

The Seven Secrets of Successful Presentation

Martin Cochrane

'Working with Martin is extremely useful
helpful and enjoyable'
Sir Andrew Foster

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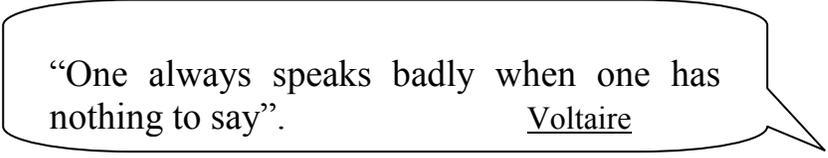
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INTRODUCTION

A recent survey revealed that although 50% of us think we are good communicators (and we almost all believe ourselves to be good listeners), our colleagues don't agree. Less than 25% of communication at work is experienced as enjoyable and, as communicators, both bosses and co-workers give each other the thumbs down. And although three quarters of British white-collar workers have at some stage been taught to write letters, only one in six has been trained in any kind of face-to-face communication.

Yet there is almost universal recognition of the importance of good communication at work. The ability to communicate well is probably **the** most important leadership skill. Good workplace communicators tend to reach, and hold, powerful positions. They are well thought of by clients and colleagues, and generally experience high levels of satisfaction in their working lives. To some, communication success has come easily; others have worked at it, gradually acquiring the necessary skills.

In exploring successful workplace communication, this booklet focuses on public presentation - that is, standing up to speak in front of a group of people. This area is chosen for two reasons: firstly, because people usually find it the most difficult; secondly, when someone improves their public presentation, the rest of their communications also show improvement. What works in front of an audience works in many other situations: one to one, one to a hundred, at work, at home - anywhere we are required to speak *for a purpose*.



“One always speaks badly when one has nothing to say”.

Voltaire

Having been employed for many years as a performer, I have been struck by the differences between acting and presenting. Successful acting necessitates pretence: you must convey to your audience that you are *another person*. Successful presenting, on the other hand, depends on authenticity. It requires us to be *most fully ourselves* - although, of course, we present different aspects of ourselves in different situations, and to different people.

Perhaps most important of all is the realisation that there is no *right way* to present or to communicate. There are countless ways - as many ways as there are people. The challenge is, to find the method that is both best for *us*, and most effective for the people we are talking to.

For this reason, you won't find a list of rules in these pages except one –

Don't waste your listeners' time.

What you will find here are suggestions - a recounting of ideas and experiences that have been tried and tested over the years. My invitation to you is simply to try them and then to decide for yourself.

‘A speech is a solemn responsibility. The person who makes a bad thirty-minute speech to 200 people wastes only half an hour of his own time. But they waste 100 hours of the audience's time – more than four days – which should be a hanging offence’.

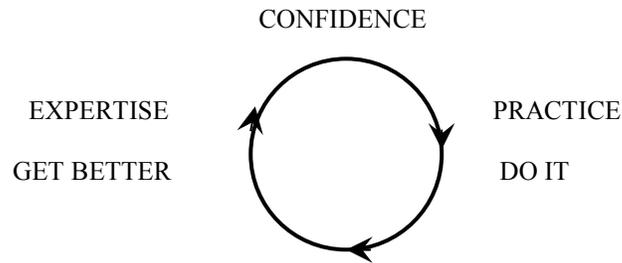
Jenkins Lloyd Jones

CREATING CONFIDENCE

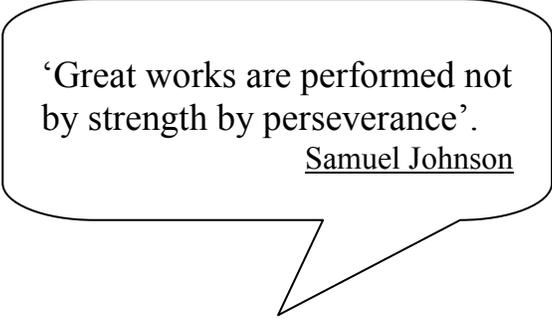
Where does confidence come from? How do we become confident? How do we become confident public speakers? Many people say, 'When I get more confidence, then I'll have a go'. But that's not the way it works in life, nor in public speaking

Let's look at the situation another way. Lets put the horse back in front of the cart.

If I were **confident** as a speaker and I were invited to speak in public, it would be fair to assume that I would probably accept the invitation and **do it**. Once I'd fulfilled the speaking engagement, it would be fair to assume that, through the experience, the practice, I would have become **better** at it. If, as a result, I felt myself to be a better at speaking in public, then it seems likely that my confidence would grow. Feeling more confident, I would be likely to accept more invitations, gaining in confidence each time. Which brings us round, full circle.



The question is then; *how can we break in to this circle of confidence?* The place where we break into the circle is the area of *doing it*, of practice. It's the same with any skill. Learning to ride a bike, we climb on, wobble about, and fall off. Maybe someone holds the saddle, and we gradually get our balance. Once we have our sense of balance, a *magic_moment* happens, the 'ah hah! I've got it' moment. Usually we fall off again very quickly! But now that we have had the experience we know what we are looking for, we have gained some vital expertise, so we climb back on the bike *again*. We ride some more, and with the practice *confidence* grows.



