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## EFFECTIVE ORAL COMMUNICATIONS

Professor Henry G. Roberts

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INDUSTRIAL COLLEGE OF THE ARMED FORCES  
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**EFFECTIVE ORAL COMMUNICATIONS**

**5 September 1955**

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**Reporter--Mary A. Kelly**

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9 September 1955

**DR. REICHLLEY:** Well, we started off your day with a little talk on research and writing. Now we turn to Effective Oral Communication. I am sure you all recognize that a man may have a lot of knowledge, ideas, and experience, but if he does not have the capability of effectively communicating those ideas and that knowledge to others, he might as well be a hermit, say, living at the South Pole.

Recognizing this fact, the Industrial College has established a course on public speaking. We have been very fortunate indeed in obtaining the services of two well qualified public speaking teachers: First, Professor Stevens, from George Washington University; and Professor Henry Roberts, who is speech consultant to the Assistant Secretary of the Navy and other government agencies. Professor Roberts will be giving the lecture this morning. They take turns in introducing our course in public speaking and so this year it falls on the shoulders of Professor Roberts.

**PROFESSOR ROBERTS:** Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen: In a very real way today is an important anniversary in my life--25

years ago this morning I arrived in Washington to start teaching public speaking to adult classes at the George Washington University; 13 years ago this month, I reported on board in the Office of Public Information of the Navy Department, where for the next three years my work was largely concerned with setting up speaking engagements for senior officers in the Navy; 5 years ago, come winter, I taught my first class here at the Industrial College.

Over that period of time I have heard thousands of speeches given by the military. I have worked for and with the Army, the Navy, the Air Force, the Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. I have worked with Petty Officers who were going out on recruiting duty. I have worked with members of the Joint Chiefs. I have worked with civilian scientists who were preparing presentations on the importance of sun spots in the calculation of the world's magnetic field. I have written speeches for civilian secretaries. And out of all that, I have learned a great deal about public speaking as it is currently being done in the military. The one thing that above all others stands out to me, the one thing that I have learned and have not yet been able to understand is the undoubted fact that when the average military man goes about making a speech, he seems to go at it with an irrevocable

decision to do it the hard way.

In a class that I had earlier this morning one of the men pulled out that old chestnut about the human mind being a terrible and wonderful mechanism. It began to work the instant the child was born and stopped the instant he got on the platform to make a speech. I would suggest, gentlemen, that with the military in many instances the mind stops somewhat short of the time that they get on the platform.

I would like this morning to talk a little common sense about this business of public speaking, not to give you my usual "do's" and "don't's" that I have given to preceding classes here at the Industrial College, but rather to talk about some simply fundamental things concerned with public speaking so that, whether you are in my class or in Ed.'s, you will start off with a point of view which is perhaps different from the point of view that you have at the present time.

Now, I have said the average military speaker goes about doing a job of public speaking the hard way. Just what do I mean by that? Let us take a senior officer. The moment that he is listed for a speech, a whole series of weird and wonderful things begin to happen to him. He is undoubtedly a man of intelligence, a man who is accustomed to meeting problems and solving problems. And yet, when he

is confronted with the simple proposition of getting up on a platform and talking for 10 or 15 minutes, everything, every bit of intelligence, every bit of know-how, all of his problem solving ability disappear.

What does he do? He calls in his speech writer, and if he is like one general officer that I am thinking of, he not only brings in one but, believing in competition, he calls in three. He wants three scripts for this performance. Of course, he doesn't tell the script writers what to write about.

I have, through the years, been very much interested at times to see my own pronouncements come out on the front pages of the newspapers, things I had written for people where I knew very little about the business. The first thing that is wrong about it is having somebody write your speech.

Then what happens? As the day approaches for the speech, the senior officer adopts all the actions of the prima donna. I know the rare and wonderful requests you can get from senior officers. You literally in some instances have to hold their hands before they go on the platform. But do they go to the trouble of reading the speech over before they get on the platform? Probably once or twice. Normally, the speech is given to them on one day

and the next day they get up before an audience, reading and stumbling through it.

The one job that a public speaker can avoid, the one job a public speaker will avoid at all hazards is the business of reading a speech. That is the tough way of doing a job.

