



*Why Organizations Thrive – Lesson 7*

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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Thrive*. The article details fifteen lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),<sup>1</sup> buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

Collectively, I believe these lessons are a very useful set of principles that Executive Director can use to improve their organization's capacity to fulfill its mission.

This is lesson 7 and it's specifically aimed at Executive Directors: Become a very good public speaker.

Some readers may react to this and say "duh," as if this is the most obvious thing in the world.

It may well be obvious. But I've been struck by the number of Executive Directors who I know to be smart, visionary, and coherent who I've seen give a public speech that isn't smart, lacks vision, and borders on incoherence.

Why? Because they haven't taken the time to hone their public speaking skills and they don't invest time into speech preparation. And their organizations suffer as a result.

And here's the dirty little secret: the Executives Director in question don't realize that their poor public speaking is a problem.

I thought I was a really good public speaker when I started at Oregon LCV in 1997, so I was surprised when my board's first evaluation of me asked me to improve my public speaking skills. I figured it couldn't hurt, so I took a 2-day training and I consciously worked on my presentation skills.

After the training, I particularly focused on writing speeches that were meant to be delivered as speeches rather than writing articles that I happened to speak.

I immediately noticed a difference in how people reacted. And more importantly, I sensed a real increase in their enthusiasm for OLCV.

Why do public speaking skills matter so much?

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<sup>1</sup> I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around \$200,000 to more than \$1 million.

The Executive Director is the face of the organization. Particularly with small, growing organization, the organization and the Executive Director are inherently co-branded.

The Executive Director's writing will influence that brand. Indeed, core organizational audiences will probably read an Executive Directors' writing before they see him or her speak.

But they will form a stronger impression from the speaking than the writing. Almost always we respond more strongly when we see somebody in person speak than we do to writing.

This is particularly true with the all important first impression, which serves as a prism through which future impressions are formed.

Good public speaking is also a way to create relationships among your supporters. An effective speech for your organization isn't the same as a series of one-on-one communications between you and each member of the audience. Rather, if done right, a good speech can create a sense among your audience that they are in this together.

Creating a sense of community among your supporters represents a powerful step towards making your organization thrive. That step can be taken through effective public speaking in ways that written communications can't.

Of course, some of you reading this will say "public speaking isn't a strength so I shouldn't focus on it."

I think that's short-run thinking. Public speaking is a learned skill.

Just as much as any other learned skill, whether it's riding a bike, learning to use a computer program, or juggling, you can be trained and you can practice. You can learn how to modulate your voice, use hand gestures, change your body language, engage your audience, and even be funny.

People who start out afraid of speaking can become speaking rock stars.

Here are three quick ideas for how to work on your public speaking skills.

Idea 1: Have somebody else listen to you practice a speech and give you feedback. They should ideally be somebody who is a decent public speaker, who cares about you, and who's not afraid to be candid. Revise the speech, practice again, and get more feedback.

Idea 2: Join Toastmasters International or some of the other similar clubs that can provide a venue for you to work on your public speaking skills outside the confines of your job.

Idea 3: Take a 2 or 3 day public speaking training from a reputable trainer. The investment of time and money should pay off in spades over the long run.

If you're interested in more ideas, give me a call and we can talk about your own situation and how you can improve.