'Great works are performed not
by strength by perseverance'.
Samuel Johnson

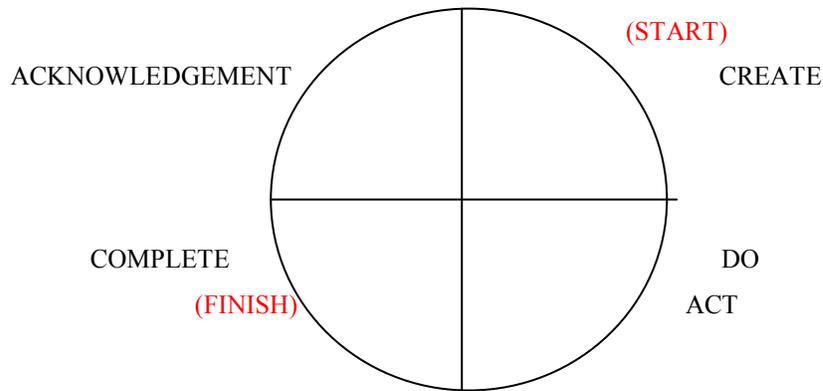
Public speaking is exactly the same. We don't wait until we feel confident to begin. We gain confidence by practising, by simply doing, by reviewing, getting feed-back, improving, leaving out what doesn't work, including what does work; gradually growing in confidence. After a while we say 'Yes, I am confident that I can speak in public. I can communicate effectively'.

So the simple *secret* of confidence is Just **DO IT!**

THE VIRTUOUS CIRCLE

After having started any project or achievement, there is the *doing*, and then there is the *completing*. If something is left incomplete we don't feel good about it. So once it is completed, take the time to acknowledge and to praise. Only then move on to start or create something new.

Everything is created twice, first of all in the mind, and then in physical reality. Often what is left out is the area of acknowledgement and praise. This means we don't feed ourselves, or get fed for what we have achieved. An opportunity to build confidence is lost.



‘Once in a century a man may be ruined or made insufferable by praise. But surely once in a minute something generous dies for want of it’.

John Masefield

DEALING WITH NERVES

‘Everyone has butterflies – it’s the professional who gets them to fly in formations’.

Anon

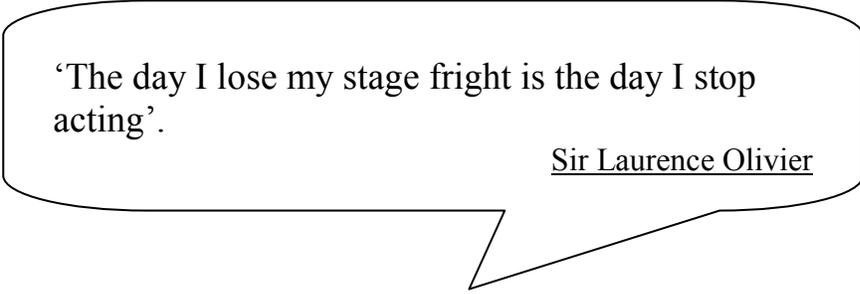
For many years I have been standing up in front of people in a range of situations, to talk or perform. During that time, one thing has become very clear to me: *I never stop being nervous*. Standing up before my audience, I can guarantee that I will be more nervous than I was prior to standing up - when I was sitting as part of the group, or in the wings of the theatre, or in my dressing room, or before going in front of the camera – whatever the situation might have been. I am more nervous presenting myself publicly than I am in less confronting situations.

Many people believe all their problems will be over ‘once I stop being nervous’. I always say ‘When that happens they carry you away in a box’. Other people say ‘I never get nervous performing; and yet I notice that their foot taps, or their fingers fidget, or beads of sweat break out on their brow. And even if there are no such obvious symptoms, and they themselves are quite unaware of their own nerves, in very subtle ways their bodies betray their nerves. If you had them connected up to a lie detector, marked increases in physical agitation, (pulse rate, skin moisture etc) would be registering.

Think about the common physical expression of ‘nerves’: tension, stiffness around the shoulders and neck, a tight jaw, a dry mouth, sweaty hands, tummies

tightened up in a knot. We may become either fidgety or physically rigid. Quite often the mind goes blank. People who don't usually stammer start to stammer or feel the need to rush to the loo.

Since we have little or no control over such physical symptoms, it is wise to come to terms with them. All such symptoms should be noted, by each individual, as being the healthy expression of their own nervousness.



'The day I lose my stage fright is the day I stop acting'.

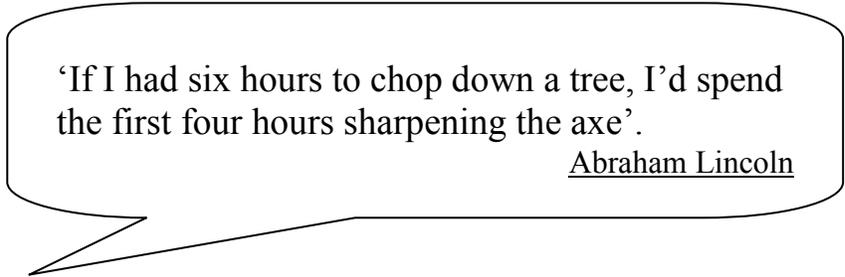
Sir Laurence Olivier

Remember that all the symptoms in the body are simply *energy* running through the body. Many of the symptoms are exactly the same symptoms we experience when we are happily excited. But in most people's minds the label 'excited' is *good* and the label 'nervous' is *bad*. If we simply delete nervous and insert excited, the whole situation can change. It provides us with a new context, a new outlook.

