



Communication



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by Sarah Gershman

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I recently worked with a newly minted CEO who, faced with an upcoming presentation, worried about his “lack of charisma.” He was an engineer by training and an introvert who felt uncomfortable speaking in front of groups. One of the reasons he was chosen for his position was that he was considered a masterful listener. So we practiced bringing listening into his speaking. Soon he realized that his greatest strength as a speaker was not his ability to charm his audience, but his ability to pay attention to their needs. Employees walked away from his

presentations motivated and “feeling understood.” This CEO may have lacked charisma, but he had a far more valuable skill: presence.

My clients, particularly those in more technical fields, often suffer from the same self doubt this CEO expressed — that they can never be great speakers because they lack charisma. Who would listen to their “dry” presentation or remember what they say? How wrong they are! What they need instead is presence. Presence is within reach of any speaker, especially those in highly technical, “dry” fields.

For starters, it is critical to understand that charisma and presence are different. Charisma involves radiating a certain magnetism, in which others are drawn to you. Politicians tend to exude it, as do actors. This is the “lighting up the room” factor. As a speaker, we often yearn to be charismatic. We want people to be drawn to us and like us, but here’s the catch — your job as a speaker is not to get the audience to like you, but rather to get your message across. In fact, if the audience is too focused on you, they may actually miss your point.

Here’s why. According to numerous studies, emotion is a basic currency for remembering content. A listener must connect emotionally to what they hear in order to remember what the speaker says. Simply, we remember most vividly the events in our lives in which we were most emotionally impacted.

Charisma actually can douse our emotional response. According to a powerful study by Jochen Menges, a researcher and professor at Cambridge’s Judge Business School in the UK, a charismatic speaker will draw all the attention and can subsequently “suppress” the listeners’ own emotional reactions. As a result, the audience will be less likely to recall a charismatic speaker’s presentation. They might

remember that they liked the speaker, but they will likely not recall what they said.

How many times have you listened to a captivating speaker and then were not able to remember the key takeaways?

This is where presence comes in. There are many definitions of presence out there. I would like to offer a literal one:

Presence is simply the ability to be fully present with the people in the room and the message you are delivering to them.

Presence is essentially the inverse of charisma. While charisma is focused on the speaker, presence is focused on the audience. Presence is about giving something valuable to the audience, not giving them a charmed experience of yourself.

That was the genius of my CEO client — by focusing on what his audience needed to hear, on what concerns, anxieties, or questions they brought into the room, not on trying to show his smarts — he helped solve their problems and made them feel connected to him.

As presentation guru [Nancy Duarte](#) writes, “You may well be the smartest person in the room where you’re giving your presentation, but you must wield the power that knowledge gives you wisely and humbly. You should never view a presentation as a chance to show how brilliant you are. You want the audience to leave thinking, “Wow, spending time in that presentation with (your name goes here) was a true gift. I’m armed with insights and tools to help me succeed that I didn’t have before.”

Your presence is critical to your being able to deliver valuable and relevant content.

Ironically, a perspective of presence — that one is “giving a gift” to the audience — helps the speaker as much as it does the listener. Presence enables the speaker to get out of their own head and connect directly to the people in the room. Speakers who are able to be fully present with their audience are less nervous and more effective.

What does presence look like?

For starters, the speaker’s attention is focused outward. Rather than thinking about how one is being received, the speaker is focused on whether the audience understands the message.

The speaker is actively thinking about their words as they speak. This is the opposite of robotic memorizing, which inhibits presence. Even when the speaker reads from a script, they are thinking about their words as they read them.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Often, when one is about to speak, the anxious mind naturally pulls the speaker away from the present moment. My clients tell me that when they are trying to be present, their mind is stuck in the past — remembering a previous presentation that went awry or the preparation they neglected to do. Or their mind is focused on the future — on the reaction of the audience and the implications of their inevitable failure.

How can you cultivate presence in order to be able to be fully present with the people in the room? Here are some ways to start.

1. Prepare with presence. From the moment you begin to prepare, focus on who will be in the room and on what they need from you. If you build your presentation around the needs of your audience, it will be easier to be present with them when it is time to speak. Always ask who the audience will be!

2. Practice with presence. Each time you practice, aim to be even more focused on directing your message to an audience — even if that audience is imaginary. The moment you catch yourself going into autopilot, stop and restart the sentence.

3. Get your mind present. Right before you get up to speak, take a moment to jot down everything that is keeping you from being present and put the paper aside. When I do this with my clients, their list is long and includes negative prior speaking experiences, anxieties about lack of preparation, fears of the audience's reaction, upcoming meetings, and other distracting thoughts. Taking a moment to jot them down and putting the paper away helps to refocus the mind on the present task.

4. Get your body present. Right before you speak take 15 seconds to open your posture. Having an open, connected posture tells your brain it's time to be fully present with your audience. What does an open posture look like? If you're sitting, hands are in front of you, above the table. Your shoulders are back and relaxed. Your breathing is relaxed and you are looking at the people you will be talking to. When you shift to an open posture, you signal to your brain, "I am ready to be present with the audience" and you automatically feel less nervous.

5. Begin with presence. Before you speak, take a moment to breathe and look directly at your audience. Then begin with a "you" statement. e.g "each of *you* in this room..." or "I want to share a story with *you*

about the power of...” This immediately signals to your brain that you are focusing on the audience.

6. Speak with presence. As you speak, direct your energy towards the individuals in the room. Look at one person at a time. Focus on making sure each person listening fully understands your message.

Everyone can learn to cultivate presence — especially introverts. While many extroverts have excellent presence, introverts have a distinct advantage. Because introverts don’t demand as much energy *from* the audience, they are able to be more present *with* the audience. When my CEO client finally understood this, it was a game changer. He was finally able to stop worrying about his likeability and focus on what actually mattered — helping the audience.

You can be a masterful speaker *and* lack charisma. What you need instead of charisma is presence.



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