

HUMAN RESOURCES

Present a telling performance

Memorable stories, punchy introductions and strong conclusions combine to make sure formal presentations hit the mark, says Constance Lamb

The prospect of giving a formal presentation can strike dread and foreboding into the hearts of many people, especially if it is their first – the initial step into senior management.

Too often the perception is that a formal presentation will be boring. How can this be changed? The key element is remembering who the presentation is for.

Engaging the audience is paramount. It is a question of balancing the content while captivating them. You may have the most scintillating content but the presentation can fall flat if the audience is forgotten. Preparation is important but rather than spending hours focusing just on the content, consider three things:

- what do you want your audience to remember?
- how can you motivate, persuade and influence them to take action?
- how will they remember your message?

Hook your audience in with your opening sentence. The first 10-20 seconds are crucial: if you don't get this right, you have lost your audience and it can take a lot of effort to win them back. Spend time crafting a bold opening statement, aim to create a punchy style and keep the language simple.

One junior manager had to make a presentation about how her trust would use performance as a lever to accelerate delivery of a particular programme. To make the style more succinct and engaging we worked on going straight to the heart of the issue. She immediately pinned her colours to the mast and said what she believed. It was a clear, bold, engaging beginning.

Another way to maintain audience attention is to repeat regularly. This aids recall, so build repetition of the main messages throughout the presentation.

How much information do you remember from a 40 minute talk? If you are lucky it will be five bullet points, sometimes less. One way to ensure the audience stays with you is to emphasise unusually.

Masterful metaphors

Powerful stories and masterful metaphors are unparalleled in their ability to help lead the hearts and minds of those around us. They become the vehicle to drive your message home. The facts are subtly conveyed through the story. For example:

George is 62 years old, intelligent and sharp thinking. Suddenly, he blacked out outside a busy railway station. He had had a stroke. He was rushed to hospital, where tests were run in accident and

TOP TIPS

There are five keys to audience recall

- Begin powerfully
- Repeat regularly
- Emphasise unusually
- Maximise audience involvement
- End powerfully

emergency, and he was admitted onto a stroke ward. A brain scan was done, but only after four hours. The stroke was confirmed and he was put on medication.

George had lost the use of speech and his left arm. He was frustrated and distressed. Speech and physiotherapy were instigated after week five. Towards the end of his eight week stay, social services became involved. A social care package was set up, but only after the family pushed for it.

We can see that this is an example of poor performance. What should have happened?

- a brain scan within an hour
- social services alerted on admission

- *speech and physiotherapy plan developed in week one.*

Better coordination between hospital departments and between the hospital and social services would have made it more efficient and George's health outcomes more effective.

The message is about greater efficiency and effectiveness, but we remember this through the story of George's experience.

Question and answer is one way to allow the audience to take a more active role and maximise their involvement. Rather than passively listening they are more fully involved. This is very useful when motivating and inspiring an organisation to take action.

For example, a senior executive had to influence the board to make a decision and take action. Initially his approach was to just formally present the facts and his recommendations. However, during coaching it was suggested he should actively engage the board by throwing the matter open for discussion and exploring the issues together, through Q&A. This produced much more lively engagement by the board and they were more easily influenced and persuaded to take action.

Remember to end powerfully. The close of a formal presentation is your final opportunity to make an impact. End with a strong punchline.

By using the five keys to audience recall you are putting the audience at the heart of the formal presentation (see box). Dare to be more creative and make your next formal presentation come alive. ●

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Getting across: engage your audience from the outset