But let us not talk about senior officers. Let us come down to cases with you boys. Before the year is over, you will be standing on this platform giving a presentation. Let me forecast what is going to happen to you. When I say you are going to do it the hard way, what is going to happen is this:

You will slave for months preparing that presentation. You will read stacks of material. And then when the day or the month of that presentation begins to roll around and you feel the breath of fate on the back of your neck, you begin to get to work to try to organize that material into a presentation.

What do you do with it? You try to cram two or three months reading into a 12-minute presentation. An idea of any importance is lucky if it gets one sentence in the presentation.

How do you prepare it? Easy. You sit down and write it out as though you were writing a magazine article.

Now, although as I look over this group I only see about a half dozen faces of people who are familiar to me, I know from experience that there probably are not over two or three of you in the room who are competent speech writers. To be a good speech writer means you are a very valuable man. It is hard to write a speech that sounds like a speech, and yet you will insist upon trying to write that speech out, word by word.

And then what do you get worried about? Is it the ideas in the speech that worry you? In my experience, the things that begin to worry you: Is the grammar correct? Have I used precisely the right word? Are my sentences long enough and intricate enough to confuse my listeners completely?

And then you come before a Murder Board. You haven't experienced that yet, have you, gentlemen? You have something to look forward to. I have never sat on one. I don't know what happens; I can only guess. I know what I would like to do if I were on a murder board for the presentations that you people are going to give. I doubt if that is what happens in the murder board.

Then with your completed manuscript, which has been carefully gone over for any heresy of grammar, word usage, or omission of an idea, you come up on this platform and are one of 15 people who

go through the motions up here making that presentation.

I am telling you that by the time you get through with your student presentations, your backsides are going to be very tired indeed and what you come out with will be probably very little that you can carry away with you that is useful. Why? I think it is evident that the real difficulty is that you do not go about preparing yourself for this situation in a reasonable manner, that you do not approach this speaking situation with a really clear understanding of what you are here to do, and that in the actual presentation of it, you go about it in distinctly the hard way.

Now that is my indictment. Some of the things I have said here this morning are things I have been wanting to get out of my system for the past five years. As Patrick Henry said, "If this be treason, make the most of it." But that is what I say after working with you people over this period of years.

As I said, let us get down to fundamentals. Why do you make a speech? Why does anyone make a speech? Is it simply a part of the ceremonial of the occasion? Do you make a speech as you prepare a skit to be played on the stage? Are you acting when you are on this platform? Is the value of your speech, its entertainment value? Are you in competition with Winston Churchill, or William

Jennings Bryan, or Douglas MacArthur, or Marilyn Monroe when you stand up on this platform?

I suggest you are not. There may have been a time in an earlier America when the speaker on the platform was there largely to entertain the public, but that day has passed. We use public speaking now for a very practical purpose. Let me give you an example.

Suppose you are a commanding officer and there is a project under way where a number of people must work together and each do exactly the correct thing in order to make that project work out. You call the people together in front of you where you can talk to all of them at once. You give them specific instructions in what shall be done by each and how the group will be coordinated.

What are you interested in? I submit that you are not interested in the grammar that you use, nor are the people out in front of you. They are not interested in whether or not you use exactly the right word. They are interested and you are interested only in one thing, that is the success or failure of that project. If those men do the things, if each does his own job and does it in coordination, and if the project is successful, the speech has been successful.

But it doesn't make any difference whether you have got the best speech writer in the Navy or in the Air Force, or whether the

Murder Board approved or disapproved, if, when the time comes for action, those people didn't understand and didn't get the word. If, in every instance where you get on a platform, you would realize that what you do is minor; what you get the audience to do and understand is the important thing, I think you would approach public speaking in a completely different manner.

I am not putting on an act up here this morning. I am not tremendously concerned about my stage presence. I am concerned in only one thing, and I am convinced that if you follow some of the things that I am talking to you about, it will make the job of speech making easier as far as you are concerned. If you use the things that I am talking about to you this morning, my speech will have been a success. If you do not use them, my speech has been a flat failure.

