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THE ART OF DELIVERING ENGAGING AND CONVINCING PRESENTATIONS

**LET'S START BY LOOKING AT WHAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ACHIEVE
WITH YOUR PRESENTATIONS!**



It is vital that you know yourself why you give a talk ('I am supposed to give a talk' doesn't count). What is your goal? Do you want to show that you have done your homework? Or that you are an expert? Do you want to merely convey information? Do you want to inspire and motivate?



It's all about energy!
Without the right energy, it is very difficult to communicate any message and to convey any information.

Expert tip



You should always start your presentation with high levels of energy, capture your listeners' attention and to make them interested. Use expressive gestures, maintain a lively intonation in your voice, and start with something compelling. Also, end your talk with an energetic high.

Expert tip



Energy is also crucial when it comes to communicating your passion for the subject you are presenting. Share your personal excitement, using concise, clear and, at the same time, powerful personal statements. Use strong verbs: "I like" and "what interests me" are weak expressions; instead say "I am truly excited about" or "what has intrigued me for years" or something of that kind.

SHAPING YOUR PROFILE AND KNOWING YOURSELF

What are your strengths as a public speaker? Name at least 3 things. Actually, make it 5! You need to know your communication strengths in order to unlock your full potential. Take time to reflect on how you can use them more effectively and more often.

Now, name at least 3 public speakers that you find impressive (anyone from a celebrity to a colleague or friend of yours). Study the way they speak and act on stage. Focus as much as you can on the small things they do (or don't do). The small things are crucial. Most importantly, 'make it your own kingdom': Don't just copy a technique but adapt it to your personal style of presenting.

STARTING YOUR PRESENTATION

There are quite a few great ways to start a presentation.

- Come on stage and keep silent for 5 to 10 seconds while you stand confidently and maintain eye-contact with the audience
 - Start with an inspiring quote (and comment on it)
- Share your S.T.A.R. moment ('something they always remember'), i.e., the most interesting and compelling idea or information from your talk
- Maybe, invite your audience on your journey (and use the metaphor of travelling – discovery – new paths – uncharted territory etc. throughout your talk)

Furthermore, keep in mind:

- If you start with a question, make sure you pause for about 3 to 5 seconds so that your audience can actually think about the question!
- Make sure not to reveal the whole structure of your presentation. Instead, give your audience a taste and a feeling for what is to come. You can start with a short teaser right at the beginning, for example: „At the end of my talk, you will learn/discover...“ / „Today, I would like to present a solution to... but before I share that idea with you, let me...“

STRUCTURING YOUR PRESENTATION

Use the 'Lincoln technique': Formulate 5 to 10 engaging open questions. Most importantly: These questions should be interesting to your audience. Use these questions to structure your presentation. as you move from one question to the next one.

Keep in mind: You don't have to know the answer to each question! This is particularly important for scientific presentations: Asking the right questions is as important as coming up with answers. Science is supposed to be on the verge of the unknown.

Segmenting the audience: It might be difficult to come up with engaging and inspiring questions which will be relevant to everyone in the audience. Therefore, divide your audience into 3 segments.

PYRAMID: The first segment is the most important for you; therefore, make sure that a large part of your questions are interesting for this segment (roughly two-thirds of your questions). One third should be relevant for the second segment, and one question for the third segment (which is the least important segment of your audience).

SOME ALTERNATIVES

Repeat your main idea (or question) several times throughout your presentation, each time emphasising a different aspect or adding new information. This way you make sure everyone gets your key message.

Use several buzz words or simple question words (why / what / when / how) to structure your talk. You can write these question words on a flipchart (or show them on a slide to let the audience know at what stage of your talk you are)

SOME RHETORICAL TECHNIQUES AND TRICKS

Use the 'telegraph style', i.e., use short sentences (or even bullet points) to make it concise. You can also use enumerations, ideally 1-2-3 sequences. Most people, especially when they want to appear very smart, tend to use overly long sentences (roughly more than 25 words). These are hard to follow and to digest. A good rule of thumb: 1 in 5 sentences should be short (around 10 words or less).

Use the pyramidal form: Start with the most important idea – the top of the pyramid – and then briefly comment on that idea – the bottom of the pyramid). This is particularly important if your talk is short and if you know that your audience is tired or not paying much attention.

Use proper 'power pauses' in order to appear confident and calm (and, of course, to give your audience time to digest the information or to build up to a momentum). A proper pause should be at least 3 seconds. To make sure your pauses are long enough, breathe fully in and out 2 times (alternatively, count the seconds as you maintain eye-contact with the audience).

Use 'pre-declarations', i.e. a statement you place before any key message. Examples: "the next point will help you to..." / "the following idea will be very important if you want to..." / "what comes next is truly important to me..."

Avoid generic expressions (set phrases). They rarely resonate with the audience and reveal a lack of eloquence and awareness. Replace all set phrases with your own words. The audience will relate much more to your individual language than to impersonal generic phrases.

THE ABC OF STAGE APPEARANCE

Change your position on stage. Make the stage (or the room) 'yours'. Changing position on stage works particularly well when moving from one subject, argument or idea to another.

Maintain eye-contact with your audience as much as you can. And smile.

