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How to Speak Up in a Crowd

A class participant recently emailed me with a question: "What if you find yourself in a discussion with quite a few people at a social gathering and you have an important point to make, but feel intimidated by those around you? I find I get all tongue twisted and the words do not come out the way I had planned." Here are my suggestions:

- Think about WHY you feel intimidated – it gets back to fear and self-confidence. FIRST, you have to believe that you have something to say that is worth listening to – do you believe it? What do you tell yourself before you open your mouth to speak to them – “wow, they’re so smart/experienced/articulate, they’re never going to listen to me” or “I have something to contribute to this discussion and this group will benefit from listening to me”?
- What is your goal in making your point? Do you want to convince them, or just contribute to the conversation, or speak up for what you believe in even if no one else changes their mind?
- Think about your message. Can you boil it down to one short sentence with a few points to back it up? Getting to the point quickly will help you keep their attention.
- Deliver your message with confidence. Wait for a slight break in the conversation and then jump in. Speak in a voice that is loud enough for everyone to hear, speak confidently and make eye contact with people in the group (smile if appropriate). Be mindful of the message you are sending with your body language; it should match your words and your intention. So, for example, a confident person will stand up straight with shoulders back and head up, while someone who is less confident will slump their shoulders and avoid eye contact.
- Even though you may not be able to practice at home for the exact social situation and conversation, you can practice speaking concisely and confidently about topics that you want to discuss in social situations. For example, if you usually go to events where there are a lot of teachers, you might want to discuss educational reform or how to handle a specific classroom problem. So when you have free time at home, or in the car, you can practice stating your opinion or relating a relevant anecdote. Practice saying the words out loud, so you get used to how they sound and are less likely to get tongue-twisted.
- Take one step at a time. Before you decide to make a very controversial point in front of a group of 15 lawyers, try speaking up about something a little easier to a smaller, less intimidating group. As you experience success one step at a time, you will build your confidence.

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