

## Going Big on the Big Stage

Successful organizations know that in today's increasingly dispersed workplace, getting employees face-to-face with senior management is a powerful and persuasive tool. While video-conferencing, virtual meetings and online communications have their utilities, convening senior executives and top leaders *in person* is a priority. For these companies, growing a culture of connected communication isn't just desired; it's required.

WPNT Communications has the privilege of supporting many companies as they prepare to conduct annual management conferences, worldwide senior management meetings or offsite leadership events. These are often large crowds meeting in big auditoriums supported by professional staging and audiovisual production. The high-profile (high-stakes) venues that can optimize this opportunity can also create a challenge for executives whose roles have encompassed everything from financial wizard to engineer, dealmaker to manager—but perhaps never professional speaker.

Bottom line: It takes time, effort and practice to glide across a live stage, and deliver an impactful, memorable, worthwhile presentation. Only hard work makes it look easy. We've summarized below a handful of suggestions aimed at executives who must rise to the occasion.

### Ten Tips to Master Your Moment in the Spotlight

#### 1. Manage the nerves.

Homo sapiens get nervous when we speak in front of groups. This fight or flight response is part of what makes us human, so expect it, and prepare for it. Having a good grasp of content of your presentation is an obvious first step. Knowing your audience and their perspective is key. Practicing your presentation (preferably in the setting where you'll deliver it) is also very valuable. Finally, employing strategic relaxation techniques can also help significantly.

Some speakers find stress hormone levels decrease if they engage in a 30-minute cardiovascular workout the morning of (or night before) a big stage engagement. Others

benefit from deep, diaphragmatic breathing in the minutes before a speech. Still others use a technique documented by Harvard University Business School social psychologist, Dr. Amy Cuddy. Dr. Cuddy's research has identified a series of physical stances she calls Power Poses. These positions, when maintained for a certain length of time in the minutes before a presentation, quantifiably reduce a stress hormone (cortisol) and increase a "power" hormone (testosterone). This measurable change in body chemistry can give speakers who Power Pose a distinct advantage in both content and delivery.

### 2. Take the stage with authority.

As described in the book, *There's No Such Thing as Public Speaking*, an audience must acquire a speaker psychologically and sociologically in three phases: stranger, member, leader. You are a stranger to the audience group before you address it, even if you personally know some members. As you take the stage, the audience has the opportunity to promote you from stranger to member of the group. But the role you must achieve—as quickly as possible—is that of leader.

Being promoted to leader means looking the part. Your posture, gait and attire must exude confidence. And you must give the audience time to check you out, particularly in the critical moments *before* you start speaking. Never rush your entrance. And pause. That's right. Pause—longer than you think you should—before you start speaking. Pausing is the nonverbal equivalent of saying, "I'm in charge and I'm glad to be here."

### 3. Lengthen and strengthen eye contact.

Eye contact is one of the most poignant aspects of nonverbal communication. It's also one of the most commonly misused tools in a speaker's toolkit. The urge to spread eye contact around to *every* member of an audience leads to a frenetic windshield wiper look that leaves audience members uneasy and your role as leader in doubt. The solution? Focus and properly assign your eye contact.

As you look out from the stage, divide the audience into thirds. Now, choose one person (or spot) in the middle of each of the three sections. A so-called "halo effect" around each person (or spot) makes every audience member in that one-third section feel as though you are looking at him or her—even though you are looking at only one person (or spot).

Completing a full thought or two each time, continue to seamlessly alternate eye contact among the three sections of the audience, returning to the same person (or spot) in the middle of that section. Limit the number of times you look down or away. You will effectively make eye contact with only three people in the entire audience; but you will make *everyone* in the

audience *feel* as though you have shared some eye contact with him or her. This type of eye contact also causes the speaker to realize this is a conversation, not a presentation, and it helps to personalize your delivery.

#### 4. Gesture. Gesture. Gesture.

When most of us feel observed, as when we're speaking on stage, we forget to behave naturally. A common natural behavior is to move our hands and arms when we talk. These gestures result in greater facial expression and vocal variety. They relax us. And they even help us use a greater percentage of our vocabulary. To gesture is human. Blind children, who've never seen a gesture, gesture. When our gesturing is limited, so too is our energy, enthusiasm and verbal ability.

Give yourself permission to gesture like you mean it. Open your body. Keep your arms exposed and your palms open to sincerely invite your audience to absorb what you're saying. Remember that crossed arms and folded hands are signals of defensiveness, not confidence. And get big. The bigger the stage, the bigger the gestures need to be to convey confidence and importance. Gestures help you own the stage. Don't be afraid to own them.

#### 5. Slow down.

We all do it. When we get nervous, we speak too quickly in the subconscious hope that the faster we go, the faster an uncomfortable situation will be over. The truth is, delivering a speech too quickly is the fastest way to make your audience tune out, and miss the message you're sending. Research shows audiences only remember a small percent of presentation content as it is. Slowing down is one way to boost this challenging number.

