



Speech! Speech!

by **Stephen Xavier**

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“Become therefore a mighty craftsman in thy speech, for thereby shalt thou gain in life the victory.”

An ancient Egyptian inscription

Every day, leaders are confronted with a wide range of communication challenges, from meetings, presentations and interactions with the executive team, board members, clients, prospects, shareholders, stakeholders, suppliers, advisors and other associates. In each situation, there is the potential to generate or otherwise impact critical outcomes for the organization and the leader’s career. Accomplished leaders make the best of it by applying the right communication style and tools to craft a compelling message appropriate to each context. But mere technical skill is not all there is to delivering effective presentations. Great leaders are not just proficient speakers—they back up their messages with integrity and credibility.

Say What You Mean ...

Not every leader is a natural-born and skilled presenter. In particular, executives who have moved up the ranks from technical or financial backgrounds may be excellent problem-solvers and financial wizards, but they often lack proficiency in communicating to small and large groups alike. To compensate, many have disciplined themselves to hone their skills and become passable presenters. For those who are most comfortable in a small-group environment where they interact with as few individuals as necessary, the good news is that the technical aspects of good presenting to both large and small groups can be learned. Here are a few tips:

Know the audience. Who are they? What is their interest in the topic? What is the purpose and expected outcome of the presentation? What will it take to persuade them? What do they already know, and what will be new to them? What questions might they ask? What language and tone should be used in order to make an impression on this audience? “Addressing the public in your industry’s jargon is one of the most common mistakes,” says Larry Gerston, a motivational speaking coach and television political analyst for nearly 30 years. “It does you no good to speak the truth about your product, your service or

your industry if your audience cannot understand you. Successful presenting is not about the biggest words. It’s about communicating your message in a way that allows others to become invested in it.”

Plan, prepare and practice. Research the audience and the topic, prepare an outline and cue cards, and, if comfort is an issue, rehearse in front of a mirror or a safe audience such as friends or family.

Get off to the right start and leave them wanting for more. From presentation skills books or by watching great speakers, learn about successful ways to open and close a presentation. Good ways to jump-start an audience include thanking them, personal anecdotes, quotations from famous personalities, references to the day’s headlines, startling statistics or a question that immediately engages the audience on a personal level. An effective closing is equally important because it cements the relationship with the audience, strengthens rapport and provides a final opportunity to clarify the message. The most dynamic ending is the “ABC” —Action, Benefit, Conclusion: clearly state the actions expected of the audience, restate the benefits to them and the organization, and finally, close with thanks, Q&A or other appropriate ending.

Practice clarity and conciseness. Clarity is critical in leadership because its absence promotes ambiguity. Clear communication is a result of confident vocal delivery, effective physical expression and unambiguous language that conveys ideas with impact. The people to whom it is addressed know what is expected of them. Their morale is high, and they work responsibly, efficiently and with accountability. Beginning with a well-planned and organized presentation, clarity and conciseness come with frequent practice with a variety of audiences.

Develop executive presence. Work on executive presence, if necessary with the help of a coach, image consultant or personal trainer.

Engage the audience. Engaging the audience in an interactive dialog is a good way to take some attention off the speaker and raise one's comfort level in speaking. Ask open-ended questions or open the floor to questions and comments and address them. On the other hand, engaging the audience may require a new skill of the speaker: the ability to think on one's feet and ad lib. No matter how highly educated or intelligent the leader, this skill may take more time and practice to develop than any other. In addition, visual aids (e.g., PowerPoint) and storytelling, if used proficiently, are excellent ways of shaping messages with impact that will lead to desired outcomes.

An effective presenter clearly articulates company strategies and plans to help people understand their roles as part of the big picture. When employees and other stakeholders know where they fit and how they can contribute to the greater good, it's easier to turn them into followers.

...And Mean What You Say

"Being a successful presenter, whether in front of the press or the board of directors, means you have to be sincere and believe in your message or you will not be able to convey it well," says Gerston. "You also have to find the best way of reaching your audience. That means talking to them on their terms, but without compromising anything about you, your product or your activity." Presentations skills coaches help leaders and others find their voice so they can present messages in a way that both reflects their own character and reaches the audience, whether the public, the media or company stakeholders. "The bottom line is credibility," Gerston stresses. "If, as a political analyst, I don't present my message sincerely and in a clear, concise manner people can understand, I lose credibility. If you are comfortable with your message, you will find it easy to be credible."

For delivering bad news, the solution is to approach the audience with care, consideration and concern for their wellbeing. No one likes to deliver bad news because they truly feel for the people who will be affected by it. When presenters or speakers help the audience understand that every effort is being made to minimize the downside while opening new possibilities elsewhere, audiences are more receptive and able to process disappointing messages.

The best presenters speak from a place of integrity and honesty; their values and ethics are apparent in both word and action. People believe and fol-

Getting Help

For those who are uncomfortable as speakers, practice rather than avoidance is the only solution. Speak in front of groups as often as possible. Outside of work, begin with small, familiar groups such as family gatherings or church groups and graduate up to community organizations or conferences. Seek out help in the form of:

- Feedback from peers who are good speakers or good listeners who can provide objective assessment and constructive criticism.
- Coaching or consulting by a specialist in the field for assistance with vocal delivery, body language, eye contact, clarity and accent correction.
- Classes that utilize multiple forms of feedback (including video) and teach the handling of tough questions, steering discussions toward desired outcomes, and using humor and body language effectively.
- Organizations such as Toastmasters or Dale Carnegie that teach basic and advanced skills. But don't forget to also practice them!

low speakers who walk the talk and live their words, but even phenomenal public speakers eventually lose credibility if their actions prove them disingenuous. The bottom line is that technical proficiency of presentation skills is critical and can be learned. What cannot be learned, however, is equally critical—the leader's integrity, honesty and willingness to back up words with action.

Prevent Worst-Case Scenario Assumptions

When leaders are poor presenters or shy away from making presentations altogether, both internal and external audiences draw their own conclusions. Most commonly, those conclusions come from a perspective of skepticism, cynicism and suspicion. After all, when people are left without clarity and direction, they assume the worst-case scenario. On the other hand, the benefits of being a good presenter far outweigh the positive outcome of a specific context. They include more efficient decision-making, more effective actions and stronger, more productive relationships with colleagues, superiors, subordinates and other stakeholders. ■

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