I submit to you that every time a speaker gets on the platform, whether he is lecturing to you about certain concepts of manpower or where and how and why magnesium is mined in several places in the world, unless he gets across to you certain fundamental ideas, the speech has failed in spite of all of the other things that may be good about it.

The modern concept of public speaking, then, is not one of display. While I follow a number of people on this platform, I am

not here simply showing off myself as an instructor of public speaking. I am here to get something done, a job done, and in our modern use of public speaking we more and more are coming or have come completely to the concept that public speaking, just like writing or drawing pictures, or sending smoke signals for that matter, is just another medium of communication, a medium of communication of ideas that must be transmitted from one person to a group.

Now I have several things I am trying to say to you this morning. By no means is it necessary that we make a speech to you. Indeed, under many circumstances that I can imagine, it would be much easier, it would be possible at any rate, to give you that information, to communicate it to you in a completely different form. Let us look at some of the things I could do.

Here it is 10:30 on Friday morning of this week. I have about 40 minutes of information that I want to give you, and I decide that because I am a little hesitant about this business of getting up in front of you, I will have to write to you. Forty minutes of speaking then equates to something in the neighborhood of 5,000 words. And so at 10:30, instead of coming over here and standing on the platform, I sit down in an office with pad and pencil in hand and start to write

my 5,000 words to you.

Now I don't know how rapidly you compose. Perhaps you can do it in a half hour or a half day, but I will be honest with you. It will be four days before I get that into any sort of rough draft form. If I choose to work over the week end, I will have it ready by Monday night. Then I give it to the typist, and my typist worries all Tuesday morning trying to decipher the pig tracks on that sheet of paper. She comes up Tuesday noon with a rough draft. She puts it on my desk.

Will I take that rough draft and say, "Fine, let it run into the mimeographing machine!" You may have that sort of courage, gentlemen, but I will admit I don't have. When I see it, I know I have got to make some revisions. It takes all Tuesday afternoon to make the revisions. We can dispatch it to the mimeograph room. What happens? You pray, you plead, and you threaten, and it still takes 2-1/2 days to get it out of the mimeographing room.

Then it comes back and we take it over here and slip it into the slots over in the other building. That is about a week from today. And your class being over, you rush frantically in there, you grab out the stuff, pull it out, and there is a nice six or seven page mimeographed handout entitled, "Common Sense about Public Speaking."

by Henry Roberts. And granting that all of you went in there the same afternoon to pick up your mail, how many of those copies would we find in the waste basket after you had left? Be honest, gentlemen. You may still be at the place here at the Industrial College where you are trying to read all of the material. If this were somewhat later in the term, I think I would lose my readership even more.

Actually, what we find in the Government departments runs something like this: that normally if you hand out information of that kind, about two-thirds of it goes into the waste basket without anything more than a title being read; the other third goes into that basket which is on every executive's desk and never correctly labeled. It should be labeled "Good Intentions. The Things I am Going to Do when I Get Around to It." It goes in there with similar good intentions, and eventually gets thrown out--simply a delay in the process.

Perhaps I might get, by writing to you, 10 percent readership. I doubt if I would get much more than that. Granting that what I have to say to you is, at least in my opinion, of importance, it becomes pretty obvious that writing as a means of communication is perhaps not always the most effective way of communicating with you.

There are other things that I might do, of course, some that might be as a matter of fact probably more pleasant. For instance, it would be completely possible, I presume for me to arrange a series of meetings with each of you individually. I might come into your office, sit down with you for an hour or three quarters of an hour, tell you the same thing I am telling you now, and then go on to your office, and on to yours. Good Heavens, by the time I had gotten through with 140 people with 140 hours of presentation, I would be worn out, and probably what I had told the first person would be completely different from what I was telling the men at the end of the 140 hours.

It would be pleasant because I could get to talk to you individually, but as a means of communication, it would be pretty hopeless. As the group gets larger, if it is of any size at all, and I could probably tell my story to several people in a day, 140 would take three weeks work to tell you the same things that I can tell you here if all 140 are in the room at the same time.

Do you see what I am driving at? What I am trying to say is this: That in the business world that we have got, and the armed service have certainly become big business in these recent years, we have quit thinking about public speaking as presenting the uniform

in front of Rotary and Kiwanis groups. We have stopped thinking of public speaking as a part of the ceremonial procedure. We have started to think of public speaking as a most useful tool, a tool of communication, and that is all.

