

By Invitation

Private faces in public places

Susan Cain on being comfortable with public speaking at work

Naomi Osaka's departure from the French Open highlights how jobs force many of us to be presenters. For the anxious, there are ways to improve



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WAS NAOMI OSAKA, a champion tennis player, right to pull out of the French Open this week rather than submit to post-match press conferences? Public speaking, she explained, makes her intensely anxious. Yet the issue is one that many people, not just high-performance athletes, confront: to what extent must you endure the public glare as part of your job? In the era of Zoom meetings, we're all on stage at work more than ever.

Given that three-quarters of people in America and two-thirds in Britain say they're afraid of the spotlight, the problem needs to be treated as a priority. People who are nervous speaking publicly should consider whether it's truly necessary for their work, career goals and life. Perhaps it isn't or the emotional toll is too great. But if it is, then there are ways for people to improve and for organisations to create an environment to support them.

We're all familiar with the workplace principle that people should focus on their strengths. In Ms Osaka's case, she's possessed of superhuman ability in an area that is, to put it mildly, germane to her work. She does gladiatorial battle for hours at a time, at an intensity most people couldn't stand for five minutes. On court, she's all fortitude and keeps her demons at bay.

Yet for whatever reason, when it comes to public speaking, her psychological equation reverses. That's not surprising; humans are complicated. And the post-match media scrum can be rough, filling players' minds with doubts and distractions. If the professional tennis associations were to follow the principle of focusing on strengths, they should accept Ms Osaka's particular mix of toughness and vulnerability.

Of course, athlete interviews are an important part of tennis, too: they bring personality, tension and excitement to the sport. But surely there are other ways to achieve this, such as offering bonuses to players who take the mic, or requesting (not mandating) a press conference at the conclusion of a tournament rather than every day, when players are mentally depleted. The tournaments should consider players' comfort on stage, separate from their performance on the court.

Yet if I were Ms Osaka's coach, mentor or friend, I would take a different approach. I'd sit down with her in a quiet moment and ask, truly, whether it matters to her to present herself publicly off court. If her sincere answer is no, end of discussion. But if her answer is yes, then she should overcome her fear—because she can; anyone can. I know, because I've done it myself.

I used to be terrified of public speaking, to the point of reliably losing five pounds before a talk because I was too paralysed to eat. These days, I speak to organisations all over the world without thinking twice. What I've learned is that anyone can defeat presentation anxiety—and that many of us need to in order to succeed in the modern workplace.

Psychologists have studied for years the process of extinguishing fears. They know exactly how to do it. It takes grit and energy; it can be a painful process; but it's not magic. The correct approach is to expose yourself to that which you fear in small, manageable doses. In contrast, the absolute worst thing you can do is to throw yourself—or be thrown—into a media circus. If Ms Osaka so chooses, she could start by talking at smaller gatherings, not by facing down the international press.

From there, people work up to more challenging situations. The idea is to build on small, dependable successes that train the brain that the source of its fear is more benign than it had thought. Stressed-out public speakers see the podium as the equivalent of crossing a narrow bridge above a deep ravine. Once the brain learns that nothing calamitous happens at the mic, it stops signaling to the body to take flight.

As more collaboration happens online following covid-19 lockdowns, managers have a role to play. They can design work environments so employees with public-speaking anxiety can flourish. For example, they can make some meetings audio only, since video conferences are distracting and tiring for everyone.

But even video conferences can be structured more thoughtfully. Moderators can make a point of asking for comments before moving on with the agenda, for example, to dilute the influence of the dominant and the talkative. They can promote the meeting's chat function as a channel for written contributions as an alternative to spoken ones. They can even designate someone to summarise the chat comments orally, or message their authors privately and invite them to make their case to the camera, giving them both encouragement and time to prepare.

Perhaps most of all, managers can urge quieter workers to learn to speak from the heart, out of a desire to share valuable information and insights. Many leaders, from Warren Buffett to Mahatma Gandhi, overcame their aversion to the spotlight because they had so much they wanted to say.

Maybe Ms Osaka will keep her silence, a decision we should all respect. And maybe one day she'll decide to face the cameras—to show the world how she overcame her fear, on her own terms, and that others can do the same.

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