Speakers commonly try to suppress, rather than embrace, their agitation. They try to *control their nerves*, holding them down, forcing the body not to display them. I'm sure you've watched speakers in that condition. They become physically stiff. They hold on to a lectern/table/chair, and we see the whites of their knuckles, the sad truth is that in devoting so much energy trying to control our nerves, we rob ourselves of a large portion of our expressive energy.

However, as part of the process of preparation, we can do something about many of the symptoms. For instance, if you are the kind of person who has very sweaty hands or a sweaty forehead, you need to have something ready (tissues or a handkerchief), with which to remove the perspiration. If you are the kind of person who has a dry mouth, then you need to have a glass of water handy. If there is tension in your shoulders and neck, then you should include, as part of your preparation, some kind of physical warm-up and release.

The best remedy for nervousness is to prepare physically, vocally and mentally prior to giving a presentation, or talking in public. A physical warm up, or loosening up, can vary from simply shaking the body, to bending and stretching or in some cases running on the spot or up-and-down stairs or around a park. The whole point is to loosen up the body. Likewise, the apparatus of speech (tongue / teeth / lips) should be exercised. Singing is very good, as is speed-reading and reciting tongue twisters. Do all this before you go near your audience. Deep relaxed breathing is wonderfully effective.



‘If I had six hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend the first four hours sharpening the axe’.

Abraham Lincoln

Attitude is also important. Mental rehearsal or visualisation has become widely used in sport and is becoming increasingly used in public communication. First you sit quietly, close your eyes, and picture the situation that you are about to enter.

Imagine the people you are going to be speaking to. Run through the whole scenario in your mind's eye, creating the best outcome that you can have, exactly as you would like it to be. See your audience being friendly and receptive, understanding what you say, taking your ideas on board, agreeing with you, exploring the argument or discussion with you, responding as you would have hoped.

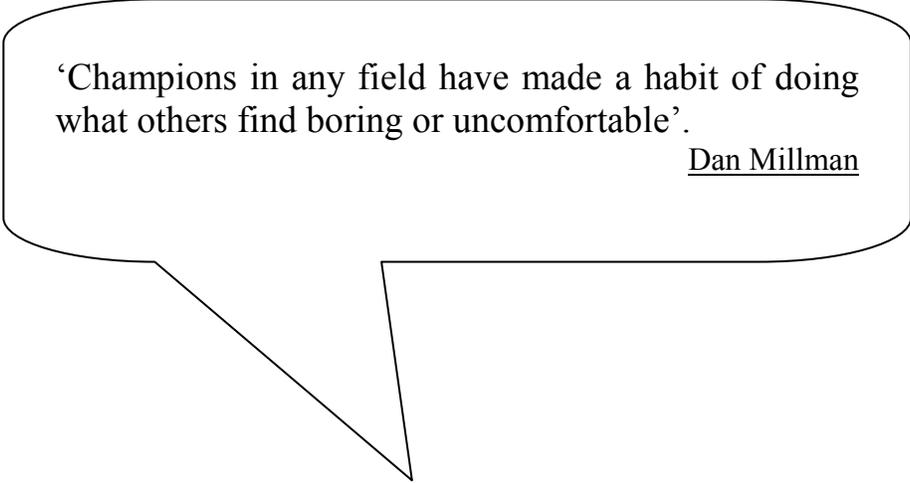
See yourself operating well, effectively, dynamically, clearly, confidently, in a relaxed manner. Imagine yourself reaching the end of your presentation. You have achieved what you set out to achieve. The reception your audience gives you is exactly as you would like it to be. And now you open your eyes.

Having gone through this positive imaginary rehearsal, you have entertained the best possible outcome, rather than the worst possible outcome that your Inner Critic (see later chapter) would have been only too ready to tell you about.

After your positive mental rehearsal, and your physical warm up, you can look forward to your presentation. Now your body (expecting a positive outcome) is more relaxed and your energy is being used productively, instead of being held at arm's length or pushed down. Throughout the communication, you are operating optimally.

You can actually value nervousness, remembering that we don't get nervous in areas we don't care about. When we're nervous, it lets us know that we are in a situation – **that is important** to us. And we know that the outcome of the interaction is also important.

Nerves are simply a reminder that something important is about to happen, and if something important is about to happen, it is wise to be ready for it. In brief, when we are aware of our nerves, we should welcome them and prepare for success. That is the secret of *creating confidence* – and creating confidence is the first secret of successful presentation.



‘Champions in any field have made a habit of doing what others find boring or uncomfortable’.

Dan Millman

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

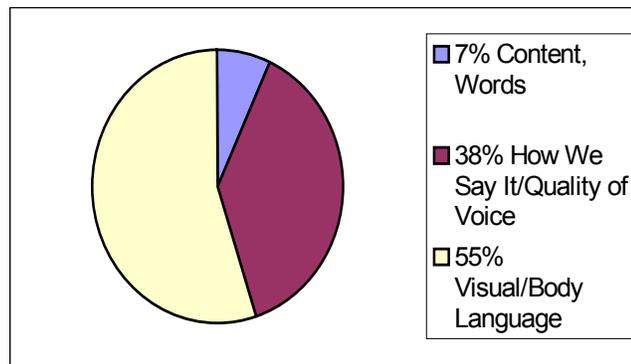
You are in a room. Someone you don't know enters you *look* at the person. How do they look? Their height, their colouring, their approximate age, their mode of dress. That is what we see first. The first point of contact is visual.

