



Book Say It Like Obama

The Power of Speaking with Purpose and Vision

Shel Leanne
McGraw-Hill, 2008

Recommendation

President Barack Obama's considerable ability to capture people's attention and move them to action is closely tied to his exceptional oratorical skills. But how exactly does he do it? Shel Leanne, president of a leadership development firm, dissects Obama's powerful speaking style and shows how it is integral to his entire leadership package. Using examples from Obama's speeches, she explains how you can improve your own communication and leadership capabilities. The book is practical and readable, although repetitive, and it would have been even more useful had the designer set off the speech excerpts more clearly from the rest of the text. *BooksInShort* considers this work essential for any aspiring speaker's library. Even if you never become president of the U.S., you will probably find yourself in front of a group of colleagues, employees or students whom you need to impress.

Take-Aways

- Observers have compared President Barack Obama's oratorical skills to those of Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan and John F. Kennedy, among others.
- Obama married his vision and goals to his speaking style to reach millions of people.
- He wins hearts and minds because he understands his audience's hopes and fears.
- Obama has demonstrated that he can communicate his vision of a better America.
- Nonverbally, through his smile, voice and body movements, Obama conveys enthusiasm and authority.
- He uses his experiences to show his emotional understanding of important issues.
- He moves people to action with inspirational language, patriotism and masterful rhetoric techniques.
- Props and the location where you deliver a speech send powerful messages.
- Build rapport with your audience by stressing shared values, aspirations and history.
- End your speech by invoking a sense of urgency and making a call to action.

Summary

Words That Resonate

Separating Barack Obama's leadership skills from his talent as one of the most accomplished speakers of the current era is difficult. Observers have compared Obama's oratorical skills to those of Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. His speaking style is charismatic, magnetic and energizing, and it enabled him to attract a wide following after his exceptional address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and to leap to the front of the 2008 Democratic presidential race.

Many qualities make Obama a particularly compelling orator. His messages are uplifting. He has great control over his baritone voice and uses different tones to express optimism, determination or anger. He understands symbols and rhetorical structures. In short, he has married his vision and goals to mastery of his delivery style, connecting with millions of people.

Obama's Speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention

When then-Senator Barack Obama delivered the keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, he faced the largest audience of his career to that point. After his friend, Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, introduced him, Obama used body language to create a strong impression. At different moments, he made a fist to mimic knocking on a door, held his palm up to indicate a stop sign and placed his hand over his heart to show his sincerity. His rising and falling voice emphasized his points or showed disapproval, giving the vivid speech an “emotional texture.” In his conclusion, he brought the audience to its feet by issuing a loud call to take action and elect Senator John Kerry president.

Since Obama has mixed race parentage and grew up with a single mother, he needed to bridge the gap between himself and more mainstream Americans. He accomplished this by showing how his family’s roles during World War II and the successful rebuilding of the U.S. afterward exemplified the American Dream. Although he has an African name, Obama assured the audience that he shared their goals and feelings by characterizing his country as “generous,” and as “a beacon of freedom and opportunity.”

“The ability to convey vision, inspire confidence, persuade and motivate others is key to effective leadership.”

Rhetorically, his speech relied heavily on repetition to drive home its themes. Referring to the 2004 Democratic presidential nominee, he said, “John Kerry believes” five times. He compared and contrasted ideas. He included enough detail to buttress his ideas, yet not so much that it detracted from his main goal of motivating his audience.

Charisma

Obama’s positions and charisma persuaded more than two million voters to contribute to his 2008 presidential campaign. When he was a candidate, 75,000 people came to hear him speak in a U.S. stadium and more than 200,000 at a gathering in Germany.

Charisma includes passion, energy, conviction and command. First impressions are lasting, and good speakers demonstrate their charisma from the moment they mount the podium. Before you ever say a word, your dress, actions and use of props influence how your audience will interpret your ideas.

Obama’s smile, voice and body movements convey his charisma. He creates an initial good impression with his distinctive, energetic walk and acknowledges the audience by waving and looking directly at them. He pats some people on the back to show his emotion at seeing them.

