to get a bit of feeling into what you are going to say. People with no 'jitters' beforehand often sound dry and indifferent.

Fear is not the same thing as nervousness, although, it can increase a speaker's nervousness. The best way of overcoming fear is to remove its causes, e.g. fear of forgetting. Good preparation and the use of notes will go a long way towards getting rid of fear.

Practice is extremely important. Making a speech **does** get easier each time and the first time is the hardest. You should avail of every opportunity to practise and to get used to standing up in front of an audience.

The trade union movement draws its power and strength from the participation and involvement of its members. You owe it to your union, you owe it to your fellow members and you owe it to yourself to get up and say it.

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