If the person walks forward and starts to speak, the next thing we note is the quality of the voice, its *tone and energy*. Loud, soft, melodious or harsh? Are they friend or foe? Only after we have tuned in the voice, do we start to hear the *content*. Probably one of the most common embarrassments is not to hear a person's name on a first introduction. That's because we haven't quite tuned into their voice yet – the information has come too quickly.

A first impression, then, seems to be a three-step process.

1. The visual
2. The quality of the voice
3. The content of what is being said.

Much research over many years, has confirmed the strength and importance of face-to-face communication. Recent figures from the Australian psychologist, Dr Robert Merabian back up previous findings. Dr Merabian estimates that the content of face-to-face spoken communication accounts for about 7% of the impact and importance. *How* we say the words we speak, accounts for around 38% of the impact. This leaves around 55% for what is called *body language*. Body language of course includes not only the torso, but also the arms, and particularly facial expression. In other words everything that that we *see*.



If we wish to have *impact* in our communication we must be aware and utilise all these elements. Content, expression of content and body language. Ninety-three percent of spoken communication is *not* content, yet so often what people prepare prior to communication/talk/presentation is **only** the content. Little thought is given to how it is to be delivered, what the body will be doing and the facial expression. As part of our preparation we need to rehearse, to practise our delivery. It's worth noting that in the professional performing arts most of the time spent on a production, is spent in rehearsal. Going over it. Getting it the way that you want it to be, before taking it out in front of the public or in front of the cameras.

The same principle should apply in face-to-face communication between people and in formal presentations. Before we *take the stage* (walk into the room) we should rehearse and practice until we are *saying it* and *doing it* the way that we want to.

That is not to say that we learn this like a script. In fact, I recommend avoiding working with a script for presentations. **It's simply too hard!** Much better to

reduce what you want to say into bullet points or key phrases because you will know what you are talking about and all you need are guides and pointers to keep you on track. A full script will inhibit you and put you under pressure to get things 'absolutely right'. That's not the purpose of speaking. So with the bullet points or key words, rehearse and practise what you want to say allowing for each time being slightly different but the point is always there; the **point** is always the same.

In day-to-day communication we often see people saying words that are then contradicted through their body language, intonation, or vocal expression. We constantly receive mixed messages from people. An extreme example is when someone shakes their head from side to side and yet says 'yes' at the same time. What we are *seeing* is somebody saying 'no', but the word that we *hear* is 'yes'. Somewhere inside ourselves we know that this is not a genuine 'yes'. And when we see people frown, yet say the words 'I think it's a good idea', or 'I utterly agree with you', we again know this is not a clear, clean, honest communication.

If our communication is to have impact, then the body language, the facial expression, the vocal expression and the content *must* line up together to convey the message. Then and only then will it have true impact, because the full range of human expression will support it. To make a *good* first impression we must make a *consistent* expression.

'The hardest battle is to be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day to make you everybody else'.

E. E. Cummings

MAKING AN IMPACT

If we took the notes of a piece of music and pushed them altogether, without the gaps between, what we would have is simply a terrible noise. Music is made interesting by the pauses between the notes. Exactly the same applies when people speak. Often in the preparation of a talk or presentation, people prepare only the words, and forget about the pauses. This is a shame because *pauses are powerful*.

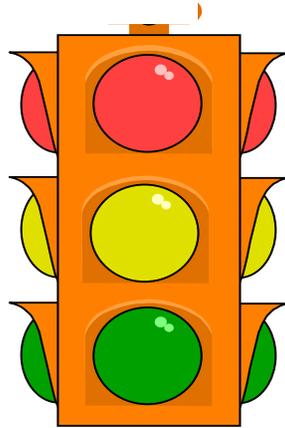
A very useful routine, used by many excellent speakers, is what I call the **Traffic Light Routine**. Think of a traffic light, going from red to amber to green. Before you speak (*green*) there are two other steps: The first step (*red*) is to *stop*. *Simply stop*. Once you have stopped, you can . . . get ready (*amber*).

There are several stages in getting ready First breathe: a few calm breaths. Next begin to make contact with your audience, with the people you are about to speak to. Look, and really see whom you are going to be talking to. Who are they? What state of mind are they in?

Then listen *externally*: to any sounds in the room or auditorium where you are standing. Are the audience settled? Is there any disturbing sound – doors, drilling, traffic?

Next listen *internally*: what is the first thing that you are going to say? Follow the traffic lights: stop (red), breathe, look and listen (amber), and then and only then speak (green).

TRAFFIC LIGHT ROUTINE



STOP

BREATHE

LOOK

LISTEN

SPEAK

START BY STOPPING

The great temptation is to get up and speak without taking that moment to first settle ourselves. This is a mistake that so many speakers make. They are into the talk before they are ready. *Nor is the audience quite ready.* They haven't had a chance to see the person standing before them, to tune in, and then be ready to listen to the words. I have seen countless speakers get up quickly, introduce themselves, their company, their subject and then launch straight into the body of the speech. I notice that nobody has heard their name, their company name, or their subject, because they have gone in so *quickly*. So . . .

