



Presentation Skills



How to Present to an Audience That Knows More Than You

Lean into being a facilitator — not an expert.

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

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I was five years into my executive coaching practice when I was invited to lead a workshop on “Coaching Skills for Human Resource Leaders” at a global conference. As the room filled up with participants, I identified a few colleagues who had already been coaching professionally for more than a decade. I felt self-doubt start to kick in: *Why were they even here? What did they come to learn? Why do they want to hear from me?*

I had expected the session to be attended by professionals who were seasoned in *their* field (human resources), but not in my specific zone of expertise (coaching). I was caught off guard. Wasn't I supposed to be the subject matter expert? What if they challenged my credibility or authority in front of my peers? What if I said something wrong and was publicly embarrassed? What if they simply walked out of the presentation because there was nothing of value for them?

And then I realized that I had a choice: I could be intimidated by these seasoned professionals' depth of knowledge and experience in the room — or I could leverage their deep and diverse expertise in service of the group's learning while managing my ego.

I picked the latter. The presentation allowed me to share my knowledge, as well as share the forum with those with greater experience. A more junior HR professional asked a question about when you might recommend that an employee you're coaching seek additional support from an EAP (employee assistance program). My response was, "This is an area where I am still learning. Would someone else in the room be able to share their experience and recommendations?" And indeed, someone did.

The presentation was engaging, well-received, and ultimately successful — probably because I wasn't the only expert in the room. In fact, I am still connected with many of those session participants more than a decade later.

I am no longer intimidated by presenting to audiences with deeper expertise or broader experience than I have. While it is still my job as a speaker to know my topic well, it's not my job to know everything — and it never was.

And it's not yours either.

In the best-case scenario, I would have known — OK, asked — in advance if there might be professionals with a range of experiences attending. (And you should do that, too.) But sometimes you'll be caught off guard and need to adapt on the fly.

3 Ways to Present More Credibly to Subject Matter Experts

Here are three ways that you can get more comfortable presenting credibly to professionals who might just know more than you on the topic you're talking about:

1. Choose self-affirmation over self-doubt.

As soon as I saw the coaches in the room who had deeper knowledge and experience than I did, I recognized that my identity was feeling threatened. I interpreted their presence as the “real experts” as diminishing my role, position, and assumed authority.

Research shows that we are wired to combat perceived threats to our identity, and we have a wide array of psychological adaptations that help us to protect our self-integrity in response to those threats. Many of those adaptations can interfere with our relationships and our ability to learn from those experiences.

I knew that if I let that threat permeate my brain, it would result in ruminating and catastrophizing — neither of which are the hallmarks of a confident, compelling speaker. So I chose to engage in some quick self-affirmation instead. Self-affirmation theory posits that we can respond to threats in one area of our work and life by affirming our self-worth in other domains, including our skills and values.

I told myself, “I may no longer be the subject matter expert in the room on this topic, but I am an expert facilitator. Using my listening skills and

engaging approach, I can create an environment where participants feel like this was a great learning experience.”

As soon as you realize that you are feeling a threat to your identity as the expert, think about a different domain in your work or life where you *are* the expert or have character traits and values that make you feel worthy and proud. You might not be the sole subject matter expert on this topic, but you are a thought leader on a different topic, and you are generous, compassionate, and creative.

(For the record, when all else fails, I remind myself that my rescue pit bull Nash loves me best.)

2. Be intellectually humble without undermining your credibility.

Let’s assume two things may happen in this situation: First, you may say something that is inaccurate, incomplete, or incorrect — and get called out for it. Second, you can be intellectually humble about getting something wrong without sacrificing your credibility.

