

# Leadership Talking Points

## NEWSLETTER

## The Presentation Advantage


Everybody was feeling anxious in the beautiful executive offices of a major Middle Eastern energy company. A group of company engineers had just made a presentation to an important industry conference in Athens, and it was a disaster.

“The slides made no sense. The speakers just read their presentations; they didn’t even look at the audience, and they could barely be heard,” said one executive who had suffered through the program.

“All of that could be excused,” said another executive. “But the real problem was that they failed to make our point. We’ve made a real breakthrough in predicting how much oil is in a reservoir. It could change the whole paradigm of oil production. But nobody—nobody in that room—understood what we were saying.”

It’s a common problem.

How many presentations like this have you sat through? Why are nine out of ten presentations so boring? The job of a presenter is to make people get out of their seats



and do something they haven't done before. That means changing their minds. But most presenters fall short of changing the minds of their hearers.

One of the great experts on communication was Henry M. Boettinger. He once attended a conference where lots of different people gave presentations. "All were persons of intelligence, having something worthwhile to say, but the range of persuasive skill ran from embarrassing, painful failures (including cases of physical collapse) to skillful performers whose presentations were perfectly tuned to their audiences, and who made changing your mind an exhilarating experience."

What was the difference between presenters who "changed minds" and those who didn't? You can be intelligent, knowledgeable, and even slick—and still fail to do the job unless you have what we call "the Presentation Advantage."

You have the Presentation Advantage if you gain the trust of your audience.

Trust comes first. If you look through the dozens of books about presentation skills, you will find that none of them even mention the issue of character. Nowhere do they talk about things like personal integrity and competency, which are essential to trust. You'll get lots of good ideas on how to "stand and deliver," but nothing about what matters most to your audience: Can you be trusted?

Their audience had a hard time trusting our engineering friends. The message was garbled and unclear. The speakers didn't look competent, regardless of their impressive resumes. And they failed to make a human connection.

Your listeners are your customers. You're there to serve them. So what job are they hiring you to do for them? In any presentation you give, there's a big "so what?" question—and you've been hired to answer it. The sooner the better. In fact, your whole presentation should be an answer to a high-stakes question.

Our engineers actually had a very significant message. They had figured out ways to predict how much oil a reservoir would supply, intelligence that might mean a great deal to their clients. But the message got lost because the presenters literally forgot the job they were there to do—or were never clear about it in the first place. Instead, they treated their audience to a long, confusing lecture on technology that never actually came to the point.

So the audience never got an answer to the question "So what?"

So when you give a presentation, what big question do your listeners want you to answer for them? What's at stake? Why should they listen to you?

Lack of a human connection also erodes trust. Our friends were mumbling, hiding behind their notes, and never even making eye contact with anyone; so they came across as insecure about their message. Of course, the opposite of insecurity is arrogance, as in the "slick operator" presenter who comes across as shifty. Neither of these styles connects well with real people.

Anyone can make a human connection, but it must be genuine. People sense it immediately if you are faking. Ironically, our engineers were kind and hospitable people, full of human warmth. If at the podium they could just allow themselves to be themselves, they would succeed.

And eventually, they did. The company called in FranklinCovey to help the engineering group become trustworthy communicators. After much learning and practice, the engineers learned to connect—they gained the Presentation Advantage.

### Questions to Ponder

How much of your business depends on your ability to communicate and persuade? Are you actually connecting, whether to an audience or one on one? Is presentation skill an advantage or a disadvantage to your organization? What could you do to generate more trust in people you communicate with? What are the consequences for you if you don't?