- STOP
- BREATHE
- LOOK
- LISTEN
- SPEAK

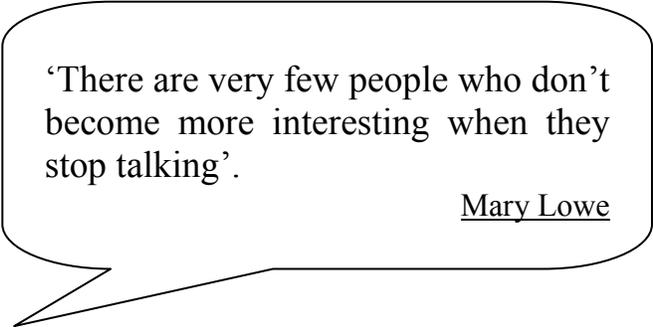
Another way of looking at this process is as a *handshake with the audience*. The unspoken part of the routine is saying – *'Here I am. I see you. You see me. Now we can begin'*. This approach has more than one benefit. Not only does it make you, the speaker, feel easier but also it gives you real impact. From the audience's point-of-view you will have tremendous impact, and power.

(Think of the opposite extreme, of people talking very fast, and not leaving time to pause. The audience becomes exhausted and confused. We miss so much if a speaker doesn't give us time to absorb what they are saying. Pauses are useful to both the speaker and the audience).

But pausing is not only something you do *before* you speak. Good speakers pause often. If a point has been made, if a question has been asked of the audience, stop, breath, look, listen – then continue to speak. Likewise, when *answering* questions. When a question is asked – stop / breath / look / listen – and then answer.

Pausing is such a simple technique, so easy to do, yet sadly so often missed, especially when we get caught up in our subject. A pause creates a space for thought to happen, a space for *true communication*. (I have a funny feeling pauses are where we truly meet and where we truly communicate).

As a day-to-day reminder of this routine, every time you are in the car and come to traffic lights, simply go through the process, either out loud or in your head. Stop, at the red. When it turns to amber, breath, look, listen. And when it goes green, speak. This habit can become deeply engrained. Remember *pauses are powerful*.



‘There are very few people who don’t become more interesting when they stop talking’.

Mary Lowe

THE INNER CRITIC

Very often, best efforts are undermined by something that I call the *'Inner Critic'*. Other names for this are the 'internal judge', the 'chatterbox in the head' or the 'parrot on the shoulder'. It's the voice we all seem to have inside of us, which provides a running commentary on our lives. You might remember the bust in the Morecambe and Wise show. When you turn to it and say *'What do you think of the show so far'*, it always replies **RUBBISH**.

This voice seems to give most of us very little in the way of *positive* feedback. When I ask groups of people who among them have an internal voice that says *'Well done - that was terrific'*, everyone just laughs. They have never heard 'their' voice saying that! When asked to describe the kind of comments this internal voice (or inner critic) makes, people volunteer phrases like - *'that was terrible'* *'you're no good at this'* *'you're never any good at this'* *'why do you always do that - you're hopeless'* *'Oh! I'm stupid'* *'Oh! I can't do it'* *'I'm not very good at this'*.

The big mistake is to believe this voice.

I've yet to hear my own inner critic say something positive. The most encouraging thing it has ever said to me was *'You did that better last time'*. But somewhere along the line I got the hang of how to handle this inner critic. What I do now is refuse to pay it any attention. Sadly I don't think it's possible to shut the voice up completely – it seems to be an automatic part of us. But what I do is to put my attention somewhere else.

I've come to regard the voice in my head - the inner critic – as if it were a 'drunk on a bus'. If you get on a bus or train and see a drunk, what is the last thing you would do? Wave to the drunk and say '*Hi, how's it going?*' No, most of us, would sit down as far away from him as possible. We look out the window, or get out a newspaper or book or talk to somebody else. In short we *keep our attention elsewhere*. We certainly don't turn round and say '*Hi, what've you been drinking?*' for then we are lost. We are into conversation with the drunk. Similarly with the inner critic. If in the middle of some meeting or presentation, I think '*How's it going so far?*' I can guarantee my voice will say '*rubbish*' or '*they're bored*' or '*this isn't very interesting*'. **SO DON'T ASK!**

If you want to know how you're doing, look at the people round about you.

That holds good at any level of communication: one-to-one with your colleague, your kids, your partner - anybody you are interacting with. If you want to know how you are doing, **look at the person or the people you are with**. That will give you a much better idea of the impact you're having than asking your inner critic. It will enable you to make some rational judgement as to how things are going. Then rather than bowing to this internal fantasy, this inner critic - you will start to notice if people are nodding or smiling, or looking anxious or confused, whatever it may be. You will see the *reality* of the situation.

THE INNER COACH

Once we have recognised the *Inner Critic*, one of the ways that we can help to counterbalance it is to develop and grow the *Inner Coach*. The Inner Coach is your secret support. It is the positive internal voice that confirms to us that we **can** do things. It says things like 'go for it', 'you know its possible' 'you can do it as well as anybody.' The Inner Coach is essentially there to encourage us. It may be that in our lives there hasn't been a great deal of encouragement, so we may be starting from zero. This is something only you will know.

Building up the Inner Coach can be done partly through feedback from other people, **positive** feedback. It can be also done by looking at what's been achieved already in our lives. To achieve this, we can do the Back to the Future exercise. Mentally go back into our **past**, recognise and clarify successes or achievements, and take those achievements into the **future**.

For my own part, when I feel my most nervous, apprehensive or insecure, I look back to my past and say 'Well I've been in a very similar situation a number of times. This feels remarkably similar and in the past it worked out successfully. Therefore, there is every reason to expect this situation to be successful too!' In doing this I open up the possibility of success, I reduce the fear level, and create an area of solid ground in which positive thought can germinate and grow.