That thing is a fountain pen (holding up pen). That is one tool of communication. I could write to you, and I would do it without any self-consciousness, without getting the jitters, without becoming a prima donna in the process. I am simply saying that, if you will approach the problem of talking to groups of people with the same attitude that you approach the simple problem of sitting down and writing them a note, you will attack this problem of public speaking with a great deal more success and very much more ease than if you persist in the mumbo jumbo that you are going through at the present time.

I have said that you make a speech to get work done, that it's one of the media of communication, and under some circumstances obviously the most effective and the quickest, and from the communicators' standpoint, the easiest way of getting that information across. Yet, it is the thing with which some of you have quite admittedly real problems in getting the job done.

What do you have now, as of this instant, to help you in doing

a good job of public speaking? What do you start out with? I can tell you what you start out with. You start out with 30, or in some instances, 40 years of experience in talking. From the time you were two until the time you get into that long black box at the end, you will be talking, talking, talking. For most of you, the longest quiet periods that you have during the course of the day are those hours that you spend in this room with somebody talking to you. And really the illustration is quite apt here when I say silent period. You can't even cough.

All the things you have gotten out of life up to this time you have gotten by talking. You can handle yourselves well in conversation. If you hadn't learned how to talk, you wouldn't have gotten the promotions that have put you here. In a briefing session, at a bar, across the commanding general's desk, you can talk and you can talk very effectively. That is what you have got to begin on.

Where do you go from here? I would like to make this simple suggestion. Public speaking is nothing more than an extension of conversation. It is conversation with a group of people instead of with one person. It is done for exactly the same reasons that we talk to people in conversations. It is done in exactly the same way that we talk to those people. It is done with the same ease and the same

informality that we talk to people in conversation. It is on the same subjects that we talk in conversations. There are a few changes that become necessary, but 98 percent of public speaking, of good public speaking is simply good conversation, with some very minor adjustments to the necessities of the specific case.

Every time I bring up this subject, somebody says, "That's all wet. There are big differences between conversation and public speaking. For example, in conversation you can sit down, but when you have to stand up in front of a group of 150 people, or smaller, or larger, the situation changes very drastically."

Let us look at it for a moment. I have been standing up here this morning. I presume there is no reason on earth why, if I so felt like it, I couldn't have sat down here. (Sitting on edge of stage). I am sitting down now. I have transferred my weight from one portion of my anatomy to another portion, and physically, from my point of view, that is about the only change that has taken place. I presume it would be perfectly possible to deliver a speech flat on my back. Even there, I think I would show a little embarrassment.

But I would suggest to you that whether I am sitting or standing, I am still doing the same thing. I am making a speech to you people. Sitting or standing makes no difference to me. But it makes a difference

to some other people.

For instance, gentlemen, doesn't it make a difference to you when I sit down here. I see some heads going this way, that way, and the other way, because if I persist in sitting here, it makes it miserably difficult for people in the back of the room to see me. Literally, I am a pain in the neck to some of the people in this audience. How long will I remain a pain in the neck? Not long, because you are people of intelligence, because very quickly you will come to the conclusion that it is not worth it and will quit looking at me.

What have I done? I have lost 20 percent of my audience because I was too lazy to stand up here. I am not a good enough speaker to take a chance on losing 20 percent of my audience because I refuse to stand up on a platform in front to them.

The only reason we stand in front of a group of people is because if we stand here everyone can see us and therefore is more likely to pay attention to us. If we sit down we will lose a considerable part of our audience. There is nothing sacrosanct about standing on a platform. We do it for a very common sense reason.

If the group is smaller, as indeed when we begin to have our classes in here they will be, I doubt very much if I will be standing

on the platform much of the time because there will only be about three rows of people here and I will be working down here. If the group is larger, obviously I am going to come up on the platform where you can see me.

Wait until you get on the precipice in the other auditorium! There you feel that you have been elevated above the whole world. Why? Simply because the floor level is different and in order to have people see you, you have to be raised higher.

