

# RECOVERY

*The official newsletter of the RCORP Rural Center of Excellence on SUD Recovery at the Fletcher Group*



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# IT'S TIME TO TELL YOUR STORY

*by Founder and Chief Medical Officer Dr. Ernie Fletcher*

In this issue of our monthly newsletter we do a deep-dive into the mindset, skillset, and toolset of effective public speaking.

According to research quoted at our most recent webinar by our in-house expert, Dr. Matt Johnson, public speaking is what humans dread most—more than dentists, spiders, and zombies.

But does it have to be that way? Some people (TED Talkers for example) make it look easy, even fun!

So what are the rest of us doing wrong? Misunderstanding the challenge, says Johnson.

That's why, in addition to offering a number of valuable tips, this newsletter is designed to help you speak from the heart in a way that leverages your greatest assets—the personality, values, spirit, and experience that make you who you are.

# THE STORYTELLER’S MINDSET

There's a word for it—"glossophobia"—a combination of the Greek words for tongue (glossa) and fear (phobos). There's even an acronym for it: "PSA" for "Public Speaking Anxiety" which the DSM-5\* categorizes as a social anxiety disorder.

The fear is so strong and universal, says Matt Johnson, that, "If you don't get nervous when public speaking, you're probably not doing it right."

Johnson admits there's nothing he can say to make the nerves go away, and might not want to even if he could. "The nervous energy bubbling up inside you is just a sign of how intensely you want to succeed." The better option: Instead of resenting or fighting it, accept the nervous energy for what it is—a driving passion to do well.

According to Johnson, the heebie-jeebies aren't the only thing that needs to be thought of differently. "Teaching is important," he says, "but the higher goal is to create a level of emotional engagement that opens the listener to new possibilities."

Johnson does that by abandoning the goal of changing someone's mind—"It's not going to happen, especially in these polarized times"—and embracing a loftier one: "Seek to create in the listener's mind a world where new interests, insights, and understandings can take root. With any luck, the feelings nurtured there will linger afterwards in a willingness to think about the world and the work that's happening around them in new and different ways."

In other words, you're not trying to close the deal; you're opening a door to the new. Its a high bar, obviously, and can only be achieved, says Johnson, by tapping deep into your own experience.

The first thing to know, he says, is what drove you to be here in the first place, talking to strangers who, like you, have had to break away from other obligations and pursuits to hear what you have to say. You need to know the underlying purpose, not just of your presentation, but of the life that has led you to this point and time—what caused you to reject the thousand and one other forks in the road and follow this path, as improbable and unexpected as it may be, to this particular group of people at this particular point in time.



## WATCH THE VIDEO

of our October 3 webinar with Dr. Matt Johnson, the Fletcher Group’s Director of Faith-Based Initiatives.

[CLICK HERE](#)



Equally important is knowing you're not alone. Each audience member has come here through their own hit-and-miss journey of self-discovery. Your job is to connect, on an aspirational level, your journey with theirs, by sharing the hope and vision that make you who you are.

If you can illuminate—for both yourself and the listener—the reason why your paths have crossed you have accomplished your goal. You've connected more than bullet points on a piece of paper; you've connected hearts.

It's the kind of connection that lives long beyond your parting.

\*The American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

# THE STORYTELER’S SKILLSET

One of the first things children want, notes author Salman Rushdie, is to be told a story. "Man is the storytelling animal," he says, "the only creature on earth that tells each other stories in order to try and understand the kind of creature we are."

"Stories do what facts can't," says Matt Johnson. "That's because information alone can't engage the heart or soul. Only stories can do that."

University at Buffalo professor Melanie Green agrees: "Messages that feel like commands—even good advice coming from a friend—aren't always received well. If you feel like you're being pushed into a corner, you're more likely to push back. But if someone tells you a story about the time they, too, had to end a painful relationship, for example, the information will likely come across less like a lecture and more like a personal truth."

"We all know this delicious feeling of being swept into a story world," says communications expert Liz Neeley. "You forget about your surroundings and become entirely immersed." Stories wield a particularly strong influence over attitudes and behavior, says Neeley, because they help us see the world from a different perspective.

