



## **“Effective Peer Feedback: The Speaker's Edge”**

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Increasing competition? Dissatisfaction with some aspect of our presentation style? A desire for greater market share or simply a yearning to satisfy more of our personal potential as speakers? Whatever the reason, professional speakers everywhere are recognizing the need to continuously improve their presentations.

But how do we get better? One of the fastest and most effective ways to improve our performance is through peer evaluation and feedback.

“Peer feedback,” you say? “But don’t we already receive tons of audience feedback?”

NSA Past-President Jim Hennig, PhD, CSP, CPAE, replies: “Honest peer feedback can be the little difference that makes a big difference in a speaker’s career. Who better to evaluate us than our peers who do the same thing day in and day out?”

Growing your career through effective peer feedback involves:

1. Identifying discerning peer evaluators who are safe and helpful
2. Learning how to give meaningful peer feedback
3. Learning how to analyze and apply the feedback received

### **Identifying Discerning Peer Evaluators**

What a gift it is to find speakers who are able to pinpoint and communicate to you the “necessary few”: the one or two critical changes that will make the most significant, positive difference in your presentation!

Seek out discerning evaluators who are willing to be both honest and helpful. Honesty is the foundation of all feedback. It is the evaluator’s responsibility to “call ‘em as they see ‘em,” even if there is the potential for hurting someone’s feelings. Evaluators can minimize this painful possibility by offering feedback a way that is helpful, not hurtful.

“During my early years in professional speaking, Cavett Robert and the first NSA President, Bill Gove, were among my mentors. One day in the early 1970s, 10 of us videotaped our live presentations, then spent the next day reviewing the tapes and giving each other suggestions for improvement. I was so fortunate to be in the presence

of these NSA legends whose appetite for improvement greatly exceeded their ego as well as the insecurity that can come from being under the microscope.” – Don Thoren, CPAE, Past NSA President

## **Learning How to Give Meaningful Peer Feedback**

Evaluating means actively listening from both the speaker and audience’s frames of reference. It requires knowledge of basic strategies and techniques, but more importantly it calls for a conscious attempt to analyze the spirit that shapes the material and the presentation. It is not easy work, but it is incredibly rewarding, not just for the speaker but for the evaluator as well.

Evaluating others and sharing your observations makes you keenly aware of how each element of your speech contributes to or distracts from the total impact. You begin to notice subtleties in word choice, gestures and organization that either capture the audience’s emotions or leave them cold. You suddenly have a sharper awareness about how the things you say and do could be holding you back. You begin to seek out discerning peers and ask them to evaluate you. Why? Because you realize that good feedback is the core of any plan for successful growth.

### **Let’s explore six keys to providing helpful feedback to your peers.**

1. **Give speakers the feedback they want to receive, not just what you want to give.** Prior to the presentation, find out if the speaker wants feedback on specific aspects of his or her presentation. For example, “Was my movement purposeful?” or “How was my vocal variety?” Only offer other observations after you’ve responded to the speaker’s specific feedback requests.
2. **In addition to specific feedback requests, carefully observe and evaluate:**
  - **Content:** Within the first few minutes, the speech should answer some basic questions: What is this person talking about? Why should I care? What am I supposed to do with this information? Every good speech has a topic, a purpose and an application. If you’re listening for it and don’t hear it, imagine how lost the speaker’s paying audience may be!
  - **Structure:** How well does the speaker guide the audience verbally and visually through the experience? Does the opening and closing work? Are transitions effectively transparent? Does the structure support the message? Can we follow the speaker’s thoughts easily? Did the speaker tell his audience where they are going, where they’ve been, and what it means? Simple shifts in organization create emotional energy, generate audience involvement, and lead to memorable speeches and speakers.

- **Style:** One of the most significant gifts an evaluator can give to a speaker is to identify and validate the speaker's personal style. What makes this speaker unique? What supports or diminishes his unique presence on the platform? Valid reflection may get that stand-up wannabe to see that her real strength is in storytelling, not one-liners, or stop that high-energy speaker from toning his style down to the point of looking like an unemotional sphinx.

**Offer positive, constructive suggestions, not demands.** Who likes to be told what they must, should or ought to do? No one! Present your feedback in the form of suggestions for consideration, not mandates for change based on your preferences or your favorite textbook theories.

Above all, be positive and enthusiastic. "Constructive criticism" has a bad reputation because too many evaluations focus on the latter and forget the former. This doesn't mean your comments should be flowery tributes, which are nice for the ego but lack any great value. Telling speakers *what works and why*, and *what doesn't work and how to change it*, is both positive and productive.

3. **Less is more.** Rather than a laundry list of opportunities for improvement, follow the 80-20 rule. Share with the speaker the 20 percent of suggestions that will generate 80 percent of the desired improvement.
4. **More is more.** While it's wise to keep your evaluation tightly focused on the vital few, don't skimp on details or examples of these key points. Capture the word, phrase or action that drew your attention to a feedback point. Provide very specific references and suggestions. Demonstrate ways things might be done differently.
5. **Remember, it's not about you!** As an evaluator, your job is to provide meaningful performance feedback to the speaker. Please don't use an evaluation as a showcase for your own speaking skills or to promote your own interpretation of the speaker's material. Focus on the speaker and his or her goals and material.

