
HOW TO GIVE A REALLY LOUSY TECHNICAL PRESENTATION

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INTRODUCTION

Tell ‘em what you are going to tell ‘em. Tell ‘em. Tell ‘em what you told ‘em. Begin with this simple format and you will be well on your way to a successful presentation. We find that many presentations don’t have a road map at the beginning, so the audience is left confused as to what the theme or point of the presentation is. A logical presentation of the data or facts, followed by a summary of the key conclusion will provide the essential ingredient for a successful talk. But, it’s still a little more complicated than that.

We have all been there sitting in the audience. The moderator introduces a speaker whose paper is very relevant to our organization’s work in progress. We are still innocently unaware that our worst nightmare, a really lousy presentation, is on its way.

After courteous applause, the presenter steps forward and begins with “unaccustomed as I am to public speaking....’ The audience groans audibly. The speaker’s voice trails off as he turns his head to look at the blank screen, seeking an as yet invisible visual aid to relieve his own obvious unease.

‘Can have the lights, please,’ he continues. The moderator glances around the room and, seeing that no help is available, moves toward the light switch. The lights go out. The room is pitch black. Someone has forgotten to turn on the projector. The audience begins to giggle like a group of nine year-olds snickering in church. The lights come up, the projector is found and turned on; the lights go down and the first slide says ‘NITRIFICATION IN BIOLOGICAL REACTORS IN A FULL-SCALE PLANT” ... backwards. Oh joy, incompetency reigns supreme. After apologizing, the speaker quickly dispenses with this first slide. The next visual pops up looking something like an eye chart in the optometrist’s office without the big ‘E.’ You still can’t read line 7 or any of the others.

The speaker haltingly begins, ‘I know you can’t see this, but....’ The audience rises in overt rebellion and, as if one, moves to the nearest exit. Truly, that last sentence is our fantasy. The rest has all happened in real life too often.

WHY?

Why should we want to give a speech? Well, because as Charles Osgood clearly points out in his book, *Osgood on Speaking*, leaders speak and followers listen (similar to that 80s line ‘lead, follow or get out of the way’). The podium is a powerful place. You’ll find that, after you have spoken a few times, you’ll begin to enjoy the attention and the power. Applause is exhilarating. It’s an experience worth having.

WHAT DO THEY WANT?

All that the audience wants is information presented in a clear, hopefully entertaining manner. The audience is on your side. They are stuck in that room with you for the half hour of your presentation. Your job is to give them a half hour that does not look like the scenario described earlier. An organized talk, to clear voice (showing personal interest), visual aids that work, and a little insight – that’s not too much to ask.

FEARS

Have you heard this story, probably anecdotal, about people’s fear of public speaking? A survey was taken of the top ten things that scare people the most. The survey results showed that people listed five ways of dying at the top of their list: boiling in oil, falling from a building, being run over by a train, and the like. Number six on the list was public speaking. Below public speaking were three or four other ways of dying.

So the fear of public speaking is universal. Even dental work is listed as less fearsome. We’re all afraid of making fools of ourselves by freezing up in front of an audience of 500 people. Can we guard against this and make an effective presentation? Can we learn to relax in front of crowd? Is being relaxed even important?

CREATIVE TENSION

Surprise! Not even a good speaker should relax when giving a presentation. Giving a presentation is a lot of work. It’s also theatrical and carries a very heavy dose of what actors call “creative tension.” It’s a milder version of the natural ‘fight or flight’ syndrome natural to animals. It can involve sweaty palms, a fast beating heart, flushed cheeks, a dry mouth, a churning stomach and a need for the bathroom. It’s our job to prepare for our talk and practice enough so that the fight or flight syndrome is toned down to the controlled level of creative tension. If we want to provide our audience with our optimum controlled presentation, some creative tension must be present.

Hey! As the kids say, “lighten up.” This is not a matter of life or death. Remember, the audience is on your side. They are stuck in that room with you. They want you to do well.

The fear of public speaking probably comes from some event in our childhood that we have completely forgotten. It may have occurred in elementary school when the teacher asked us to stand up in front of the class and talk about a subject we didn’t know or didn’t prepare for. That white sheet of fear appeared before our eyes. We couldn’t think of any word to say. “Fight or flight” was in full bloom in our ten-year-old body. From a Pavlovian standpoint, that is an all too memorable lesson on why we shouldn’t want to be in front of an audience.

You see, what we didn’t know at that time was even that audience was on our side. Nobody wants a presenter in front of them fumbling and mumbling. Oh, maybe Greg Hodel, the sadistic class clown enjoyed it, but the rest of the students were nervous for us and felt bad for us. Audiences want you to “win.” Seeing you struggle makes them nervous, too. They all want to see a good presentation. The title of your talk is what drew them and the presentation of the material is what satisfy them. So, if they are not out to get us, what are we afraid of?

CONQUER YOURSELF – BE COURAGEOUS

We are afraid that this bad talk could “cost me my career.” We build irrational fears and fantasize on all the horrible outcomes. We see ourselves standing frozen in front of the audience in a flashback to third grade. Suddenly we don’t need our tongue anymore – we need our feet and wish we can run. Cut that out! All you have to do to give a presentation is to know your material, organize it and stand up and do it.

BE PREPARED

Being prepared is the key. Speakers are made, not born. Preparation and practice are what makes a speaker. Worrying is not preparing. Fantasizing is not practicing. Visualizing where you will be and what you will say is at least a start. Choose your main theme or topic carefully. It like “Curly” the character Jack Palance played in *City Slickers*. He looks Billy Crystal in the eye and says that the secret of life is “one thing.” Curly adds that the one thing is for you to find out. You have “one thing” that you want to tell your audience. Make sure you tell them. Obviously, if it’s a technical presentation, you know exactly what you want to tell them. Just do it!

It must be a subject that you know. To give a speech on the hole of a donut, you must know the whole donut. You don’t have to know more than everybody else, but you do have to know more than just what you’re talking about. Then you have an opportunity to put it into perspective for your audience in a way they’ve probably never thought of before. Those new revelations are the joys of listening for an audience.

LOOKING AND LISTENING

People only listen about 25 percent of the time. In our busy society, with radios and TV and lots of social interaction, the great lost American art is listening. So don't worry if they appear to be hanging on every single word. Don't worry if the guy in the third row appears to be falling a sleep. Maybe he had a tough day. You have a much better chance of keeping them awake if look them in the eye. Keep an eye on your audience so that if they decide to come at you, at least you can beat them to the door. Seriously, keep an eye on them because that shows them that you are interested.

DON'T READ!

Your audience will go into never-never-land if you read to them. Reduce your thoughts to a series of notes that give you direction in your presentation. Sometimes you may need to write down the "connectors" between those notes, but usually you'll remember those if you've practiced your presentation. Interestingly, Tom Peters, the author of *In Search of Excellence* doesn't even think the connectors are all that crucial. He thinks that a good speech is really just a series of stories. The real art of a good speech is story-telling. The trick is always to be able to come back to the topic and contribute some thought to it. What story telling does is create word pictures and word situations that will stick in your audience's mind. That's what keeps them interested. The best way to create word pictures is to use the active voices: "we investigated" not "it was investigated by us." Be specific, not vague. Specifics make word pictures come alive. Whether it's animal, vegetable or mineral stones, you've got 'em.

LOTS OF "AT BATS"

Tom Peters also feels that to give a good speech, you have to have lots of "at bats." Pete Rose broke Ty Cobb's record because he had so many at bats that he finally exceeded Cobb's hits. How do you give a good speech? Have lots of at bats. Tom Peters says that every speech is an experiment and you have no right to think that every experiment will work out perfectly. So, have lots of experiments and you'll give lots of good speeches. You can also learn to look relaxed by giving enough presentations. You begin to get the feeling you're in control of the situation. You may still have butterflies in your stomach but at least they'll be flying in formation.

FORGIVE YOURSELF

If the speech isn't perfect, forgive yourself. You probably got your basic points across if you prepared adequately. Your audience almost never know what you left out. Not every speech needs to be perfect to carry the day. All the audience needs to know is that you're on

their side, too. All they want is for you to try to get your point through to them, effectively. If you care, they care.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

That's right. Three practices, or maybe a few more if you're a little nervous, should do it. After preparing your notes, review them quietly to be sure you have the thoughts in order. Talk through your notes at least twice more. If the presentation is in the morning, make sure to go through the notes the night before and then in the morning just before the speech. If the presentation is in the afternoon, also look at the notes later in the day just before your talk.

Should you rehearse in front of a mirror? Absolutely not! It's an unnatural way to talk and it creates self-consciousness, which isn't helpful. It's much better to imagine an audience and present to them. What about an audio or video tape? An audio tape can be helpful if you want to hear your flow, your inflections, your pace, but that's up to you. Video is a little like a mirror, unless you used to it. How about doing the presentation in front of a colleague or your spouse? Sure, it gives you an opportunity to go through the sequence before an audience and makes you focus more than you would if you were sitting alone with your notes.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

It is a good idea to know your audience but it isn't always essential. Technical presentations are given to technical audiences and we all have some feel for that. If humor isn't your style, don't use humor. Set jokes can be awkward speech material. Try to make positive statements in your presentation. Ask questions, they make the thoughts more provocative. Avoid cliches. ("unaccustomed as I am to the public speaking") – "nuff" said. If you're speaking to non-technical people, cut the "big numbers" technical stuff. Stick to the basic concepts and make them understandable.

TIMING

If you are speaking in a set time-frame, end on time. Have a watch in front of you to make sure you stay on schedule. When you rehearse, check your timing but remember you'll probably talk faster in the actual presentation. If you are supposed to leave time for questions, do it.

LOOK NATURAL, ACT NATURAL

For goodness sakes, don't forget to smile. It doesn't have to be a huge, toothy grin – just smile once in awhile so that your audience knows you're not in pain. They want to think you're at ease, too. Pause when you speak, it gives people an opportunity to think about what you said and it gives you a chance to breathe. If you get yourself in some twisted position behind the podium, you're going to look uncomfortable and you'll make your audience feel uncomfortable, too. If you want to walk around the room, make sure you've got a microphone

on and that the cord is long enough so you don't strangle yourself. Wear comfortable clothing that is appropriate to the occasion. The best kind of presentation is one that looks like you're having a conversation with your audience.

When Tom Peters noted that each speech is an experiment, he also said that it is a work in progress and that the goal of an experiment is to learn something interesting. The greatest feeling in the world is when someone says to you, "I remember five years ago, you said in a speech...."

CIRCULAR LOGIC THAT WORKS

You only get good at what you practice. You practice things you like. You tend to like those things for which you get applause or approval. In short, if you practice speaking, you'll get better. You may even learn to enjoy giving presentations!

YOUR VISUAL AIDS

Even if you are not an accomplished speaker, your visual aids can make you look like you get paid \$50,000 a speech. The corollary is that poor visuals can make even the good speakers look like fools. Here are key criteria for preparing effective visuals:

- Color selection
- Amount of information on visual
- Figures or pictures rather than text
- Simplicity
- Logos

As we get settled in our seats, the speaker is introduced and gives her preliminary comments. The lights dim and Wham!! We are hit with the first of 27 text slides that are prepared in fluorescent orange on a yellow background. **GIVE US A BREAK.** One wonders if speakers are sometimes color blind. Often the color selection is not even considered when making a presentation. The typical scenario is for the speaker to hand-write the text for the visual and then not see the finished product until the day before presentation. Then it's too late to change. There are dozens of color combinations that work. There are hundreds that don't. Pick one that does. If you aren't an expert, play it safe with a medium or dark blue background with white or yellow text. Display colored data on white grids.

Why are engineers compelled to cram an entire 22 page paper onto visuals to be presented in 20 minutes? The results are visuals with ten lines, ten words each. They even use complete sentences then read them to you. If you have any hope of keeping the attention of your audience, limit lines to six words, preferably four or less. Limit total number of lines per visual to six. Your visuals need only provide enough information to outline the presentation. The more information that is provided, the greater the tendency is for the speaker to read.

You'll not only bore your audience if you read, but you'll also embarrass yourself if you lose your place when you happen to look away. Audiences can only take about four or five of these busy visuals before they start to fidget. The result is talking, paper shuffling, "walkouts," coughing and other noise and distractions that compete with the speaker. If you use this "busy visual" style in a presentation for a prospective client, they won't wait until the end of your presentation to start asking questions. The interruptions will disrupt your control and momentum. These interruptions could lead to lengthy diversions that will prevent you from presenting all of your material.

A picture is worth a thousand words. If you can make a point with a picture or figure, use it rather than a text or a table.

Your presentation is an attempt to get two to four points across to the audience. They won't remember all that raw data and construction drawings that you're just presented. You've been to presentations where there were so many data points, tables and figures that you somehow missed the main point of the talk. Most speakers add to our confusion by overloading us with information. Use simple and uncluttered visuals.

If you are a consultant, put a lid on the logos! You and your firm will get enough notoriety from having your name in the program, in the introduction and on the title slide. Must you also put the company logo on every slide? We can only hope that someday someone will ban forever this silly practice. Until then, let's keep the presentation on a professional basis and minimize the propaganda.

Finally, don't forget visual humor. If you are not a good story teller, you can use your visuals to do it for you. Cartoons, funny quotations, silly pictures and yes, even a slide of your recent vacation to Hawaii can drive home a point. If you can leave your audience smiling, your presentation was successful.

This discussion is slanted toward the use of slides, which are the most common visual aids used at conference presentations. However, overheads are occasionally used and all of the above ideas apply. Two common mistakes can destroy your credibility when using overheads – handwritten or typed text. Both are hard to read and imply a rushed preparation to the audience. Try to use computer-generated bold lettering and, whenever possible, colors.

Don't forget to practice with your visuals until you are familiar with their flow.

SUMMARY

A major weakness of many presentations is a failure to summarize. A great deal of information is presented in the talk. If you are trying to convey two to four main thoughts or themes in the talk, don't blow it by leaving the audience dangling. Hit them over the head with the velvet sledgehammer – a good summary. Speaking of which....

To summarize, your audience wants information in a clear and entertaining manner.

- A well-organized presentation
- Enthusiasm
- Visual aids that work
- A little insight
- A conclusion
- A summary

Your fear of public speaking will be greatly reduced if you stop to think that you probably know more about the subject than 99 percent of your audience. Remember, you are the expert.

References:

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