The next thing that I get as a difference between conversation and public speaking is this: that conversation that is easy with two or three people, when you get 20, 30, 50, 100, 140, then the thing has become a speech. Well, I am tempted to say, "Thank God for that." I would hate to have to give this same spiel five times if I can get it all done once. And has it ever occurred to you that the larger the audience, the more efficient the operation?

I have said parts of what I am saying, this is the fifth time this week. Some of that same part I shall have to say five times next week to various groups of people. Don't you think that I would infinitely prefer to have gotten the other audience and brought in that other 150 along with you and tell it all at once and then I could go to the mountains for the week end.

Don't be worried about this business of the size of the audience. A big audience is always very much nicer to you than a small audience is. It is the audience of one that is really hard to sell. When you get 100 or 140, you may have all the top men of all the services, but they all for some strange reason instantly become gentlemen when there are 150 of them all together, and you will get different treatment from them.

I would like to submit to you this idea. You have been hearing a speech this morning. whose fault is it? Is it something that I have done that has made what I have been doing up here a speech? Or on the other hand, is it something that you have done or failed to do? I submit, gentlemen, that if this has been a speech, it has been your fault. You have brought it upon yourself. This is a speech for one reason and one reason only, that is, that you have shut up and let me do all the talking.

The instant that anybody on that back row up there had stood up and said, "I think it is all tripe," I would have been flat back into conversation. If someone had asked me a question, we would have slipped immediately into conversation. The only difference between conversation and speech making boils down to this: When a group is willing to keep quiet and let one man do all of the talking.

that man is making a speech whether he likes it or not. And it can shift from that public speaking situation back to the conversational situation the instant that anyone in the audience breaks in and sets up the two-way communication.

Now probably the inferences of what I have just said don't mean much, but to me they mean a very great deal. It means that when I am standing on this platform, I am really trying to talk to you just as honestly and just as effectively as if I were trying to argue with you over a cup of coffee in the coffee bar. You are military people as far as I am concerned, and I am trying to put my point across to you as people, as individuals.

I would like to have the situation in which, instead of it all being one way, as it is at the moment, we would get that cross-fire of questions. I wouldn't mind if it turned into conversation very quickly. But I know that it does make some changes. This business of having to do all the work for one's service. It has very grave implications so far as the speaker is concerned. What are some of those implications? I am going to give them to you very fast because I don't think they need development.

The first one is, it seems to me, that if speech making is just an extension of conversation, the speaker has got to have

something to say when he gets on the platform. He is not going to get any help from the questions that come at him from the audience. He has got to have something to say and he has got to have it clearly in mind. That is the first thing.

The second, it seems to me he has to do some planning. I am not thinking of planning in the idea of writing out word by word what you are going to say. I am thinking of planning as trying to figure out what questions the audience would like to have answered; how what he is going to say is going to affect them and that they are likely to respond to it, and therefore get some order and organization into what he says. I think that is incumbent upon him, again because he is going to have no help from the audience.

The third implication I think is this, if public speaking is simply an extension of conversation, it means that when he gets on the platform and stands up here, he has got to talk to people, to individuals just as he would talk to them in conversation. None of this business of fixing your eye on the "No Smoking" sign and just letting the stuff roll out. He has got to approach the platform or his appearance on the platform with the same attitude he would have if he were going into your offices individually to tell you the things he has to say.

And, finally, I think this is the implication of what I have had to say, that when you get on the platform to make that presentation, you have got to be yourself, not some stereotype of what you think a good speaker should be. Get up there, tell them what you believe to be true, tell them in your own language, tell them in your own way, and the chances are 90 out of 100 that, if you follow that easy way of doing it, the people in the audience will think you have made, perhaps for the first time, a really effective presentation.

QUESTION: You mentioned the deadly sin or lulling effect of reading, which I think is quite evident. You got up here and you followed down all your points very quickly. Your mind is trained to follow the outlines you have made for yourself. Many of us have trouble and are a little apprehensive about going up on the platform with just a set of cards in your hand and you wouldn't do it in any conversation, but you would at least have jotted down and could hold in front of you in a large conversation the points you wanted to cover. My question is, how do you effectively handle notes which <sup>you</sup> need as a little prop, not a long thing, but a few notes on a card?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: You have raised a specific question about what I did this morning. Out in my car there is a 5 x 8 card on which I jotted down about 10 headings last night of things I wanted

to say to you this morning. After I had gotten them down and decided those things were what I wanted to say, I carefully memorized what is on that card. I think I could probably close my eyes and see that card in front of my and tell you the things I put down on it.

