

## **What Is the Meaning of Life and Why Are Presentations Boring?**

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On 20th January 2008, the memory of Martin Luther King jr, the civil rights leader, was honoured at a church in Harlem. The event has earned its place in history not due to the speaker or his speech, but to one of the guests – Bill Clinton. I always advise my BE students who attempt to brush up on presentation skills to watch the clip (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DaDN5LM1t7Q>) and concentrate their attention on the former US president. His body language displays a collection of classic telltale signs indicating that the presenter has lost their audience: looking down, staring into space, fidgeting, sighing, touching his face, glancing at his watch, and finally catnapping. Apart from the highly entertaining aspect – VIP caught gaffing on camera – the footage offers insight into one of the biggest mysteries of our universe: why presentations are boring.

To answer this question, we should first ascertain the success factors of a presentation. According to a survey taken on business executives (LaPedus, 2005), 51% of the respondents went for an enthusiastic and animated presenter and 36% for an interesting and interactive delivery. So it's the speakers' personality and the way they convey their story to the audience that make or break a presentation. Conversely, it's the presenters' lack of enthusiasm and persuasion power, and daze-inducing PowerPoint tools like bullet points and text-heavy slides that get people to snooze during presentations. An acclaimed communications expert (Denning, 2005) has split presenters into two categories, according to their managerial style: controlling and interactive.

Controlling speaker give-aways are well-rehearsed dog and pony shows, and main focus on the performance, which is delivered in the shape of an abstract lecture. The audience feels excluded and responds with a Clinton-type reaction. You recognise an interactive speaker by the wide variety of rhetoric techniques employed and the presentation organised around the audience, the performance being continuously fine-tuned to their reactions.

In these uncertain times, business people feel the urge to boost their communication skills, since making an excellent first impression, persuading and selling have become a matter of survival in today's business arena. Whenever your BE students ask for advice on how to pep up their presentation skills, the answer should come promptly: "It's interactivity, stupid!" An interactive presentation or workshop signposts the audience's existing knowledge, guides their mental processing, and energises presenter and participants alike. Other imminent side effects are that it makes reaching a deeper level of conceptual understanding possible, it provides on-the-spot feedback, and it builds an emotional bridge between audience and speaker.

In order to involve the public, a presentation needs an exciting beginning, a compelling delivery and a memorable ending.

### *An exciting beginning*

A presenter mustn't be afraid to throw the audience in at the deep end right from the start. It may take people aback at first, but most of them are always in for a refreshing and challenging experience. To give them a kick-start, hit them with a pre-workshop task. If it's a whole day event, use the breaks for a double-faceted activity, simultaneously appealing to both the cognitive and the emotional sides of the audience. To prevent the participants who know each from clustering together and excluding the newcomers, as people trickle in, distribute colour question cards together with the badge and the programme. During the breaks, participants group according to the colour on their card and start discussing the questions, which should be related to the topic of the presentation. Their task can be to find a solution to a challenge, gather information on a certain subject, brainstorm ideas, come up with suggestions, etc. Each group is supposed to present their findings at the end of the presentation. To make it more exciting, promise a prize to the team that provides the most original answer. So, instead of having to drag an exhausted or – even worse – bored audience into the Q&A phase of the presentation, the event is going to end on a high note, with everyone eager to make their voice heard.

After the introduction, play a chill-out tune and help the audience visualise and articulate their goals. Ask them to sit straight, close their eyes and take a few deep breaths. Then invite them to picture themselves at the end of the presentation. What is the question they hope this presentation will answer? What do they want to take back with them? And, if they got that, what would it do for them? When they're ready to come back to the room, ask them to discuss their imaginary journey in small teams and compare results. After a few minutes, one representative of each team reports the findings back to the whole group. This will give the speaker a clearer idea as to what the audience's expectations are.

### *A compelling delivery*

Take an intelligence-fair approach and don't cater only for logical-mathematical and verbal-linguistic intelligences through well organised bullet points and text. Honour the other six intelligences too: visual through images, pictures, mind maps, colour-coded info; intrapersonal through visualisation and reflection; interpersonal through storytelling, personal anecdotes and rapport building; kinaesthetic through movement; naturalist through patterns from nature, and comparing and contrasting; and musical through rhythm and sound.