'Although men are accused of not knowing their own weakness, yet perhaps few know their own strength. It is in men as in soils, where sometimes there is a vein of gold, which the owner knows not of '

Jonathan Swift

The Inner Coach needs constant nurturing, because our Inner Critic is a weed that grows constantly and threatens to take over. By looking for successes and positive attributes, we grow the Inner Coach, the voice that always encourages us and keeps things in perspective.

Inspirational books, and quotes may also be useful. Other people's achievements and wisdom can also help us be at our best, reminding us of our *bigness*, rather than our *smallness*.

The **third secret** of successful presentation is to ignore your inner critic and cultivate your inner coach.

TWO REALITIES

Over the years one aspect of human communication has become increasingly clear to me. It is what I call the *Two Realities*.

Have you ever been in a situation when you felt nervous or anxious, yet other people have said how relaxed you looked? Or perhaps you thought someone appeared very confident and easy, yet when you talked to them later you discovered to your surprise, that they were feeling really worried.

This is due to the *Two Realities*. We have an *inner reality*, our own experience, beating heart, knotted tummy, sweaty hands, feeling unable to breathe, random negative thoughts running our minds. This experience is TRUE FOR US. Usually, however, it is unseen or unnoticed by those around us. Only in extreme cases, do other people get glimpses of our inner life.

There is also an *outer reality* – other people’s perception of us and how they see us from moment to moment. This is TRUE FOR THEM. However because, our mind doesn’t like to have two conflicting realities, in the one place, it tries to cancel one of the realities out. For example if I am feeling nervous and worried, and other people say I look relaxed my mind tries to make sense of the situation by telling me comes up with the answer ‘they’re just being nice’ or ‘they’re lying’. Conversely, if the onlookers’ impressions that I am fine are the ‘true’ ones then my internal reality must be invalid and I shouldn’t be feeling nervous. To feel like this is wrong. Our mind likes to deal with only *one* reality.

In fact, although our minds can't cope with more than one truth at a time, both things *are* true. Contradictory and yet true.

'Oh wad some power the giftie
gie us to see oursels as others see
us'.

Robert Burns

One thing we must start to do if we are to be good communicators is to start to hold both realities at the same time. We can learn to say 'I feel very nervous *and* they see me as confident' ...or.... 'I am scared *and* they see authority'. No audience can see a 'pounding heart' or a 'knotted tummy'.

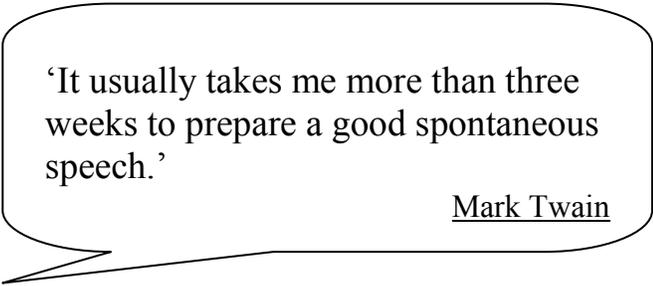
Learning to hold the two realities can make public presentations far easier.

This is the **fourth secret** of successful presentation.

PLANNING YOUR JOURNEY

Whenever you are stuck with a ‘party bore’ or a ‘pub bore’ it’s clear there is one person the bore talks endlessly about. Themselves and their own concerns. They may be very knowledgeable about their ‘subject’; they may talk with great enthusiasm, with great animation. What’s missing is that they seem to have little or no interest in their audience, or in their topic the relevance of topic to their audience.

Any subject is boring to an audience who has no interest in it. The bores haven’t learnt that fact. The point that Dale Carnegie captured in his famous book, *How To Win Friends and Influence* is that if someone talks about you, you are interested. This is useful information when you are talking to somebody you want to influence. *The best person to talk about is them*. With that secret in mind, let us now look at preparation for the presentation.



‘It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good spontaneous speech.’

Mark Twain

Over the years the most powerful presentations I’ve seen, are presentations that require some **action** from the audience at the end. The best speakers do not just present information. They present information for a specific purpose, to persuade us of some shift, some change so that their audience eventually leaves the room in some way different from the way they entered it. Perhaps they’ve signed a

contract, or paid some money, or have voted yes or no. Something has changed in their minds, if not in actuality.

Now before any ‘action’ is taken there has to be a ***decision*** to take the action. The decision will motivate the action. Where does the decision come from? The decision comes from the heart of your communication. The ***message***. What does your audience need to know to help them name the decision?

How much information do you need, before you can make a decision? It can vary. Sometimes all you need is a nod from someone you trust completely. Other times we need to sift through every detail before we commit ourselves. There is no hard and fast amount of information that we need. Essentially the ***message*** is whatever your audience needs to help them make their decision.

Contained in the message may well be information about the ***benefits*** of the proposed action. There may be ***alternatives***. There may be ***examples*** given to them. Whatever information is given must help the audience understand both the situation and, how they can solve their problem. They need to see that ***you*** understand their problem. That is the journey on which you need to take them.

The first question most speakers ask themselves when preparing is ‘what will I say’, ‘what will I tell them?’ In actual fact that is the ***last*** question that you, as a speaker should ask. The first question is what is the destination? What ***action*** do I want them to take? Therefore, what ***decision*** do they have to take to take that action? Therefore what do they need to know and understand to help them make that decision? Therefore what do I have to provide them with to make that clear? That is where you start.