The effect can even be tracked now using MRI scanning. "As the story unfolds," says Princeton professor of psychology and neuroscience Uri Hasson, "the listener's brain waves actually begin to synchronize with those of the storyteller. The greater the listener's comprehension, the more closely the listener's brain wave patterns mirror those of the storyteller."

Other parts of the body join in as well. "The listener's palms start to sweat, their eyes blink faster, and their heart might flutter or skip," says Hasson. "Your facial expressions shift and the muscles above your eyebrows react to the words."

The listener may not leave the room, but has nevertheless taken a journey. And every time the story’s remembered the memory is reinforced. The listener may also retell the story to others, thereby contributing to an even broader change in attitude across society.

## RURAL STORYTELLING

Fletcher Group research indicates that storytelling may be especially effective at reducing stigma with rural audiences. To check out our numerous ongoing research projects...

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"If you look at the times somebody's beliefs have been changed," says Green, "it's often because of a story that hits them in the heart."

By this time, you may be wondering, "What's my story?" The answer, says Johnson, is to "Find the One Thing."

"Ask yourself what's the one thing you want your audience to carry home with them," says Johnson, "then shape your story around that. Be careful though. There's very little that bothers me more than a canned story. So make sure the story draws from your own personal experience. It may reveal something about you that would otherwise be invisible or unexpected. That doesn't mean it has to entail some deep vulnerability, but it does need to paint an authentic picture of who you are, what motivates you, and what brought you to this place where people are waiting to immerse themselves in what you have to say."



# THE STORYTELER'S TOOLSET

**Know Your Audience.** "Ask the organizers or visit their website and Facebook page to find out who's attending and where they're from. Is the audience local, regional or national? What groups or interests do they represent? Are they peers? Do they have lived experience? Will they have any idea what you'll be talking about?"

**Be Confident.** "Don't talk down to people but don't be timid, either. Approach the podium with confidence. People invited you because they believe you have something important to say so reflect that in your body language and demeanor."

**Make Eye Contact.** "Eye contact is one of the most powerful tools you have because it helps you maintain your energy and flow. It also helps you read your audience."

**Take the No-Notes Challenge.** To help you speak from the heart, Johnson suggests not using notes. "Practice to the point that your presentation becomes part of you. You may not be able to do that for a full 20 minutes, so start small by practicing five minutes at a time."

**Read the Room.** "Listening and learning go both ways. So be sure to scan the room as you speak to monitor the reaction you're getting."

**Change It Up.** "It's easy to lose an audience by speaking in a monotone. That's why I intentionally vary my cadence and intonation. I also intentionally pause now and then, especially at transition points."

**Don't Rush.** "Because you're nervous you're likely to talk faster than usual. So make a conscious effort to talk much slower than you think you need to."

**Use Gestures.** "One trick is to imagine, as you're speaking, that you're holding in your hands something of great value that you're going to give to a loved one. That will immerse you more in your presentation and trigger more compassion in your facial expressions as well as more imaginative hand gestures and body language, all of which will create a stronger sense of connection and authenticity."

**Handling Distractions.** "I try to focus on the people who are most tuned in to me. That helps maintain my energy and keep me on track. If somebody falls asleep in the front row, I'll try not to look at them, but focus instead on the folks who are still with me."

**Know When to Stop.** "The average attention span of most people is about 22 minutes. So around that time, you might want to pause and ask if anyone has a question."

## MATT JOHNSON'S TIPS AND TRICKS



**Watch for Bumps and Land the Plane.** "There are going to be bumps along the way. By maintaining eye contact and continually reading the room, you'll be able to navigate them and know when to end your presentation."

**Don't Telegraph the Ending.** "Never say 'Finally' or 'My last point is...' or 'To wrap up...' People hearing those words immediately turn off and start thinking about where they're headed next. Keep them guessing and, when you do 'land the plane,' don't make a big deal out of it."

**Mic Control.** "At the end when I give the mic to someone to ask a question, I immediately step back to give them space. When it's time to take the mic back, I simply take a step closer. Most people will take that as a signal to hand the mic back."

**Don't Run Off.** "Stay around after your presentation to talk with people one-on-one. Their feedback can help you become a better speaker by telling you what most engaged them and what they'll be taking home with them."