Apply learner-styles theory, taking into account all representational systems – visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory. By acknowledging that people perceive the world through the five senses and have preferred representational systems, it becomes clear why they react differently to the same situation. Listen to the participants and pick

up all verbal and non-verbal signals from their discourse – tone, rate of speech, motivation, metaphors. This will enable you to speak the same language as the audience. Multi-sensory metaphors (e.g., *a picture is worth a thousand words, sing from the same hymn-sheet, put the pedal to the metal, smell a rat, the proof of the pudding is in the eating*) guarantee successful communication with all learner types.

Manage the audience's attention span and keep them on their toes through regular mental fitness exercises meant to help the brain cope with information overload and to contribute to organising knowledge and remembering information. For example, interrupt the presentation when the participants least expect it and ask teams to identify the most surprising or controversial idea presented so far, or to demonstrate their understanding by coming up with an application example or presenting an action plan. To humanise communication, allow time for ad-hoc storytelling sessions, where participants are encouraged to share experiences, opinions, ideas. A mindful presenter will be able to fine-tune the presentation to be in sync with the audience's mood and feelings. Moreover, when members of the audience are given the opportunity to weave their own stories into the presentation, it cannot fail, because – once they put their emotional print on it – it has become theirs.

### *A memorable ending*

The presenter's task is to make the audience laugh and, when their mouths are open, to give them something on which to chew. For a memorable ending, I'd recommend corporate stories and funny quotes. Here are a few of my all-time faves:

On managers: A crow was sitting on a tree, doing nothing all day. A small rabbit saw the crow and asked him, "Can I also sit like you and do nothing all day long?" The crow answered: "Sure, why not." So, the rabbit sat on the ground below the crow, and rested. All of a sudden, a fox appeared, jumped on the rabbit and ate it. Moral of the story: To be sitting and doing nothing you must be sitting very, very high up.

On negotiating skills: A saleswoman is driving home in the rain when she sees an old lady walking by the roadside, heavily laden with shopping. Being a kind soul, the saleswoman stops the car and invites the old lady to climb in. During their small talk, the old lady glances surreptitiously at a brown paper bag on the front seat between them. "If you're wondering what's in the bag," offers the saleswoman, "it's a bottle of wine. I got it for my husband." The old lady is silent for a while, nods several times and says, "Good trade!"

One-liners on presentations:

The mind is a wonderful thing. It starts working the minute you're born and never stops until you get up to speak in public.

The worst human fears are: dying and speaking in front of a group of people.

A good presentation is like a miniskirt: short enough to be interesting, long enough to cover the essentials.

The secret of a successful presentation is to deliver a message that appeals to people's brain and heart alike. Before the dawn of the emotional intelligence theory, a mere hint to anything else but facts and figures would have made business people cringe. There still are some – of a rather dinosaurian nature – who proudly admit to deleting without opening any email message containing the word *emotion* in the subject line. However, there is no such thing as a purely rational human activity; it's our emotions that we rely on too when we take decisions, learn, memorise, plan, make forecasts, interact with people. The art of giving an effective presentation involves blending the hard and soft aspects of business - hard is about data, soft is about emotions. The limbic system in our brain is an emotional filing system, responsible for decision making, filtering information and responding to both imaginary and real experiences. (Tinnish, 2005) This capacity allows the presenter to conjure up the audience's emotional experience to persuade, inspire or motivate them. And interactivity seals this exchange between the speaker and the audience through the emergence of a strong sense of affinity.

## References

Denning, S., 2005, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling. Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

LaPedus, M., 2005, *Survey: Business Presentations Are Boring*, at <http://www.eetimes.com/news/latest/showArticle.jhtml?sssdmh=dm4.156828&articleID=172901995>

Tinnish, S., 2005, *Emotionally Attached Meetings*, at <http://suetinnish.com/Emotional%20Meetings%2006.05.pdf>

An illustrated version of the corporate story on management to be found at <http://www.slideshare.net/targetseo/corporate-lesson-pictorial-moral-stories-iim/>