

Engage to Transform – The Art of Public Speaking

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“What was that, doctor? What did you say is my diagnosis?”

“Polycythemia Rubra Vera,” I said.

“Could you write it for me?”

“Sure.”

I wrote it in all capitals.

“Ah! P Vera. I have had it for years,” he said.

“I am sorry. It’s a long name, and I have an accent.”

“No, it’s fine. My hearing isn’t that great either.”

I had just moved into a new practice. Most of my patients were elderly. Many were war veterans. The sounds and memories of the Vietnam war still rang in their scarred middle ears.

Pretty soon I developed a reputation. The moment I walked into the office I could see my senior patients preemptively cranking up their hearing aids! I still didn’t get it.

Finally, a medical assistant came to my rescue. “Speak up so they can hear you. Many of them need new batteries in their hearing aids,” she said politely. I learned my lesson.

This is just one amongst hundreds of lessons I have learned about communicating. I will summarize some of these for you. Pick the ones that may not be your strength and try to integrate one or more ideas in your next presentation.

Make Sure They Can Hear You Well

When speaking to a group, try to check the sound quality of the speakers ahead of time. As you begin, it is always a good idea to ask the audience that are the furthest from you if they can hear you well.

Get to Know Your Audience

Ideally, days, weeks or even months ahead of your presentation, ask somebody about the stress levels in your audience and the reasons for the same. Are there any hot-button issues you should avoid? Who will be speaking before you? What time during the day is your presentation? Is it at 3 PM after they have had a six-hour class on a new computer software? Knowing who you are going to meet can go a long way in enhancing your effectiveness.

Establish a Rapport Early On

Very early in your presentation, share with them your experience in teaching this topic. Find common grounds – Do you share a concern for stress among kids? Are you struggling with demand-resource imbalance? Have you experienced a similar diagnosis in your family? In subtle ways, let your audience feel a sense of fellowship with you.

Validate Before You Educate

Most people seek validation and not education. For example, healthcare professionals could misconstrue resilience training as an assault on their intellect. They may also feel that resilience training means the administration won't do much about the structural issues that are the source of stress. In this situation, acknowledging the healthcare system's inefficiencies as the underlying cause of stress and pointing to the group/s within the organization working on the solutions might be a reasonable first step.

The neuroscience in the SMART program strives to validate people by sharing common neural traps that are often the source of stress. Emphasize these aspects in your presentation.

Manage Your Energy

A good marathon runner doesn't start the race off with a hundred-meter sprint. He or she conserves energy for the entire run. Similarly, if your presentation is two-hours long, and you start it as you'd start a fast-moving TED talk, the audience (and you) will be exhausted soon. Manage your energy well, so you and the listeners don't get depleted by the end of the presentation.

Ensure Optimal Interaction

Let your presentation not be a one-way flow of information. Instead, make it interactive. For a smaller group, ask questions, so they speak directly to you. For a larger audience, poll them through a show of hands and have them interact with each other. The more spontaneity and engagement they find in your presentation, the more engaged they will be.

Sprinkle Humor

Humor is about social connection. Humor is about trust. Hearts that laugh together beat together. Show you are happy to be with them. Your positivity is infectious. Let your fun

be decent. Talk about the craziness of our collective human challenges while making sure your words aren't offensive to anyone. When in doubt, laugh at yourself!

Share Stories

Stories go straight into our memory bank and keep ricocheting in our minds for a long time. The best stories are ones that talk about your own life, help others see your vulnerabilities, challenges, and of course triumphs.

Share Metaphors

If it is a group of musicians listening to you, help them train their attention by finding music in the buzz of the mall. If it is a group of dermatologists, help them notice patterns in the sky. When speaking with farmers, talk about the gorgeous vegetables in the supermarket, with airline pilots, talk about finding value in a used boarding pass. The richer your metaphors and the more your audience can resonate with them, the more effective your presentation will be.

Move Some, But Not a Whole Lot

I've noticed some speakers choose to move from one end of the stage to the other. I find that distracting. Of course, remaining glued at a spot may not be ideal either. So, move some, but not a whole lot during your presentation.

Insert Breaks

As you know very well, the brain gets tired after about 60 minutes of work. Try not to go over an hour without a break. It will also be good for their heart and kidneys!

Be Humble, Be Authentic

Self-praise can push your presentation into a downward spiral. You do not need to wow them, or name drop. Instead, share your vulnerabilities and honest mistakes. Develop a relationship of being a fellow student instead of the teacher of a particular program. If you don't have an answer to a question, be open to accepting your ignorance instead of making something up.

Rehearse, But Not Excessively

Have a general familiarity with the sequence and flow of what to say on each slide. But try not to memorize your lines. If you try to stick to a very rigid way of expressing yourself, you will risk looking artificial. Let the words flow spontaneously.

Also, try not to add a new slide at the last minute. You will risk breaking your flow.

Share Take-Home Points

In the last few minutes of your presentation, try to share a couple of take-home points. If possible, leave them with one practice or idea they can implement right as they walk out of the room. Sharing an informative yet concise handout with your contact information is always a plus.

Help Them Feel You Truly Care About Them

I saved the most important for the last. Truly, truly care about them! Practice the Golden Rule. Remember that if you have an audience of a hundred people, twenty would have experienced depression, many would have been suicidal at some point, a few would have lost a child, and almost everyone has excessive stress.

Your authentic compassion will express itself in every aspect of your presentation. It will help and heal them, as well as you.

If there is one thing to remember in all that I have said, remember to care for your audience. Everything else that is good will follow.

Happy speaking!