“In the absence of trust and confidence, nothing else follows.”

Your voice’s tone, along with its volume, texture, pitch and inflection, create an impression, which you can improve with lessons and practice. Obama uses pacing and pauses to emphasize his most important ideas. He uses silence to create drama.

Props send powerful messages. To look patriotic and presidential, Obama often surrounds himself with American flags – a tactic he used when he sought to defuse the controversy about his association with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Military personnel flank him when he makes foreign policy speeches.

Making Connections

Barack Obama generated momentum for his presidential bid by uniting disparate groups. He built bridges between people by citing well-known quotes from famous Americans and from the Bible, such as “Am I my brother’s keeper?” and “Let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream” – which Martin Luther King Jr. also liked to cite. He frequently explained his unusual name and multiracial background to reassure voters who had never met anyone like him.

To build rapport, Obama stresses the goals, values and history he shares with his audience. For example, when addressing a group of working women, Obama cited his mother’s similar experience and his grandmother’s help in raising him. He uses his background to demonstrate his credibility and emotional understanding. For example, he explained that he knows how disenfranchised black and Latino children feel, because he worked with them in Chicago as a community organizer. He uses first- and second-person pronouns, such as “I,” “we,” “us” and “you” to personalize his messages and show his involvement.

Obama demonstrates his knowledge of his audience’s hopes and fears to address controversial issues such as health care, education and the Iraq war. He chooses details that show audience members he recognizes the things that affect them. But he balances the need to present details and make a compelling argument with maintaining his momentum.

“If you aspire to be a highly effective leader, people must trust your judgment and ethics and have confidence in your leadership abilities, believing that you are worthy of authority.”

Obama does not number his main points. Doing so would break the emotional connection he seeks to establish. Instead, he structures his remarks by repeating introductory phrases, such as “We are up against...” to set off each idea.

Conveying a Vision

Many people have a vision, but leaders must communicate theirs. To do so, Obama reframes historical events in a contemporary context. To make history come to life, he uses the “backward loop,” explaining the lesson of a historical event and applying it to a current problem. The audience concludes that if people succeeded against great odds in the past, they can overcome current problems.

Unlike many business speakers, the U.S. president can rarely point to charts or graphs. Obama must use words to create pictures in the minds of his audience. Thus, he uses visual descriptions such as “wedge,” “lines of people” and “bludgeon.” He uses symbols and “corollary” words, which evoke other meanings. And, he makes his ideas tangible through “physicality,” or connecting ideas with physical attributes. For example, he explained one of his favorite abstractions by saying “Hope is what I saw in the eyes of a young woman.”

Repeating Over and Over

Use repetition to indicate to the audience which of your ideas are most important. Obama often uses parallel sentence and paragraph structures and these rhetorical techniques:

- **Conduplicatio** – Repeating a word or phrase from any place in a sentence toward the beginning of a following clause or sentence.
- **Anaphora** – Beginning each sentence the same way, such as, “What does he want? What does he hope for? What does he seek?” Martin Luther King Jr. famously used anaphora in his “I have a dream” speech.
- **Epistrophe** – Closing successive sentences with the same word or phrase.
- **Mesodiplosis** – Repeating words or phrases in the middle of successive clauses or sentences.

“Most people know charisma when they see it – that certain fire in the eyes, passion and command.”

Obama has used “asyndeton,” or eliminating conjunctions, to accelerate the pace of a speech, as well as its opposite, “polysyndeton,” or inserting conjunctions between every word or phrase, to build drama. “Triadic extension” is the use of words, phrases or paragraphs in threes to create an image or emphasize a point, for example, “It comes with little sleep, little pay and a lot of sacrifice.”

The Power of Persuasion

Leaders use persuasion to influence, encourage, guide and generate agreement. The best way to persuade people is to provide them with information that will lead them to the same conclusions that you made.

