

Banish the Presenter Box (Jan 08)

By Achim Nowak

It's time to stop hiding behind a mask when you present. Instead, think of public speaking as an exploration of your personal boundaries and limits—and the opportunity to be yourself.

We live in the era of the quick makeover. I must confess, I, too, get a certain voyeuristic pleasure out of watching those makeover shows that dominate TV these days. As cheesy as they are, with their steady stream of before and after close-ups, they tap into the part of me that still believes in fairy tales: Yes, I want to believe there is a quick fix, and that self-improvement doesn't require all that much effort.

Businesses spend millions of dollars each year to send their managers, trainers and sales reps to public speaking classes, and often they get the equivalent of the quick cosmetic makeover. Many courses only correct the outer elements of public speaking—the use of eye contact, gestures, body movement and vocal modulation. If you were fortunate to work with a seasoned coach, you learned how to harness and expand your personal energy.

That is the technique level of public speaking, and it is essential. But I continue to marvel at the employee who returns from working with a speaking coach, only to come across as more strained and inauthentic than he did before.

When I coach speakers, I work with a simple, three-level approach that integrates tools and insights from the worlds of actors, personal transformation, and group dynamics. A speaker development process that seeks to galvanize a speaker's presence must always address all three of these levels:

In Level I: The Craft Level, we explore the basic skills of the presenter: the use of voice, body movement, gestures, eye contact, and personal energy. Without mastery of these tools, we will always operate with a set of barriers, and the audience will focus on the barriers rather than the message we seek to convey.

Level II: The Connection Level heightens our ability to deeply connect with the audience. On this level, we select conscious intentions to help create a desired impact; we integrate stories and humor to shape our content; and we forge a mind-set that has the power to transform any audience resistance. A mastery of these skills marks the difference between a beginning and advanced public speaker.

At Level III: The Flow Level we investigate how we truly "come across." It is where we ask the tough questions: What are the personal values that motivate me as I speak, and how do I actualize these values in my interaction with an audience? Where is chronic fear blocking me from "breaking through" to my audience? What would it mean for me to be a more expansive speaker?

Our willingness to unflinchingly consider these questions, coupled with our ability to shift and develop, is the true secret to speaking success. The inner clarification that occurs at this level exponentially increases our impact as speakers. It can lift every presenter into the realm of the power speakers who are able to transport any audience into magical states of flow.

I recently attended a dinner that featured Thomas L. Friedman, the Pulitzer Prize-winning New York Times journalist. Friedman is a seasoned speaker, and the moment he began to speak, it was evident he was in full command of his Level I communication tools. Furthermore, he used humor to engage his audience and he knew how to spin a good tale—marks of the advanced Level II speaker.

The speech was off to a rousing start. But halfway through the keynote, the energy in the ballroom inexplicably seemed to deflate. It was as if someone had just let the air out of the tires. "What's going on here?" I asked myself. "Why is Mr. Friedman not connecting anymore?"

The question took me right to Level III, the core level of public speaking. The longer Mr. Friedman spoke, the more evident it became that he was delivering a "canned" speech. Such a speech violates one of the key factors in public speaking—the implicit value the speaker places on the audience, and the explicit way in which this value is expressed. An audience does not feel honored or appreciated by a routine speech.

To understand this complex relationship, we must examine our psyche and thought patterns. This is the personal essence an audience responds to and "gets," regardless of the topic of a presentation. Our conscious understanding of this landscape is the Level III homework of a speaker. It is the single most important factor in unleashing our speaking power. I liken the process of investigation to looking at a house. My dad was an architect, and I grew up studying the blueprints of buildings he was about to build. Even as a little boy I understood that those blueprints were the foundation for a solid building.

To help uncover the blueprint of a public speaker, every speaker should contemplate four core questions:

- What are the personal values that motivate me as I speak, and how are they actualized in my interaction with an audience?
- Where is chronic fear blocking me from "breaking through" to my audience?
- How spontaneous am I in front of a group?
- What would it mean for me to transcend the confines of my personal "speaker box?"

These questions bring us right to the behaviors that often can negatively impact our relationship with any audience. Let's look at one speaker:

Bob swaggered into one of my seminars with the demeanor of a seasoned cowboy. He had worked for Winnebago Mobile Homes for 32 years. His job title was "Product Trainer," and that, indeed, was what he did. Bob was an almost iconic American speaker—the gruff, charged-up salesman.

I enjoyed Bob and the feedback Bob received from his colleagues was consistent. "Bob, smile a little more." "Bob, show us a little more of your warm side." Bob's disarming and also revealing answer was: "But I'm a product guy."

Bob had placed himself squarely into "the content box." He believed the content he was communicating was the most important part of his presentation. His audience focused entirely on the personal qualities it longed to see in him. As I listened to the feedback exchange between Bob and his audience, I realized I was witnessing a classic duel between the significance of content and the power of personal essence.

Now, Bob certainly knew how to be engaging. What he failed to understand was that a smile and warmth are signals that reveal a speaker's inner regard for an audience.

Chances are that behind his bravado, Bob was hiding a good deal of "people fear." Many of us live with this fear every day, and we're adept at masking it by hogging the limelight, not listening to others or interrupting. This ingrained fear of people is a tough nut to crack, because the moment we speak in public, we are brought face to face with people. Not only that, we are facing them in a truly vulnerable way. That is not a natural or comfortable relationship for most of us. Our fear is, quite literally, staring us straight in the face.

Fear goes to the core of how we maneuver through life.

The act of speaking in public simply focuses a magnifying glass on it. I am not suggesting we try to eradicate fear. There are many valid reasons to be afraid. In fact, I am always a bit concerned when I meet a speaker who professes to know no fear. I suspect she may be the sort of speaker who rigidly blocks her fear, and, thus, blocks any vulnerable communication with her audience, as well. She will aim for the perfect delivery of a speech and diligently stick to the script. "It all went exactly as planned."

This sentence puts more terror in my heart. Have you ever watched a speaker who decides to leave a prepared script? Amazing things happen in this moment of spontaneity. Even if the speaker is very polished, we likely have been aware he has been clutching his carefully prepared script—poised, polished and lifeless. But the moment he leaves the script, the quality of his voice changes and we feel he is speaking from the heart.

The outcome of such spontaneity, at its best, is a delicious state of flow, where a presentation seems to unfold with an almost transcendent measure of grace. In a state of flow, psychologist Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi argues in his book "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience," "people become so involved in what they are doing that the activity becomes spontaneous, almost automatic; they stop being aware of themselves as separate from the actions they are performing."

Sounds delightful, doesn't it?

So, how do we inhabit the role of the speaker? Quite often, I witness the vivacious and engaging person turn herself into a speaking machine on stage, void of the personal traits I so enjoyed "off-stage." I literally see her don the cloak, the mannerisms, the very demeanor of the professional speaker. In the end, there is little left of the person I know: The schematic role of the presenter has become the limiting box.

Banish the presenter box forever. Know that playing with the role of the speaker can be a lot of fun. It can become another part of the exploration of your personal boundaries and limits. Play with this role consciously. Make expanding choices. Do it with a sense of playfulness and investigation. But above all, be yourself as you speak. Your audience does not want to experience an imprint of a speaker. It wants to experience you.

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