In a [test of self-esteem](#), more than [4,700 participants](#) identified themselves as either willing or unwilling to admit making mistakes. Those who were reluctant to admit errors were more likely to:

- Believe that talking about their faults will make them vulnerable to rejection or mockery from others
- Feel “degraded” when someone points out their errors
- Believe they will lose other people’s respect if they admit they’ve made a mistake
- Consider themselves a failure
- Have a deep fear of rejection
- Point out other people’s mistakes in retaliation

If that sounds like you, then you may want to replace your fear of making a gaffe with intellectual humility. This includes having respect for other viewpoints, not being intellectually overconfident, separating your ego from your intellect, and being willing to revise your own viewpoint — especially in the face of new information.

This isn't easy. Studies show that we are less likely to exhibit intellectual humility when the stakes are high — like during a big presentation. However, the benefits of intellectual humility are associated with many factors that contribute to professional (and personal) credibility.

Like what? Like empathy, gratitude, better interpersonal relationships, higher emotional intelligence, higher satisfaction ratings from followers, well-informed decision making, and better knowledge acquisition. And your willingness to admit errors is positively correlated with being highly regarded, trusted, and exemplified.

Be prepared to say:

“I got that wrong. I will update my findings.”

“I didn't know that. Thank you for telling us.”

“That's new information to me. I appreciate it.”

“You've shared a perspective I hadn't considered.”

“I'd like to follow up with you afterward so that I can learn more.”

3. Acknowledge and invite their expertise and experience — without letting them take over.

When I started my workshop, I introduced myself and then announced that we were fortunate to have several seasoned coaches in the room

from whom we could all learn. I asked them to raise their hands so that the participants could see who they were, so that I knew who they were, and so that they felt seen and respected. It also set the tone that I was not planning to be the “sage on the stage” during this session; I intended to draw from others’ knowledge and experience.

You might say something like, “We have several people in this meeting who have been working in this field for many years/decades. I know we all can learn from them.” And then, if you anticipate they would want to be acknowledged, ask them to raise their hands.

During the presentation, you can include your colleagues by asking them to:

- Provide additional perspective (“That’s how I see it, and I’m curious if any of my seasoned colleagues have a different perspective. Thoughts?”)
- Share case studies and examples (“Here’s my experience. Would any of you who have been in the field for a while like to share your experience?”)
- Answer questions you can’t (“I don’t know the answer to that, but I imagine one of my colleagues might.”)

Nevertheless, while it can be beneficial to have seasoned professionals in your audience who can supplement (or complement) your knowledge, don’t forget who your presentation is geared toward. Your target audience’s expectations and goals shouldn’t be sacrificed just because you *can* elevate the level of the conversation in the room. My session was aimed at human resources professionals who were new to bringing coaching skills to their work. Even though some participants in the room might have been ready to discuss advanced coaching practices, it wasn’t the right fit for this group and this time.

I said, “While there are many coaching approaches that experienced practitioners use, we’re going to keep today’s conversation aligned with the original goal of teaching foundational coaching skills.”

You might say something like that to remind everyone who this session is for and what you’re planning to discuss. And if an expert decides to leave? Then they’ve made a strategic decision to do something else with their time. (It’s not personal.)

One caveat: If you discover that your audience is largely comprised of professionals with more knowledge and experience than you have, you might want to pivot in the moment. It’s possible that your original topic may still be useful — and it’s possible that it may not. Rather than sticking to an agenda that may not be relevant to these participants, you might say something like, “While I had planned to cover X [insert planned topic], I want to check to see if that’s still relevant to this group. Can I see a show of hands of those who still want to talk about X?” If you have the majority vote, stick with your plan while recognizing the diversity of experience in the room (and inviting others to contribute to the conversation). If you don’t, then offer or gather a few opinions on more advanced topics — and be transparent about your competency level. Say something like, “It looks like most people want to talk about Y instead. I am not an expert in Y, but I am happy to facilitate a conversation about it as long as you are willing to share your knowledge and experience.”

And then, pivot your role. You’re no longer the subject matter expert, but the expert facilitator — which can be a career-boosting move for you, too.

One last consideration: Your audience may know more than you *on this topic*, but they don’t know more than you about *everything*. Remember

that you have plenty of knowledge, experience, and expertise as well — and your time to shine will come.

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