In addition to using rhetorical techniques, body language and voice tone, Obama’s speeches sequence and link ideas logically, demonstrate clear thinking and turn on a sharp argument. For example, in his 2004 Democratic convention keynote address, he said: “We have real enemies in the world. These enemies must be found. They must be pursued, and they must be defeated.” These parallel ideas conveyed his orderly thought process.

Obama both stresses his positive ideas, such as unity or change, and raises questions about his opponents’ grasp of the issues. He uses both “juxtaposition” and “antithesis.” In juxtaposition, you place opposing ideas side by side and compare their respective merits. In antithesis, you emphasize the differences between ideas.

“Persons seeking to present themselves as leaders should dress the part, act the part and gather the right props around them.”

In national controversies, Obama has advocated for the positions he favors by comparing them with the ones he rejects using the “idea-pivot-contrasting” structure. He first presents the contrasting ideas, then transitions into his preferred position using a strong transition sentence. This technique was especially effective in Obama’s debates with his presidential opponent, Senator John McCain.

Thriving on Controversy

All leaders have to face controversy. Obama’s responses to controversies have often been more important than the original events. He has successfully navigated controversies by facing them directly, acting humbly, taking responsibility and, when possible, resolving them expeditiously.

When you find yourself embroiled in a controversy, identify your goals. These should shape your response and affect everything from your body language, vocabulary and prop selection to when and where you offer an apology. When Obama has faced a tough issue, he appears gracious and humble. Since conflict causes people to question your integrity, you have to re-establish that to retake the high ground. Body language plays a large role, and Obama’s posture demonstrates neither defiance nor weakness. He maintains eye contact and restates his ethical standards.

Strong Impressions

Obama emerged as a leading candidate and eventually won the presidency because he moved people to take action. Ending his speeches on a strong note, he asked people to get involved in rebuilding the country. He did not hesitate to ask his listeners to make contributions and sacrifices for the greater good.

“It is best to get off to a strong start and avoid situations in which you must work hard to reverse the damage of a poor first impression.”

To close speeches memorably, create a sense of urgency and explain why people must act immediately. During the presidential race, Obama’s calls to reform health care, reduce global warming and end the Iraq war invigorated his followers.

The best closing remarks repeat the speech’s messages and slogans. Obama effectively used slogans in his campaign, including “Yes we can,” “Reclaim the American Dream” and “Our moment is now.”

He used all the rhetorical and speaking skill he could muster in his August 28, 2008, presidential nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Denver. Commentators immediately praised it as “the best since President Kennedy,” boosting Obama’s status as one of the most powerful orators in modern political history. **Words That Resonate** Separating Barack Obama’s leadership skills from his talent as one of the most accomplished speakers of the current era is difficult. Observers have compared Obama’s oratorical skills to those of Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King Jr., Ronald Reagan, John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy. His speaking style is charismatic, magnetic and energizing, and it enabled him to attract a wide following after his exceptional address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention and to leap to the front of the 2008 Democratic presidential race.

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“When a leader succeeds in conveying strong ethics and substantiates those ethics consistently through subsequent deeds, people begin to have great faith in [his or her] character and choices.”

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“Find ways to tap into the prevailing mood and speak meaningfully to [your audience] about the things they most care about.”

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“Details provide evidence of awareness and empathy.”

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“Persuasion plays a central role in enabling leaders to motivate and guide others to achieve designated goals.”

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uses visual descriptions such as “wedge,” “lines of people” and “bludgeon.” He uses symbols and “corollary” words, which evoke other meanings. And, he makes his ideas tangible through “physicality,” or connecting ideas with physical attributes. For example, he explained one of his favorite abstractions by saying “Hope is what I saw in the eyes of a young woman.”

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“When assessing what makes Barack Obama such a powerful orator, it is easy to observe that he avoids drab recitations.”

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“Barack Obama has demonstrated a notable ability to survive controversy and thrive in the aftermath.”

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About the Author

Shel Leanne is president of the Wisel Corporation, a leadership development firm. She has worked for McKinsey & Company and Morgan Stanley, and taught at Harvard University. She is the author of //How to Interview Like a Top MBA. //

