Making a speech: Talk about tension!

by Michael_Kinsman

Without a doubt, one of the most challenging work assignments I've ever faced is giving a presentation or speech in front of a group of people.

It doesn't seem to matter whether it is a group of chief executives or third-graders, my heart accelerates to the same hyper-beat and my voice cracks out of fear.

In fact, I used to think there was nothing worse than giving a speech. Ask me to sacrifice a finger or two in lieu of giving a speech and I'd carefully consider the proposal.

Yet, these harrowing incidents regularly seemed to spring themselves on me in my job and cause me great duress.

That is until I got smart.

I finally figured out that what people want to hear are personal stories that relate to the topic at hand. Figure out your message, delve into your past to find stories that illustrate that and simply tell those stories to others.

This makes easy work of being smart.

Probably the first time I learned this is when I was asked to talk about the job interview. I thought long and hard about it, prepared my list of tips for how to prepare for the interview and then scrapped it all the morning of my speech.

Instead, I talked about things that had happened to me on job interviews.

I remember telling some human resources executives about the time I interviewed with an editor who was a weightlifter. In the middle of my job interview, he began squeezing a small rubber ball in his right hand and each time he made a fist, his right biceps would bulge from beneath his short-sleeved shirt.

I got distracted by this and lost my concentration. The interview was a total loss.

I did my homework on my next job interview and learned that the editor I was going to meet with was aloof and uncomfortable meeting new people. I was also warned that he had a dead-fish handshake.

The morning I arrived, the editor presented his hand and, sure enough, it was cold, clammy and seemed to have no bones in it. Fortunately, I was prepared for this and took it in stride. That interview went much better than the one with the weightlifter.

The point of these stories was not that some managers have odd personal characteristics, but that you need to know as much about your interviewer as possible before the interview so you don't get knocked off your game.

Annette Simmons, author of the book "Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins" believes that using personal stories is one of the most powerful and effective forms of communication.

Not only do you grab people's attention, but you strengthen your message by transporting listeners to different points of view, giving them a chance to connect with your stories and find their own meaning in them. They bond with you, even though these are your stories, not theirs.

"The problems is that you haven't realized how much your stories matter," says Simmons. "When you turn your attention to these stories you can be more intentional in creating the kind of perceptions that achieve goals rather than reinforce problems."

Simmons understands that people love stories. They are easy to remember so the message isn't lost in a series of bullet points. They are effective because they draw humanity into the equation of communication, making it more meaningful for both parties.

And, in the end, stories can make a lasting point.

The day I figured this out, I simply thought about the message I wanted to leave with my audience. I thought about my own experiences and how they could show that and then I relayed those stories to others.

I saw attentive eyes, heads bobbing and, when I finished, there was plenty of applause. And, then there were the questions.

I knew my "speech" had connected by all the questions the audience members raised.

And, I never fear about speeches anymore.

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