In effect, you are starting from the end. Remember that when you plan a *trip*, the place that you actually start to plan your journey from is the place you want to end up - your destination. You look and see where it is you want to go and work back from there. It is the same with planning your presentation. Where do I want them to get to? Where are we now? What do they need to know – therefore what will I need to say?

For a successful journey it's wise to have a *Route Map*.

The Presenting Success Route Map

Preparing and planning your journey

Start

Let them know that you understand **their** situation

Benefits

What's in it for them?

Explain how you can help them solve **their** problem

Examples?
Alternatives?
Stories

Info.

What **they** need to know to help them reach their Decision

Decision
Motivation that leads to Action

Action from Audience
Destination!

Now just like any journey or 'goal setting', start at the *end* and work back to the beginning
P.S. It's all about *them* - it's never about you



Why Present in Public?

Standing up in front of people to talk seems to be an experience most of us dread. Research prioritising fears consistently shows that fear of speaking in public is greater than many other common fears - fear of the dark, fear of flying, even fear of death.

When did you last sit through a presentation that was exciting and interesting? When I ask this question in a group, participants often scratch their heads and I see them having to backtrack, sometimes months, before they can recall such an event. If, on the other hand, I ask the question ‘when did you last sit through a *boring* presentation?’ there is no hesitation: most people can readily remember not just one such presentation, but a few.

This should both depress and encourage us for if, by and large, presentations are so boring, then almost any improvement will lift *our* presentation out of the ordinary. In truth, since most presentations are dull, you don't have to be a brilliant communicator to be outstanding. To be outstanding, you only have to be fairly good. This realisation should soothe fears.

In times gone by, people would travel miles, sometimes right around the world, to hear somebody speak. Speaking was associated with the transfer of information. Through public speaking, information held by the few was broadcast to the many. Nowadays, there are many other ways of transferring information. Telephone, radio, television, satellite link, e-mail, voice-mail, the Internet - all these render information-giving through face-to-face communication largely unnecessary.

What's more, research shows that public speaking is a very **inefficient** way of transferring information. Indeed, most of us remember lectures at school or college when we struggled to grasp, note or retain information our teachers were presenting to us. Yet even though, from such personal experience, we are all aware how inefficient oral presentation can be, many people still *act* as if they believed it were effective. The result is, that we find ourselves obliged to sit through endless, boring, information-packed talks and presentations. Indeed, when a presentation is dull, it is usually because it is purely information based. Very often, it is also linear and/or *too long*.

Since bringing people together to listen to someone speak is a very expensive exercise, companies and organisations need to be sure it's worthwhile - that they wouldn't be better advised to disseminate the information in some other way, and save everyone time and money.

One very good reason for bringing people together (apart, obviously, from the opportunity to network) is if some *change* is required - if the get-together is to be used to *persuade* them of something. For when a number of people are gathered together to listen to another person speak, you are setting the scene for change, and the catalyst for change can be the speaker. When a presentation hits the spot, the audience can be powerfully affected. When a good speaker sits down they can leave the world a different place.

Obviously, the presentation will contain information, but it will not be pure information. Also, it may contain some form of entertainment. By entertainment I don't mean flippant, irrelevant gags. I mean entertainment in the true sense of the word: the revealing to us of our own condition. When something entertains us, it touches in on things we can all recognise and identify with.

They're Already Interested!

'Who are you? Why are you talking to us? What do you know about this?'
'What is the price? How long will this take to deliver?' Until such questions are addressed it will be hard for your audience to take in any other information

This means that before we engage with our audience, we need to find out about **who** we are talking to, and **what** their primary concerns will be, so we can address those worries as soon as possible. In other words we must first deal with the *other* person's agenda, before we deal with our *own*.

Very good communications are often structured around answering the questions in the audience's mind. Sometimes you must actually state the questions; sometimes you need simply provide answers.

This approach of always addressing your listeners' concerns, can be a more useful and dynamic way of structuring presentations than the traditional 'Introduction, Situation, Complication, Recommendation and then Conclusion', or the frequently recommended 'Tell them what your going to tell them. Then tell them. Then tell them what you've told them.

'A speaker who does not strike
oil in ten minutes should stop
boring!'

Louis Nizer

The sooner you acknowledge what is on the audience's mind, the more likely they are to pay attention to you. As the audience we always want to know: 'What's in this for me? Why should I care about this?' Only when the benefits are clear to us, will we really pay attention. If a speaker begins by saying 'I know your main concern about this product is the price, so let me explain about the price first', and if that truly *is* my worry, then I'm hooked.

Secret five is: The sooner you address what *your audience* cares about, the sooner you can move on to what *you* care about. Start by answering the audience's questions.

GREAT COMMUNICATION - LISTENING

The Chinese character for the verb to *listen* tells us a lot about true listening.



Part of the character, represents the *ear*; part of it represents *you*; part of it is the *eyes*; the line across is *undivided attention* and the final piece at the bottom is the *heart*. What that says in brief, is that when we listen to each other, we need to listen with all of ourselves, our whole self, not just the ears but with a *total awareness*.

In the best circumstances we do this. We take in the whole message. Not just intellectually - we pick up *all* the signals. When we are sensitive to somebody, we have truly effective and full communication.

Often we need to do this consciously. The way it's done is to set ourselves a 'Super Objective' – one over-riding mission that informs the whole presentation.

For example, our super objective may be *to listen with the desire to understand*. If that is our primary objective - truly to understand the other person – then we have to lay aside our own agenda (i.e. our opinion of what they are saying) and

open ourselves to whatever they are saying. Once we have really heard what is being said, and the way it is being said, then we can start to form an opinion. This is sometimes called empathic listening. Listening with the desire to understand and appreciate the other person.