Vary your intonation (quite – loud, fast – slow, soft – sharp). If you want to share some truly interesting information, slightly lower your voice: This sounds like you are sharing a secret and we all love secrets.

Gesticulate. Ideally, you cover all 3 levels of gestures: micro (hands) – torso (your upper body and in front of your chest) – macro (beyond your torso). You do not have to gesticulate all the time. It is perfectly fine to stand still for a while. Use the 'freeze-effect' and slow gestures to appear confident and relaxed.

ENDING IN STYLE AND MASTERING Q&A SESSIONS



While there are many cool ways to start a presentation, I recommend only one technique to end it: CFA (call for action).

Ask yourself: What would you like your audience to do (for themselves / for you / for society etc.)?

Communicating a clear and specific CFA shows that you are focused, dedicated and motivated.

And, of course, do not show the infamous last slide which says 'Thank you very much for your attention'. This slide is completely pointless. Just say it!

Make sure to open your Q&A sessions with specific questions. Avoid empty set phrases such as 'I am looking forward to hearing your questions / to receiving your creative input'. Instead, try to steer the discussion subtly into the direction you like and you find particularly interesting. Maybe you want to refer to specific aspects and ideas from your presentation.

If you receive a critical question and negative feedback, make sure to:

1. Positively evaluate the remark as specifically as you can (interesting / good / nice are weak and bloodless words which mean nothing). Show that you appreciate the comment or question, regardless of what you might actually think of it.

2. Give a short answer and then ask if you should proceed.

CALL THE SLIDE DOC



A lot of presenters suffer from what I like to call 'death by Power Point': They follow their own slides which dominate the entire presentation. Remember that your slides are only there to support you as a speaker.

A few things you can do:

- Switch off you PP presentation from time to time. Use a flipchart or whiteboard. Or just talk.
- Avoid unnecessary images and animations in your slides. One slide should have maximum 3 bullet points and 1 graph or diagram. If you have more than that on your slide, you have squeezed several slides into one. The more overloaded your slides are, the more your audience will pay attention to your PP rather than to what you are saying.
- Practice your talk without any slides until you feel comfortable with it. Then add your slides.
- Make sure to not read out what is on the slides. This is completely redundant: People can read so there is no need for you to read it out. Instead, give your audience some additional information which they need to properly understand your slides. Remember: If you have created self-explanatory slides, you have created a handout – not a PP presentation.

Here is a TED Talk on avoiding death by PP:



COMMON CONCERNS



First of all, appearing nervous is perfectly fine. It's a natural body response that can actually improve your performance. Acknowledging nervousness can also create engagement. In fact, audiences prefer to see real human beings with flaws to which they can relate.

Furthermore, it is helpful to distinguish between things you can do 1. before and 2. before your presentation.

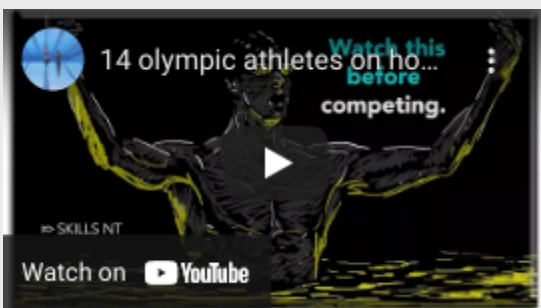
1. Keep your mind occupied with, well, pretty much anything you enjoy and that works for you: Breathing techniques, listening to good music, stretching, walking, engaging in light-hearted small talk, solving riddles...

One thing you should not do right before your presentation: Work on it.

2. When anxiety strikes you on stage, you can simply mention it. Just let it out in a few words. Let your audience empathise with you a little bit. If you have lost track, ask the audience what your last point was. And do not be upset with yourself; have a light-hearted self-deprecating remark up your sleeve!

Here some advice from professional athletes on how to deal with anxiety:

14 olympic athletes on how to manage nerves before a competition



How to stay calm under pressure - Noa Kageyama and Pen-Pen Chen



Forgetting important information during your presentation

Simply share the missing information with your audience whenever you remember it again. The order in which we present information, i.e. the logical structure of your presentation) is often somewhat overrated. In fact, we do not pay much attention to order in our normal everyday conversations, and we still understand each other and listen carefully – if the information is interesting. The same applies to presentations.

Not ending on time

This is an easy one: Always prepare a presentation that is slightly shorter than the allocated time (if given 30 minutes, keep it 3 to 5 minutes shorter). Another cool technique: Have two endings up your sleeve. One is your normal ending and the other a concise alternative ending which you can use in case you run out of time.

Final Remark

It's all about practice. We all know this. The question is how and when you can practice (everyone is so busy these days). In fact, there are plenty of opportunities to practice each technique in your daily life. Start with short and easy things, i.e., talk for a minute or two in front of a small group of people you feel comfortable around: Maybe at a toast speech of one or two minutes at a dinner with friends or a family gathering? Once you have mastered such 'mini speeches' at this type of relaxed and informal event, you can talk in front of some of your colleagues and other groups.



Good vs. bad presentations, a short clip:



A short and light-hearted TED talk about how to appear smart during a presentation:



Here is a video on nonverbal communication during presentations:



A light-hearted clip on presentation fails and things to avoid:



Here is an example of an extremely short (scientific) presentation:

