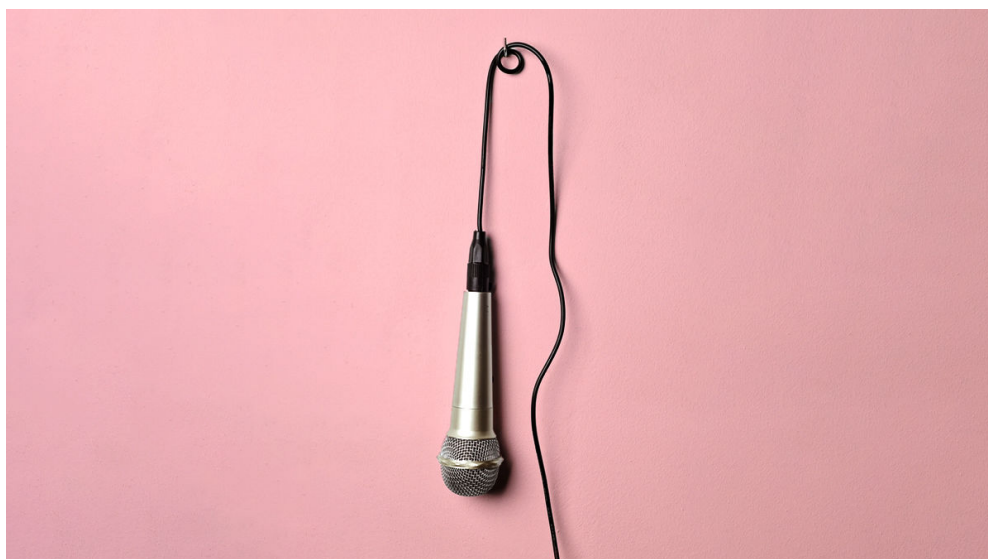




Presentation Skills



Nail Your Presentation — Even When Your Time Is Cut Short

Three strategies every presenter should keep in their back pocket.
by Deborah Grayson Riegel

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Juan Moyano/Stocksy

As a professional speaker for three decades, I've had to deal with my fair share of surprises that could have completely derailed my presentation. Like what?

Like speaking during two separate blackouts without lights, AV, or functional toilets. Like facilitating a two-day training session where, in the middle of the first day, all participants got an email letting them

know that layoffs were imminent. Like presenting in a glass-enclosed conference room inside the Congo exhibit at the Bronx Zoo, where a gorilla pounded the windows every time I advanced a slide. (I turned off the projector pretty quickly and proceeded anyway.)

One of the most common unpleasant surprises that you've likely faced as a public speaker is getting your time cut short. You go into the meeting with a plan for what you're going to cover based on the allotted time you've been given. And then, the technology doesn't work until 15 minutes into the meeting. Or the decision-maker shows up late, and you've waited to start until they arrive. Or someone (and maybe everyone) in the group runs a few minutes over, and by the time it's your turn, those few minutes have compounded and you're left rushing to finish.

This can be a lose-lose for both the participants and the presenters.

First of all, the participants are likely to experience an uneven distribution of content if the first speakers in a group get to take their time but later speakers have their messages truncated. Second, participants may miss the opportunity to ask questions, clarify understanding, and participate in a discussion if a presentation is shortened or accelerated. Participants are also less likely to understand what the speaker is saying if they're speaking quickly to finish before their time is up.

Presenters don't have it much better. They're likely to feel pressured for time and frustrated with the situation (or their team members), which doesn't lend itself to an engaging presentation style. They may miss out on delivering information that's important to the audience in favor of sharing what they really would prefer to talk about. And if they haven't

practiced a shorter version of what they're planning to say, they may sound unprepared, nervous, and disjointed.

One way to manage this dynamic in advance is to require everyone to practice their section of the presentation with a timer, and cut down their own presentations to meet their allotted time. This can help prevent the inevitable “time creep” in a group setting. A second step in managing this is to make sure that the host or chair doesn't over-program the meeting. They should ensure that the event has enough slack to allow for questions, comments, tangents, and even a glitch or two. Third, whoever is running the meeting should be skilled in managing questions, comments, and tangents against the time allotted for the meeting.

And another way to deal with all of this is to make sure that everyone participating has a Plan B that they are willing and able to adapt to ASAP. Here are three Plan B's that every speaker needs in case time gets cut short:

1. Come prepared with two versions of your presentation.

Come with the full version of the presentation you planned, and a version that's 50% of what you've planned. Make sure that you have practiced delivering both (just having a shorter deck won't prepare you to deliver an effective, shorter presentation). As soon as you start to realize that you're not going to have your full allotted time, revert to your shorter version. You might need to make some quick decisions about whether you still need to cut some content. And plan to let your listeners know that you'll provide additional context or content in writing after the meeting. Take the advice of English writer Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who coined the phrase “murder your darlings”, which means being willing to cut content you care about objectively, and without sentimentality.

2. Just hit the headlines.

This means that you have to build your presentation headlines instead of headers. What's the difference between a header and a headline? A header is a neutral catch-all for what you're going to talk about in the slide whereas a headline provides the story of the slide right up top. It lets both the speaker and the audience know the bottom line first.

Compare these:

Slide header: "2023 Economic Outlook"

Slide headline: "2023 Economic Outlook Looks Optimistic"

Slide header: "Q2 Sales"

Slide headline: "Q2 Sales Bounce Back after Disappointing Q1"

Slide header: "Next Steps"

Slide headline: "Next Steps: Hiring, Onboarding, and Training"

When you have a limited amount of time to present your findings, you can deliver an effective (albeit brief) narrative by just covering the headlines of your deck even if you don't get to explain the details of each slide.

3. Don't apologize, don't throw your colleagues under the bus, and don't sulk.

Behave as if this is exactly the version you'd always planned to present. (It is highly likely that your audience won't know unless you tell them.) As much as you might be tempted to say something like, "If only our tech team had been prepared this morning..." or "Since my colleagues went overtime...", don't do it. Stay professional and be collaborative. All of those conversations can happen *after* the meeting — not during.

Finally, do some [emotional management](#) so that you don't come across to your audience as angry, frustrated, resentful, or resigned. Emotions are contagious, and negative emotions are especially so. Unless you want your audience to feel the tension you feel, take a deep breath or two, and lean into your current reality of how it is rather than how you wished it could be.

Being an excellent public speaker requires planning as well as flexibility and resilience. Just because you don't have as much time as you'd planned doesn't mean you can't have as much impact as you intended.

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