

MODULE

10

The Reflective Pause

Letting a line land — and why you must
film yourself

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

The pause may be the most powerful word in human language, and it is not a word at all. This module covers the first of the two power pauses.

A **reflective pause** lets the speaker dramatise or accentuate what they just said, giving the audience time to savour it. The definitive example is Ronald Reagan at the Brandenburg Gate in 1987.

Reagan built to it deliberately. He said "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate" — the crowd reacted — then let the applause die, then delivered the real line: "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." Then he paused again and let the cheers run. He did not say the line and immediately move on to his next point. He let it reach a crescendo, and it became one of the most dramatic moments in American political history.

A **crescendo line** is a line you are near-certain will draw applause. Build to it, deliver it, then stop and let the room have it.

The second half of this module is about **filming yourself**. Steve films every student in the first week, before teaching anything, precisely so there is a baseline. He grades on a 20-point scale. Most people start around 9 or 10. Fifteen puts you roughly in the top 10%; sixteen in the top 5%. Nobody has ever scored 18, 19 or 20 — a 20 would require every element to be perfect, and speeches are complicated enough that nobody manages it. The highest score ever recorded was a 17, for Obama's press conference.

1987

Reagan at the
Brandenburg Gate

20

point scale Steve
grades on

9-10

where most people start

17

highest score ever
recorded

KEY CONCEPTS

The reflective pause

A deliberate silence after a line, giving the audience room to absorb and react. It accentuates what you just said rather than filling space.

The crescendo line

The line you are confident will draw applause. Set it up, deliver it, then stop. Do not talk over your own best moment.

The baseline recording

Film yourself before you learn anything, then film every time you speak from then on and compare back. Without the baseline you cannot see your own progress.

Reagan in New Hampshire

When a moderator tried to cut his microphone at a debate he had helped pay for, Reagan snapped back: "I am paying for this microphone." It showed a toughness Republicans had not seen from the affable Californian, and his numbers rose sharply. Same man, different emotion, deliberately deployed.

FROM THE VIDEO**The student who ran off the stage**

A young woman knocked on Steve's door before the semester began, crying, asking to drop the course. She had tried public speaking twice; both times she felt lightheaded, broke into a sweat and ran off the stage in tears.

Steve made a deal: come to the first week, be filmed, sit through an hour of critique, and then drop it if you still want to. She came, walked to the podium, got dizzy and ran out crying.

At the critique he played the first few seconds — her walking in — and stopped. She had a radiant smile. She had naturally worked the four quadrants. He told her: your speech started when you walked through that door, and that part was good. Hold the smile five seconds instead of three.

Then she told him why it mattered. Orphaned young, placed in foster care, sexually assaulted as a girl and told she was to blame. She had spent fifteen years wishing she had spoken up, and believed her calling was to be a voice for abused children — but she had no voice.

He filmed her again immediately, told her to open with "I'm going to tell you something today that's going to break your heart. How do I know? Because it broke mine," and then pause. She spoke for three minutes. She did not pass out and she did not run.

At the end of the semester she gave a speech that got a standing ovation and there was not a dry eye in the room. She went on to become a professional spokesperson for abused children.

REMEMBER

- Deliver the crescendo line, then stop talking. Let the room have it.
- A pause is not dead air. It is the frame around your best sentence.
- Film every time you speak and compare back to your baseline.
- Most people start at 9 or 10. Nobody has ever hit 18. Progress is the point.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Write and drill a crescendo line

What is the one line in your next presentation you would most want applause for?

Write the three segments that build to it.

Record it. Did you pause after the line, or did you keep going? Be honest.

EXERCISE 2

The pause count

Most people are physically uncomfortable with silence and cut pauses short.

Deliver a passage and deliberately hold each pause to a count of two. Watch it back. Did it feel too long while doing it? Did it look too long on playback?

Ann Richards held eye contact with a reporter for six seconds. What is the longest pause you can hold before it feels unbearable?

EXERCISE 3

Score your baseline

Steve grades on 20 points. Most start at 9 or 10, and 15 puts you in the top tenth.

Watch your baseline recording and score yourself honestly out of 20. What number, and why?

What are the two specific things that would move you up one point?

Tick each one once you have done it:

☐ Scored my baseline

- ☐ Wrote down two specific fixes
 - ☐ Filmed a second attempt
 - ☐ Compared the two side by side
-

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it: