

Speaker Secrets



By Peter de Jager

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Despite the opinion of many, giving a presentation isn't a death sentence. To call it an enjoyable experience might be going a bit too far for some, but regardless, the ability to give a good presentation is a necessary management skill. The most effective way to communicate a message to the organization, perhaps even motivate them to action, is through the art of speaking.

Yet most people, even managers, will pass on an opportunity to present. If they do grudgingly accept the responsibility, they fail to take advantage of what the stage has to offer.

The truth of the matter is that 'speaking' is somehow perceived as being something difficult and very different from our day to day activities, when in reality all of us are already consummate speakers. To see proof of this, watch people talking as they share a meal together. They are animated, the conversation ebbs and flows with a natural rhythm, nobody is reading from a script, and there is a casual humor, even when they aren't telling jokes.

Speaking from the stage is exactly like speaking at a dinner table... with one exception; you seldom get interrupted. I've spoken for a living for a quarter of a century, here are some things I've learned that make up the core of this craft we call "speaking".

Be yourself.

This is perhaps the most difficult thing for a non-speaker to accept. Most people who take the stage have a mental image of a speaker they admire, and try to emulate that person. That's the biggest mistake we can make. We're not that person, and even if we manage to do the impossible and perfectly impersonate that person, it'll still be nothing more than an impersonation.

Here's the trick... just be yourself on stage, just more so. Think back to that dinner conversation and do the same thing without food in front of you. It's not impossible, we do it every time we're with our friends, and it's just a matter of doing it on stage. Be yourself.

Accept your role as the expert.

There're two aspects to this, the first is we must know what we're going to talk about. Taking the stage without knowing our topic inside out is tantamount to a death wish.

The second aspect is more subtle and frankly unknown to most who take the stage. The audience assumes from the start that you are the expert and they want you to succeed. The assumption of expertise comes from their respect of the stage. Their reasoning is, that out of all the people who could have been selected to speak to them, you were chosen. If we know our material, if we speak coherently and with confidence, then we can't fail.

Communication is a two way street.

Contrary to popular belief, a good presentation isn't a prewritten script; it is a conversation between the speaker and the audience. The speaker is the one voicing the words, but the audience is also 'speaking' via their body language in the form of laughter, grimaces, smiles, nods and shakes of their head, shifting in their chairs, side long glances, note taking etc. etc. A good speaker is listening far more than they're speaking. A good speaker responds to the audience, is led by the audience and is guided by the audience.

All of this "listening to the audience" might sound like an esoteric skill, but it is something we use every day of our lives. All a speaker does is pay attention to this natural ability, using it to shape their presentation.

Keep it simple.

What is the one idea you need to communicate in your presentation? What are the 3-4 points you need to assist you to communicate that single idea? What are the handful of important facts you need to build your case? How will you start your talk? What's in the middle? How will you close and summarize? In twenty words or less, what do you want your audience to do differently, or understand differently after your presentation?

Answer those relatively simple questions, and then think about them for a day, and you'll be ready to sketch an outline for a 60-90 minute presentation. One of the most common novice mistakes is to include far too many messages in a presentation. A good presentation communicates a single idea, forcefully, in a manner that the audience cannot forget. If you need an example, then reread Martin Luther King's speech, "I Have a Dream"

Use stories.

"A picture is worth a thousand words" is a commonly known epigram, but when it comes to the art of speaking there's a better one, "The tongue can paint pictures more quickly and more vividly than any painter's brush". There is no better way to communicate an idea than by wrapping it inside a story, especially a story containing humor. Think of stories as a courier service, they'll keep on delivering your message long after you've left the stage.

Put visuals in their place.

If you need to communicate lots of raw data as a part of your presentation then make sure that the details are in the handouts, don't attempt to communicate finicky details from the stage. IF you must, and we sometimes do, then by all means use visuals to represent the data, but keep this to a bare minimum. Hard facts are best delivered to the audience via

the handout, not the presentation itself.

Speaking is something we all do each and every day, giving a presentation is exactly the same, except we have time to prepare and we seldom get interrupted. Enjoy and take advantage of the experience.

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