When I came over here this morning, before I went in to see Dr. Reichley, I pulled it out of my pocket, read it through twice, and put it down on the seat where it is at the present time. I had memorized that--not memorized the speech, but I had memorized the notes. It is amazing that with very little practice it is possible to do that job, to do it that way, and that is the way I would suggest.

However, to get to your actual question, how I would handle notes on the platform, if I had brought in those notes this morning, I would have been very honest about them. I would have put them on the little desk, I would turn the notes down. If I needed to, I would have looked to see what the next point was and gone on about my business.

I don't think you need notes. With a little practice you learn to get along without them. When you do need them, I think the mistake is trying to pretend to other people you don't have them. Heavens, if you go into one of your senior officers and he asks a question, the answer to which you don't have on the tip of your tongue, you have no

hesitancy in turning to the file of correspondence and getting it. I would use the same common sense approach I would in conversation.

**QUESTION:** Returning to the practical side of this thing, if we are called upon to make a speech, which none of us accepts with any great pleasantness, that speech must be written out word for word and generally approved by some authority before it is made, and we dare not depart very far from that text. Would it be a practical idea--I think some of us would be better speakers than readers--to teach us something about reading and making public reading since we are compelled to follow notes quite closely?

**PROFESSOR ROBERTS:** I regret to say, sir, that it will be so included. You will get some instruction in reading from manuscripts.

**QUESTION:** At the time of the meeting of a recent selection board for admiral, I believe Mr. Thomas, Secretary of the Navy, wrote a letter, I won't call it advice, to the senior member of that board, in which he did stress that, in selecting the captains for the rank of admiral, some attention should be given to their power of--I guess he called it "vocal expression." What are the impacts or effects, if any, within the Navy Department as a result of that letter?

**PROFESSOR ROBERTS:** I have been out of the city for

some time. This is the first I have heard of the letter. I would warrant the guess, however--I would like to go into a huddle now with Ed--but my guess would be that 50 percent of the flag rank officers have had instruction in public speaking at one time or another and that the real import of what Mr. Thomas has written is a statement of acceptance of a situation which has been in existence for a long time.

QUESTION. My question is one of technique, Professor. I noted that, due to the construction of this auditorium, you were able to free yourself to a large extent from that microphone. However, were you in the National War College auditorium you would not have been so freed. Is it not true that a lot of the attention-getting in making a speech does involve moving about the stage and thereby keeping people's attention on you, and, if so, to what extent?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: In some instances one is bound by a microphone, but I will cite you an example of the auditorium upstairs. Several years ago, when I was teaching National War College courses, I found not a single member of my class needed the microphone for the other auditorium. Also that year I had a class for the wives of some of the officers of that group and they found it was perfectly possible to hear nearly all of the wives easily. My guess is that the microphone becomes a convenient prop and a most excellent

excuse for not getting out and working without it.

Now there were two or three times where I have run into places so large that I had to have the mike; 9 times out of 10, it isn't necessary.

QUESTION: I gather that you are a very strong advocate of extemporaneous speech making, but there are a lot of other factors that we must watch in that act. You can see I am not an extemporaneous speaker. Don't you feel that, before you get into that class, you should go into some of these mechanics of rehearsal and timing, and things of that nature?

PROFESSOR ROBERTS: Oh, yes, certainly. I think when you get in my class or in Ed 's, we will pay some considerable attention to the right way to do it. What I have talked about this morning is what I consider to be the wrong of it. There is a right way, an easy way that pays good dividends. I am not going to talk about that this morning. I have got to save something for the course.

DR. REICHELLEY: On behalf of the Commandant and the students, I want to thank you for coming here and getting the public speaking course off to such a good start. I might say, I am sure after we have all graduates from this course, we can turn to each other and say as Shakespeare did, "I will rant as well as thou."