

**When things beyond your control go wrong, the only thing you can control is your reaction to them.**

# Dos and Don'ts For When the Mike Won't

By Gene Perret



The sailor is at the mercy of the sea. The captain and crew combine their considerable skills and experience not to master the waters, nor to control them; they struggle simply to co-exist peacefully with the sea. Likewise, the speaker is at the mercy of the elements. The seamen may batten down the hatches in rough weather; what does the speaker do when the microphone won't work? Or when the lights malfunction? Or when the music in the next room is too loud?

Following is a list of dos and don'ts along with a few examples of intrepid speakers who rode out the sometimes stormy seas of the speaker's podium.

**DON'T: Blow Your Cool.** You never know what or when, and you usually can never figure out why, but occasionally things will either not do what they're supposed to do or do something they're not supposed to do. When things beyond your control go wrong, the only thing you can control is your reaction to them.

When you're at the podium, you're in charge. This is your stage, your arena, your audience. Conversely, when there are problems, they become your problems. Accept them and deal with them. Show your listeners that you are a leader. Prove to them that nothing can rattle you. If you remain calm and in control when these setbacks occur, people

will realize that you're a person they should be listening to.

I watched one speaker who, like Little Miss Muffet, was bothered by a spider. As he spoke, the critter lowered his web right by his side. Without faltering in his lecture, the speaker gestured with his left hand, breaking the spider's web. He followed that with a sweeping gesture with his right hand, flinging the bewildered bug far across the room.

Problem solved.

**DO: Maintain Your Dignity.** All of the complications you encounter onstage are either fixable or ignorable. Remember that you are the featured act in this performance; the problem is a bit player. It will make its entrance and its exit, but you will remain as the star. Never let your audience forget that.

I worked with a seasoned comedian once whose microphone failed in the middle of his performance. He made a few faces and got a few laughs, but there was no way he could continue telling jokes if people couldn't hear them.

Very quickly, though, a backstage technician came out and took the mike from the star. He disconnected it and hooked up a new one. He said, "Testing, 1-2-3" and the audience heard him loud and clear. He handed the microphone back to the comic and calmly walked offstage... to thunderous applause.

The comedian said, "Don't applaud too loudly. He may do an encore."

The performer recaptured his audience.

### **DON'T: Surrender to the Situation.**

Whatever dilemma you face is a temporary one. It will go away. It's only a battle, not the war. A good speaker should be able to project and convince under almost any circumstances. So continue to be a superb speaker even if the podium is falling apart in front of you.

I once coached a speaker who had prepared diligently for a very important presentation. Her voice was lively, her gestures were animated, her delivery was moving. Then the microphone cord broke and the mike around her neck crashed to the floor.

Someone handed her a replacement almost immediately, but from that moment on her voice lost its enthusiasm, her gestures were lifeless, her delivery was unconvincing. All of the enthusiasm was drained from her presentation.

She allowed a 20 second setback to destroy a well-prepared 30 minute speech.

### **DO: Your Best Under Any**

**Circumstances.** The common show-business expression says, "The show must go on." The curtain rises and you perform with gusto. A comedian I worked for once complained of being tired before a show because he had had several hours of dental work done that afternoon. I said, "Why don't you tell the audience that. They'll understand." He looked at me like I was crazy and said, "I don't want sympathy out there; I want laughs."

If things go wrong, work that much harder to win over your audience. If there's a problem, try to solve it.

One time we were taping a Bob Hope military special in the middle of a war zone. All of our shows were performed on ships at sea. Right before our last performance on the

aircraft carrier, the *USS John F. Kennedy*, we discovered we'd lost all of our costumes. We had them on the last ship; we didn't have them on this one.

How can you do a large musical song and dance segment when the wardrobe is missing? One of the stars remembered that "the show must go on." She borrowed the jacket of a naval officer. Belted tight around her waist it became a very nautical

## **"Remember that you are the featured act in this performance; the problem is a bit player."**

miniskirt. All of the women borrowed naval uniforms and the number looked like it was costumed in Hollywood.

The dance number looked so good with this makeshift wardrobe that it was used in the final broadcast version of the show.

Work your way through minor disasters and often your performance will be better for it.

### **DON'T: Continually Refer to the**

**Problem.** Most speaker disasters are quickly remedied or circumvented. Once the problem is solved, dismiss it. Calling it up throughout your speech only draws attention to a problem that no longer exists. Referring back to it keeps it alive as a distraction. It's in the past; leave it there.

Some speakers, though, insist on constantly drawing attention to the situation. It may be an attempt to exonerate themselves, to gain sympathy, or to reap revenge on whomever may have been to blame. None of those reasons, though, should take precedence over the message you have to deliver. Now that the problem has been solved, deliver your message.

### **DO: Keep Your Sense of Humor.**

I have worked with very competent humorous performers for many years. I've seen all kind of setbacks on stage. I can say from experience that most polished performers treat each

problem they encounter as a potential "straight line."

Any stage malfunction generates tension. Tension creates an atmosphere that is perfect for comedy. In almost any awkward situation, whatever the performer does or says, will bring laughter. Take advantage of that unexpected gift and get your laugh. It will not only lighten the moment, but it will win you added respect from your audience.

I remember once emceeing a

banquet honoring one of our fellow employees. The dinner was scheduled at a nearby restaurant immediately following the workday. When I approached the microphone, it squealed painfully loud. I immediately backed off and the screeching stopped. When I stepped forward again, the mike whined again. This happened several times until a technician realized the problem and turned down the audio volume. Now when I grabbed the mike, it behaved.

I said, "I apologize for that. When these dinners are held right after work, I don't always get a chance to shower first." It started the program with a huge laugh and appreciative applause from the audience.

As a speaker, you can no more control your surroundings than a sailor can manipulate the waves. The all-inclusive advice is to maintain your dignity and professionalism. In short, you do your part as well as you are able; let the problem you face resolve itself or be resolved by whoever is responsible. **T**

---

**Gene Perret** was Bob Hope's head writer and is a three-time Emmy Award winner on the *Carole Burnett Show*. He teaches an e-mail course on using humor in speaking and has written many books on that subject. Contact him at **Gper276@sbcglobal.net** or visit **www.writingcomedy.com**.