### **Learning How to Analyze and Apply Meaningful Feedback**

Once the evaluator has made his or her best effort to be helpful, all that remains is for the speaker to analyze the feedback for career-enhancing suggestions and to put those suggestions into practice. Here are some tips for doing just that:

- 1. Recognize the evaluator's perceptions as reality** – Feedback is like a mirror. It helps us see ourselves through others' eyes. It's important to recognize others' perceptions of us as reality for them, whether or not the perceptions are true. For example, an evaluator might perceive you as tired, when in fact you have great energy but are purposely trying to moderate your overly frenetic presentation style. If the message the evaluator receives is tired rather than appropriately toned down, it's not the evaluator's problem. Rather, it is your responsibility to adjust your style to eliminate the evaluator's misperception.
- 2. Choose whether or not to accept the criticism as valid for you.** Reviewing evaluation comments is like walking through the line at a smorgasbord dinner: we look at everything, but we choose only what we believe will satisfy us.

While you know that the feedback is a gift from someone whose intentions are good, you must still ask, "Are the comments relevant to me and to my audiences?" "Is this change congruent with my values and beliefs?" "Is it consistent with my self-concept?" If so, commit to the change. *If not, understand that making an incongruous change will require enormous energy to implement and is likely to generate extreme stress. Then, decide if the change is worth the personal price at this time!!* Some changes I may be ready for at a later stage of my development.

Remember you can appreciate suggestions and still say, "No thanks!" Bill Gove, CSP, CPAE, the first president of NSA and a master evaluator once said, "Avoid with all your energy anyone or anything that asks you to be other than who you are."

- 3. Commit to change** – Once you have accepted the need to change and the cost of making that change, commit to doing it! Prepare, practice in front of safe audiences, and arrange for additional feedback.
- 4. Take action** - Move from safe practice to testing it with live client audiences. If and when appropriate, fully integrate the change into your presentation.
- 5. Measure results** - Note the ways the improved methodology is adding value for your audiences. Confirm the impact of the change against your own improvement goals.

### **Some Practical Approaches to Peer Evaluation**

While NSA chapter meetings provide a wealth of useful information to those in the business of speaking, they provide only limited opportunities for speakers to receive the individual performance feedback that is so necessary for personal growth. Those limitations have forced speakers desiring this type of feedback to get creative!

Some speakers have established mentoring relationships with one or two experienced speakers whose feedback they value. Others have formed small “mastermind” groups for this purpose. Sometimes evaluators review live presentations; at other times they review electronically recorded programs. Evaluations are given orally or in writing via phone, e-mail or in person. There is really no one “right” format.

How effective is this approach? Listen to NSA Past-President, Glenna Salsbury, CSP, CPAE:

"When it comes to meaningful feedback for speakers, nothing compares with the value of peer wisdom. Other speakers intuitively know what may annoy or distract an audience. Rather than listening for content only, these are the people who recognize the mannerisms or habits that detract from a great presentation.

For instance, I did not realize that I was rocking forward on the balls of my feet when speaking to small groups. I was demonstrating, unconsciously, my discomfort in not having a large stage and a microphone in my hand. I received that feedback, and much more, in our NSA Lab meeting. That insight alone was invaluable in my next small group presentation."

Cavett recipient and NSA Past-President Ed Scannell, CSP, CMP, adds: “One very tangible benefit of attending these meetings is the chance to try out new material and be assured of getting honest feedback. Moreover, it’s always a good learning experience to watch other professionals at work.”

So, what about you? What are you doing to find sources of helpful feedback that will accelerate your growth? Top performers share many traits, one of the most significant being their interest in continuous improvement. Superior performers intentionally seek out opportunities to get and receive feedback that is targeted, specific and congruent with their mission, current goals and personal style.

### **Don’t Forget the Value of Vicarious Learning!**

When observing during a Chapter Speaker Lab or any other opportunity to observe another speaker, vicarious learning is the ideas and insights you gain simply by applying others’ experiences to your own situation. Cavett Robert used to call it OPE –other people’s experience. We don’t have to jump off a 10 story building as someone has already done it and demonstrated the bad outcome. Make your own mistakes without repeating others. Learn the principles others use that you can apply without copying them. Be your best you.

Whether it's finding a mentor, working with a small group of colleagues, or starting a "Speaker Lab" in your own chapter, peer evaluation is incredibly rewarding. It will provide the edge you need to grow your business in challenging times.

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**Don Thoren**, an inductee of the CPAE Speaker Hall of Fame<sup>®</sup>, is also a Past National President of NSA and a member of the class of 2006 Legends of The Speaking Profession. "One of my first mentors was Cavett Robert, founder of NSA. Cavett acknowledged I probably couldn't directly repay him for his help, but he would be pleased if I helped other speakers the way he helped me. I hope the content of this article will help NSA members accelerate their professional development."