

STAND UP AND BE NOTICED

Businesses are increasingly sending their employees on stand-up comedy courses to teach them public speaking and presenting skills. *Vital* sent a group of ACA students to do just that, and Claire Coleman went along to document their side-splitting (and educational) adventure

Half past seven on a Wednesday evening and, in a classroom in central London, accountant Chris Blunn is crawling around on his hands and knees under a table. Watching him and cheering wildly are six other members of the Chartered Accountants' Student Societies of London and Thames Valley.

Contrary to first impressions, this isn't an alcohol-fuelled, post-exam celebration but a stand-up comedy workshop that has been designed to improve ACA students' public speaking and presenting skills.

It might sound like an unconventional classroom but, according to Keith Palmer who founded The Comedy School in 1998, the accountancy world can learn a lot from comedy. "Comedy unleashes an individual's confidence," he explains. It also helps students become more "aware of their own persona and find common ground through shared experience".

So why was Blunn, audit manager at Frank Hirth, under that table? It was all part of an exercise in which the group had decided on a series of tasks for him to do, one of which was to crawl under a table and out the other side. The catch was, no one was allowed to tell him what those tasks were. Instead, he had to move around the room trying to elicit from their responses, (booing and applauding), when he got them right.

"It's a very simple exercise but it teaches you a lot," says Palmer. "You have to make mistakes and learn from them but crucially you have to listen to the audience to work out what they want you to do."

It quickly becomes clear that this is the golden rule when it comes to public speaking and presenting. The second rule is that, like comedy, presentations are a two-way exchange rather than a one-way delivery. "Speaking in public isn't just about talking at people," advises Palmer. Rather, the best public speakers approach it as a conversation. "You need to see how the audience is reacting to you and adapt to keep them engaged."

Palmer is also adamant that audiences, on the whole, want the speaker to do well - and that the only thing holding you back is yourself. To

demonstrate the point he asks Sheereen Pakoo, an accountant formerly of Kingswood Chartered Accountants, to share an embarrassing story about herself.

Midway through her anecdote, she pauses and says it is too silly to continue - to which Palmer asks audience members to raise their hands if they had enjoyed her story so far. Every one of them raises their hands. "Audiences generally want to hear what you have to say and they're willing you to succeed," says Palmer.

He adds: "You need to talk back to the inner voice that puts fear into you and holds you back." And with a little more confidence, Pakoo continues with her anecdote about the time she used a staple gun to repair the seam of her skirt.

But one of the group members still isn't convinced. "Often the audience doesn't want you to succeed. You might be tendering for a job and your competitors are there and want you to fail," argues Jon Dawson, trainee chartered accountant at haysmacintyre. In such cases, Palmer urges presenters to focus on those audience members who want them to succeed, rather than the negative few.

Two hours later, he rounds up the presentation with a final nugget of wisdom: "Ignore anyone who tells you 'when you step on that stage, you should be someone else' because if you can't be yourself, who on earth are you going to be?" The students certainly agree. As Ingrid Morantes, audit assistant at KPMG, puts it: "Ultimately, it taught me that everyone is their own worst enemy and, until you address that, you can't reach your full potential."

Which may not be the funniest punchline but, as Palmer's audience learned, sometimes it's the unexpected that makes comedy gold. ■

10 TOP TIPS MASTERING THE ART OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

- 1 Prepare well and give yourself plenty of time, rather than throwing together a few PowerPoint slides the night before.
- 2 Research who is going to be in the audience to ensure you're pitching with the right level of expertise.
- 3 Investigate your audience's expectations. If you're aware of what information they've been given about you, you'll know how to deliver what they expect of you.
- 4 Be yourself. The best way of engaging your audience is by being authentic from the start.
- 5 If there's an elephant in the room, acknowledge it. Whether your trip on your way to the stage or your PowerPoint stops working, addressing it will keep attention fully on you.
- 6 Be clear about which messages you're trying to communicate. This will help you structure the presentation and stay on track.
- 7 Emotionally connect with your subject matter where possible. If you can find a way of investing fully in what you're talking about, you'll automatically present it better.
- 8 Check over the technology before the presentation. This will minimise the likelihood of glitches when you're mid-speech.
- 9 Try to understand how others perceive you; it will help you communicate with them more effectively.
- 10 Be honest. Whether it's answering questions or admitting you don't know, always tell the truth. Integrity goes a long way.

The Comedy School is a not-for-profit organisation. All proceeds from work with corporate clients go to funding social programmes. For more information visit thecomedschool.com