



## All eyes on you — as you choke

By Crystal Yednak  
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Donald Chia's new job at a search firm required him to walk into the offices of top senior executives and persuade them to put their careers into his trembling hands.

As a young-looking 26-year-old from the world of academia, Mr. Chia's nerves often got the best of him.

"I'd be pretty much overcome by anxiety," Mr. Chia says. "Fidgety, just unsure; my communication was fragmented — lots of 'uh, uh, uh.' I couldn't find the words."

In short, he'd choke under pressure, a pitfall for people on all rungs of the corporate ladder, from young associates to senior managers.

At his review, Mr. Chia's bosses recognized his potential but said he needed to do something to erase his nervousness. He forced himself to do more and more public speaking through Toastmasters, a California-based non-profit organization dedicated to improving the skill. He removed the "umms" from his vocabulary and began volunteering to do presentations without notes or rehearsals. Now 28, he's been promoted to senior staff at his firm, Chicago-based Executive Search.

At client meetings or conferences, speakers are the public face of the company. If they can't maintain a good game face? "I would be very hesitant to have them do a presentation or go on a client visit," says Rose Ann Pastor, 55, a former vice president of an executive outplacement firm who is now assistant dean at Loyola University Chicago's Graduate School of Business.

In the moments after a truly disastrous public presentation or a gaffe with the boss, well-meaning co-workers may talk about how no one will ever remember the event. But John Connellan, founder and president of the Executive Technique in Chicago, says negative performances tend to stick in people's minds.

"You have a situation where someone says, 'I think Mary or Jack really has a great potential for growth,' and somebody says, 'I remember the day he wet himself when asked a question by the president.' They remember the negative things," he says.

### MEETING MISFIRE

As a 24-year-old account manager at J. Walter Thompson in Toronto, Mr. Connellan was part of a team presenting a promotion with the theme "Start the fall with a bang." The team had the idea of firing a shotgun in the presentation to make their point.

Thinking the gun was empty, Mr. Connellan pulled the trigger. But some remaining wadding material fired, and he ended up with an "entire patch of asbestos ceiling on my head."

The president ordered Mr. Connellan and friends out of the room. The team members apologized repeatedly, but there was nowhere to go but up after an episode that "should end somebody's career," he says.

But sometimes, getting past a disaster of a presentation can be freeing. One of Mr. Connellan's clients, an executive from a very large company, was asked to update 2,000 people at a conference. She was ready for the

performance but froze when she got up to the podium. She fainted with her hands gripping the lectern, pulling it on top of her, and had to be carried offstage.

The executive was ready to resign, but her boss told her to prepare to do the presentation again next quarter. "She is now an executive vice-president and has been considered for the top job," he says. She realized, "I can't possibly make that mistake any worse than what I did," Mr. Connellan says, and nailed it the next time.

As for his own story, back at the ad agency? He was promoted a year later.

Talented people can lose focus if they overthink their performance in high-pressure situations, says Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago who researches performance under pressure.

"If you're trying to pitch to a client at the same time you're trying to monitor what you're saying or how they're perceiving it, that's a lot going on," she says.

## ONSTAGE FEAR

Trying to improve his skills in high-pressure work situations, Tom Trimmer, 39, a principal at Chicago-based Trimmer Capital Management LLC, plunged into the fire by joining an improv class at Second City, which has schooled many up-and-coming executives. He found standing onstage in front of strangers without a script even more intense than an important work meeting.

After having put himself in that situation again and again, Mr. Trimmer says, he has become more accustomed to the feeling of being under pressure: "You get used to making a fool of yourself and seeing that nothing bad happens," he says. "If I'm in a meeting and I get asked a hard question, it's not nearly as stressful. Presentations aren't nearly as stressful."

Many people's fears relate to being in front of a crowd, where they could do something like faint — as Bill Daley famously did during his introduction as commerce secretary. But professionals can choke on paper as well by blowing a big project or deal. The solution is to own up to it, says Gene Morrissy, a management psychologist at RHR International LLP in Chicago who advises senior management.



**Donald Chia, left, of Executive Search, got past his "ums" and won a promotion; here, he interviews job applicant Mikaela Dragomir.** Photo: Erik Unger

Post-failure, "I think human nature is to retreat and withdraw. People tend to hide from it," he says. But workers are more likely to emerge from a professional mistake when they're honest about their performance. "People will respect you if you say, 'I didn't land this correctly, and what do I need to do to fix it?'" Mr. Morrissy says.

Mike Streit, 55, a senior vice-president at Northbrook-based Michigan Avenue Real Estate Investors, says when someone is choking in a meeting, it's interesting to see how the senior executives handle the situation.

"Very few people are relaxed and at their best in front of their senior leaders," he says. "I've seen people walk into the boardroom of Fortune 100 companies, and you can tell they've never been in that environment before. Really good chief executives will create an environment where they feel comfortable and can be successful."

Mr. Streit recalls the first time he presented to the chief executive officer of a Fortune 50 company. He was well-prepared but anxious. He walked into the room ready to give his PowerPoint presentation, but the chief executive caught him off guard by pushing the presentation to the side and instructing him to "just talk" about the business. The conversational tone relieved the pressure: "It was a wonderful, relaxing moment because I was no longer teed up to read to him," Mr. Streit says.

## SCARY PROMOTIONS

More-advanced workers can feel the heat, too, as promotions give them new responsibilities. Bill Morrill, 45, a business systems analyst who used to be more comfortable with his keyboard than a conversation, says that as he was given more mentoring and training duties, he was pushed outside of his comfort zone.

"I had a tendency to stumble over words or blank out," Mr. Morrill says of his performance in group settings. But when he was in his 40s and downsized out of a job, he started forcing himself out in front of people as often as he could, mainly through Toastmasters.

Mr. Morrill, who now works for Northern Trust Corp. in Chicago, says he decided that even if he choked during a training presentation or meeting, he would learn how to handle the mistake better.

"I still get nervous talking to the boss's boss," he says. "But whether in an elevator or in a meeting, I'm now a little more confident talking. I have fewer blank spots. I know if I do forget something or mispronounce someone's name, I can find ways to move forward without feeling like I ruined the whole meeting."

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