



Presentations

Three Steps to Make Your Next Speech Your Best

by Nick Morgan

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Published on HBR.org / March 12, 2010 / Reprint [H004H3](#)



In my experience of over two decades of coaching executives in their public speaking, I rarely run across one who has both the time and the inclination to do what it takes to deliver a great speech. Most of them are satisfied with average, which is partly why there are so many bad speeches given. The bar is set very low, and most executives are content to clear the bar, just.

What's to be done about this sorry state of rhetorical affairs? Here, I offer three quick steps leaders can take right now to improve their next speech. The steps are conceptually sophisticated but relatively easy to implement, thus fitting the busy executive lifestyle and addressing the natural objections of time and inclination.

First, step out from behind the podium and choreograph your relationship to the audience.

Our unconscious minds constantly monitor four zones of space between us and other people. We've evolved this incredibly sophisticated, unconscious radar to keep us safe, and it has important implications for public speaking. Twelve feet or more is public space, and it is the coolest category. We're not very interested in anyone, in survival terms, who's more than twelve feet away from us. So we don't pay much attention.

Twelve feet to four feet is social space. Here, we're paying about as much attention as you do to someone standing in the next circle at a cocktail party. You note them, but you're OK to keep talking to someone else.

Four feet to a foot and a half is personal space, and now we're paying close attention. In fact, we want to keep our eyes on anyone in that space all the time. Again, it's a safety issue. That person is close enough to us to do us harm, so we're going to stay focused.

Finally, a foot and a half to zero is intimate space, and at this level we only are comfortable letting in people that we trust a good deal. Spouses, family members, close friends, the attractive person you just met at that party after downing seven beers — these are the people we let into intimate space.

What are the implications for public speaking? Standing behind a podium means that you're almost guaranteed to be more than twelve feet from everyone. That means that no one is very interested in you, at the unconscious level. So one of the easiest ways to up the ante on your performance is to warm up the connections between you and your audience by leaving the podium and entering into carefully chosen audience member's personal space.

Thanks to comfort monitors and hanging screens, you don't even have to leave your speech behind, but it does help to know the speech well, so that you don't forget what you're doing when you try to walk and talk at the same time.

Move toward your audience, and particular audience members, when you're making an important point, and away when you want to signal a break or a change of subject. This choreography is a simple, easy way to enormously improve the connection you make with your audience, without even raising your voice.

Second, listen to your audience.

This may sound a bit odd — isn't the audience supposed to listen to you? — but all successful communication is two-way, and listening to your audience is a great way to increase your charisma. It will get the folks in the seats basking in your attention.

So how do you listen to the audience? The best way is to put regular breaks into your speech — at least every twenty minutes, and preferably every ten — where you stop and take the audience's temperature. Ask if it has questions, ask for reactions, ask for it to relate its own experience relative to what you're talking about.

You can save Q and A until the end, but it's less effective. People forget questions they may have had ten minutes ago.

Now, here's the important part. When you ask the audience something, you must wait for a response. If you wait a nanosecond or two, because you're in adrenaline mode, and then decide that no one is going to speak up, and go on with your speech, you will be telling the audience never to respond. The speaker sets the rules.

And here's the other important part. When you do listen, listen with your whole body. That means stopping whatever you're doing physically, and turning your whole body to the questioner and holding still. That's surprisingly hard to do for busy speakers on the go, but it's essential if you're to reap the advantages of listening in charisma. Many speakers get the gist of the question half way through and start to move on before the questioner has finished. That's not charismatic. That's dismissive.

Finally, focus on your emotional intentions for approximately three minutes before important meetings and speeches.

Many executives mistakenly think that leadership means not being emotional. That's a big mistake. Think about successful, charismatic leaders, like Steve Jobs, or your favorite politician. People respond to them because of their passion for their subject, their cause, or their products. Charisma comes from the focus of powerful, contagious emotions — like joy, enthusiasm, anger — so spend a few minutes living that emotion as strongly as you can before you go out to speak or go into a meeting. If you practice this, you will show up with greatly enhanced charisma and energy, and people will be drawn to you.

How do you focus? Identify the emotion first, and then think of a time when you naturally experienced it. Recall that time as powerfully as you can, invoking each of the five senses, for several minutes just before your speech or meeting. What did the experience taste like? Smell like? Sound like? Feel like? Look like? Run through these sensory cues, put yourself back into the moment, and bring the emotion to life. Then go out and knock 'em dead.

Practice these three shortcuts to effective leadership communications and watch the bar go up — way up — on your performances.

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