



Thinking & Speaking on Your Feet – 10 Practical Tools for Confident Impromptu Speaking

Whether it's an unexpected question in a meeting, an impromptu presentation, or an off-the-cuff response to a customer, the ability to think and speak on your feet is a core leadership skill. This guide distills the key takeaways from my popular workshop into 10 practical tools you can start using today. Each section includes why it matters, what happens if it's not addressed, and a tool you can use immediately.

1. Less Is More: Structure for Impact

When speaking without preparation, the temptation is to talk more to 'buy time'. In reality, this often leads to rambling, confusing your audience and diluting your message. The opposite works better: use a clear, simple structure so your audience can follow along easily.

One powerful method is the Martini Glass Structure – start broad to give context, narrow to your key point, and then widen again with a strong conclusion or call to action. This structure works equally well whether you're answering a question in a meeting, providing feedback to a team member, or briefing a senior leader.

If you avoid structure, you risk your points being misunderstood, forgotten, or overwhelmed. A clear, concise flow signals confidence and earns credibility.

2. Nail Your Focus Statement

Before you speak, decide: What's the one thing I want them to remember or do? This 'focus statement' is your anchor.

It's not a vague topic or slogan. It's a short, concrete fact or action you want to leave with your audience. For example: instead of saying 'We need to improve our customer service', you might say 'Our goal is to cut average wait times by 40% in the next two months'. That's specific and memorable.

Without a focus statement, your contribution can drift. Listeners may struggle to recall your main message and your influence will be reduced.



3. Use Proven Frameworks to Organise Thoughts Quickly

Even under pressure, you can sound composed if you mentally run through a structure. Frameworks act as your verbal GPS, guiding your response and helping you avoid dead ends.

Three proven examples:

- STAR – Situation, Task, Action, Result: Ideal for behavioural questions or explaining past events.
- PREP – Point, Reason, Example, Point: Useful for making a persuasive argument quickly.
- What? So What? Now What? – Describe the facts, explain why they matter, suggest a next step.

If you skip structure, you risk losing your listener halfway through.

4. Master Pausing for Power

Silence, used well, is a leadership tool. Many people fill gaps with 'um' or rush ahead to avoid discomfort. But pausing before answering gives you time to think, signals confidence, and increases the perceived weight of your words.

A short pause before key points builds anticipation, and a pause afterward allows your audience to process. Avoiding pauses makes you seem nervous or unprepared, even if you aren't.

5. Build Your Thinking Toolbox

When you have even a few seconds before you respond, use that time to run the issue through a thinking tool. These help you analyse and organise information on the fly.

Options include Ishikawa (fishbone) diagrams for root causes, SCAMPER for generating creative ideas, Six Thinking Hats for viewing from multiple perspectives, or the 5 Whys for drilling down quickly.

Without tools, your thinking can default to assumptions, leading to shallow answers or poor decisions.



6. Manage Your Nerves Physically

Adrenaline can be useful, but too much turns into shaky hands, a racing heart, and a scattered mind. Quick physical techniques help you reset fast.

Ground yourself by feeling both feet firmly on the floor. Breathe in for 4 counts, out for 6. Roll your shoulders slowly. These simple actions send 'all clear' signals to your brain, letting you focus on content rather than fear.

7. Read the Room in Real-Time

Thinking on your feet isn't just about what you say – it's also about adjusting in the moment. Watch body language, facial expressions, and note shifts in tone.

If you notice confusion, you can slow down and clarify. If energy is dropping, you might inject a quick question or example. Without this awareness, you risk talking at people instead of with them.

8. Use Language that Buys Time

You don't always need to start talking immediately. Use phrases that acknowledge the question while giving your brain a few seconds to line up your thoughts.

Examples: 'That's a great question – here's how I'd approach it...', or 'Let me think about that for a second...'. These short bridges keep you in control and avoid the appearance of hesitation.

9. Borrow & Build

If you're caught off-guard, you can acknowledge a good point made by someone else, then add your perspective. For example: 'I agree with what Sarah said about focusing on the customer, and I'd add that we also need to...'

This shows you're engaged, builds connection, and buys time to think while keeping the conversation moving.

10. Finish on a high

We remember endings more than middles. Even if your response started shakily, finish with a confident summary or call to action, not Q&A.

TERRY WILLIAMS

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Use a phrase like: 'So, in summary, we'll...' or 'The key takeaway here is...'. This reinforces your point and leaves a lasting positive impression.

***On top of the basic workshop, another option is handling 'tough crowds'.
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training half-day or full-day workshops.***