‘If you want to truly understand someone you must walk a mile in their moccasins’.

Native American Proverb

So maybe the old adage could be wisely extended to become '2 ears, 2 eyes, one mouth' as a reminder of the ratios in our communication.

Give someone a "good listening to" and watch what it produces.

BROADCASTING OR RECEIVING?

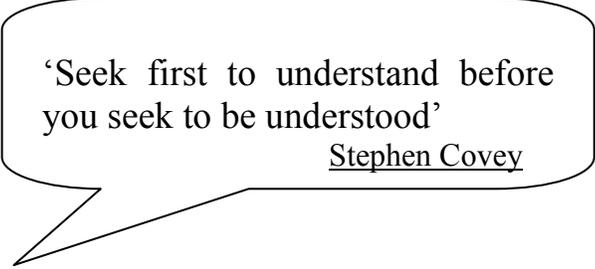
Another aspect of listening is to build rapport with a person, and again this requires us to listen in a very full way: to listen with our whole body, to the energy of the person, their speed, their pace, their edge. If we wish to build rapport, then we can mirror what the other person is doing. We can start to behave in a similar way. This is one of the quickest ways to build rapport.

‘Opportunity is often missed because we’re broadcasting when we should be tuning in’.

Anon

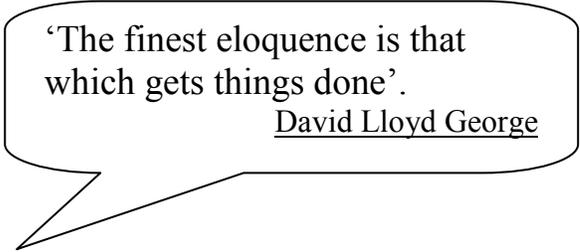
In both instances (listening to understand, and listening to build rapport), *attention is completely and utterly on the other person*. The more our attention is on them, the more we are likely to understand, and build rapport.

It greatly amuses me that people say so often that someone 'needs a good talking to!' when really it is more likely that what they need is a *good listening to*. Being truly listened to is a very unusual and deeply satisfying experience. Being with somebody who is giving us their undivided attention and really listening to us with no intention to catch us out, or make us wrong, or to ridicule us, or get 'one up', is a wonderful experience. Such moments are cherished moments.



'Seek first to understand before
you seek to be understood'

Stephen Covey

THE REAL MEANING OF WHAT YOU SAY

‘The finest eloquence is that
which gets things done’.
David Lloyd George

One of the great universal laws - identifiable in philosophy, science and religion - goes under different names. It is known as the law of ‘cause and effect’, ‘you reap what you sow’, ‘you get what you give’, ‘karma’. What this boils down to is the notion that whatever you put out in to the world is what you ultimately receive.

The meaning of our communication does not lie in the words we say, or even in the way that we say them, but in the response that comes back to us from our listener. *The meaning of your communication is the response that you get.*

To discover the meaning of our communication we need only check *the reaction to it*. Throughout, our attention needs to be not on ourselves or on our presentation - but on the audience, the *recipients* of our communication, and whose reactions tell us what we have communicated.

First and foremost, we need to check that our communication has been heard, physically *heard*. Next we need to check that it has been understood. We can all think of circumstances in which we **thought** we had communicated something

clearly, but the result was entirely different. It can even be that we got the very opposite of what we had wanted.

Very often we will also want to know if our communication has been agreed/disagreed with, or perceived as realistic or valid. As communicators, it is our responsibility to check that the response we have received is the response we *intended*. If it is not, then something more needs to be done by us. The essence of communication is *intention*. Perhaps we must repeat our message, or say it in some other way. Maybe a better time, or a different situation, will produce the desired result. On occasion, we must be prepared to go quite a distance to guarantee our intended outcome, always shunning self-serving excuses such as 'they're too thick to understand' or 'some people just won't listen . . .'

'I think you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant'.

Ex-President Nixon

CONCLUSION

In Julius Caesar William Shakespeare wrote ‘The fault dear Brutus lies not in the stars but in ourselves’. Success or failure is of our own making and lies within us not outside our control. How we develop as communicators is up to us. It is not simply what we know but what we *do* with what we know, that makes the difference.

Undoubtedly, skill as a communicator is a skill worth developing. Indeed, among peak performers everywhere it seems to be nothing less than a pre-requisite. How and whether we develop, as skilled communicators will depend in large measure on how we apply the information in this book. How much we practice. The extent to which we commit ourselves to this goal.

Skill as a communicator is a transferable skill. No matter the area you currently work in, once you can communicate effectively, you can take that skill into any other business. Time spent developing this expertise will *never* be wasted.

One final thought: not one among all the people I have worked with (some of whom are tremendously effective communicators) will ever claim ‘I’ve got it sorted’. There is always further to go. As in a garden, you must constantly be on the outlook for ‘weeds’ – the little ‘weeds of bad habit’ that can all too easily develop. As communicators we can never afford to become set in our ways. We must have the openness to take on new challenges, new ideas, and to notice the things that other people do which work well. In Japan the term Kaizan means ‘constant improvement’.

As far as communication goes, improvement is never ending.

‘Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not! Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education alone will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent’.

Calvin Coolidge

Skilled communication is an lifelong journey, a true **adventure**,

I wish you well!