

ORANGE COAST

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WORKING

Improvisation helps execs improve public speaking

By ROBERT HYNDMAN
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Robin Williams may seem an unlikely role model for business executives. But the comedian's energy, sense of humor and improvisational skills are the traits executives are learning to adopt in order to become better public speakers.

Through workshops that borrow methods practiced in actors' improvisation classes, Cherie Kerr is teaching men and women in business to become more dynamic, more interesting and less nervous as speakers.

"About 98 percent of the time, performers are hiding behind a character, which allows them to be

funny," Kerr says. "Gene Wilder, Laraine Newman and Steve Martin, for instance, are all somewhat shy and self-effacing. I guess the only person I can think of who is the same on stage and in person is Robin Williams. He's the same all the time.

"Improvisation teaches you to get rid of inhibitions, to be yourself."

Kerr, who leads courses called ExecuProv, says the biggest obstacle to effective speaking is simply a lack of proper practice.

"Our premise is that business people perform every day, but so one trains them how to perform," says Kerr, who also runs a Huntington Beach public relations firm.

"A lot of these people move up the corporate ladder, but they are terribly embarrassing to themselves and to others because they just can't speak properly in public."

That inability, of course, is widespread. According to Kerr, surveys show that the fear of public speaking had long been the No. 1 fear among Americans, edged out only recently by the fear of contracting AIDS.

"Let's face it, most everyone is self-conscious," Kerr says. "Most people are afraid of other people looking at them, making them feel uncomfortable or vulnerable. And when that happens, we withdraw."
(Please see EXECS/A2)

EXECS TAUGHT IMPROVISATION SKILLS...

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retreat and talk like a dial tone."

Kerr tries to teach speakers to get away from the prepared script, the choreographed gestures and dull monotone that bore an audience.

Instead, through improvisation techniques, a speaker is taught to concentrate, to think on his or her feet, to be spontaneous and to be aware of what others are saying and doing so the speaker can respond to it naturally.

"The point is, there's nothing harder than improv, so if you can do that, you can do anything," Kerr says. "We like to think of improv as mental aerobics."

"Another thing to remember is that almost every audience is actually rooting for you to do well, so engage them. Bond with them."

Kerr's ExecuProv classes take students through a series of improvisation exercises. She also provides a sample of those exercises when she speaks before various groups. This week, Kerr was speaking before about 200 members of the Orange County Chapter of the American Society for Training and Development gathered for their monthly meeting in Orange.

It was the largest lunch meeting ever of the local chapter, which boasts nearly 700 members drawn from county businesses and consulting firms.

"I was sure that with a group like that, where they're all used to speaking and training employees, they were going to watch everything I did — 'Let's see what this chick knows.' They were probably a little skeptical," Kerr says.

Her first move was to steer clear of the podium and the microphone, which Kerr believes act as barriers between a speaker and an audience.

Four women from the audience were called to the front of the room to participate in the first exercise. But when they closed their eyes and were asked by Kerr to provide specifics on

what each was wearing, the women were uncertain, despite having shared a table during lunch.

"This is a demonstration in awareness," Kerr said. "We have to learn to take in the whole situation. It will make you a better communicator and a better speaker."

A subsequent exercise required four volunteers to make up a story, picking up the story line from each other in mid-sentence as Kerr cued each one. The four became quickly animated, gesturing excitedly as the narration was passed among them.

"Now don't you feel yourself thinking a little faster?" Kerr asked as the participants returned to their seats. "Don't you feel more energy?"

Another exercise called for volunteers to move between feelings of disgust and exhilaration, switching quickly whenever one of the four provided that cue.

"In this exercise, we learn give-and-take," Kerr said. "If you can't do give-and-take, you can't do improv. And if you can't do give-and-take, you can't do life, as far as I'm concerned."

Kerr's decision to apply improvisation techniques to public speaking

grew out of her background in acting and comedy. As a founding member of the Groundlings Improvisational Group, Kerr is well versed in performing and thinking quickly on her feet. She learned that improvisation could be taught to some of her public relations clients who needed to host press conferences or speak before groups.

"I was amazed at how well these techniques could be applied," she said.

With help from the Groundlings, Kerr started ExecuProv four years ago and has since taught the techniques to about 400 people. Although she currently leads classes and coaches executives individually, Kerr said she'd like to hold workshops with corporations whose executives may need periodic brush-ups on their speaking techniques.

"We all have something to sell, whether it's a product or an idea," she said. "When you're confident, comfortable, you can be more believable in your presentation."

"That's the difference between an interesting speaker and one that everyone falls asleep in front of."

SEALING OF PAPERS...

From A1
tions to the registrar's office for verification the following day.

Registrar of Voters Donald Tanney said he expects his office to finish checking the petitions by late next week.

But Tanney said neither he, the Grand Jury nor the District Attorney's office has authority to impound the petitions. Only a judge could make such an order and then only after the recall committee had proved its allegations.

"If they're asking me to (keep the petitions) ... I won't do it," Tanney

said. "I have no authority to hold those."

The recall drive, the second in Laguna Beach in two years, reached its first goal Tuesday when more than 3,000 signatures against each targeted council member were turned in. The group needs 2,997 valid signatures against each council member to force their names onto a recall ballot.

But recall petitions customarily need a 10 percent buffer of signatures to offset invalid names, Tanney said, meaning the outcome of the recall drive could be a photo finish.