Look for areas of your presentation to emphasize with a change in vocal tone or volume or pitch. Think of these as speed bumps, forcing you to slow down, and convey your message most effectively. Relish the words you choose, and savor the way you choose to say them as you would a favorite food. Rushing through the compelling content you've prepared ultimately wastes your time and that of your audience. Finally, find a few phrases in your presentation that deserve repetition. These will serve as additional speed bumps, and make it more likely that your audience remembers the portion of your presentation that you deem most important.

#### 6. Pause for power.

Inserting pauses into your presentation is truly the low-hanging fruit of improved delivery. Pausing is a win-win for you and your audience. For you, pausing is one of the most powerful.

presentation techniques. First, it allows your brain a brief moment to collect its focus. Second, it gives you the chance to take a deep breath, and keep the oxygen flowing—diffusing those nerves. And finally, pausing draws the mantle of leadership to you like no other delivery skill. The presenter who can pause on a big stage in front of a live audience awes with authority and captivates with confidence.

For your audience, pausing is a gift. It allows members an opportunity to catch up and reflect on what you're saying. Too much consequential content and too many memorable moments go unnoticed because the audience is pressured to keep up with the presenter. Audience members don't get enough time to bask in the impact of what was just said before they already have to anticipate the next point. Pause. Every time. With every salient point. Your audience will thank you for it.

### 7. Punctuate with movement.

As professionals, we're skilled at using and attentive to interpreting written punctuation. We understand that these linguistic signposts—commas, periods and question marks—are critical to helping a reader fully understand any communication. Punctuation provides the recipient of our message a framework in which to receive it.

So how do you effectively punctuate spoken content, delivered live, on a giant stage? One way is with movement. Walking from one end of the stage to the center or to the opposite end signifies a new paragraph; listing key points using your fingers to count them off signifies a bullet point approach; walking slightly forward on stage and leaning forward to make a particularly vital point signifies boldface type. The audience responds gratefully to these visual cues. It's reassured because you're meeting its desire for organization—to know what's important, why it matters and where you're going next.

Never move for the sake of movement. This can result in pacing, shifting, circling—random movement none of which evokes credibility. Instead, always move with a content-driven purpose. And when you're stationary (which you will be a large part of the time), don't fidget. Stand and plant. Convey your physical energy from the waist up, and employ demonstrative gestures. Remember that physical movement on a big stage must *be* bigger to achieve audience impact. You must claim a large space by expanding your presence. That means a wider stance, more emphatic gestures and broader movement.

### 8. Win the audience.

Let's face it. Too many presentations are just plain boring. The presenter moves little, speaks in a monotone, provides no personal color and fails to understand what we, the audience, want

and need. We've all been to that presentation. Needless to say, it did nothing to further our business objectives.

When preparing for the opposite outcome, it's critical to begin not with what you want to say (content, slides, animations, etc.) but what your audience wants or needs to hear. For most of us, this is plainly counterintuitive. But all great communicators know that acknowledging an audience's concerns and feelings from the start of every presentation is the secret to securing that audience's permission to receive and act on your message. Remember, audiences require *you* to bring the passion to the presentation in order for them to buy in. Think audience first.

Next, align the visual, vocal and verbal elements of your presentation for the most effective delivery. For example, if your eye contact (visual) matches your tone (vocal) matches your word choice (verbal); your audience will subconsciously assign a deep credibility to you and your message.

And stay focused on the most significant "V"—variety. Our brains deplore the predictable. So vary your visuals: movement, gestures, facial expression, etc. Vary your vocals: volume, pitch, quality, etc. And vary your verbals: illustrations, examples, stories, etc. The more variety you bring to your delivery, the more audience attention your message receives as a result. And there's nothing like the full focus of a live audience on a message that matters to you.

### 9. Master the toys.

Digital discovery has transformed the audiovisual aspects of presentation to a level of immersive impact previously unimagined. As a presenter, your task is to engage these impressive instruments without letting them steal the show. Remember, the technology is there to serve you, not the other way around.

Often on a big stage, you'll have the use of so-called confidence monitors. These are basically large television monitors strategically positioned in front of and below you, between you and the audience. These monitors face you and helpfully display a slide or graphic or video as you discuss it during your presentation.

Resist the temptation to speak to the confidence monitors, which the audience can't see. Instead, if you want to emphasize visual content, refer to the images that the audience can see *with* you. These are often projected on a big screen behind and/or on either side of you. They are the same images you're seeing simultaneously on your confidence monitors.

When you interact with projected images behind or beside you, don't turn your back to the audience. Rather, position yourself so you are still able to speak to the audience when referring to the image. Use an arm to gesture toward the screen for added emphasis. Television

weathercasters perform this technique especially well, never turning their backs on the audience but seamlessly drawing attention to meaningful meteorological imagery.

Animation, audience participation and polling, image magnification—these are just some of the other presentation support capabilities today’s event production professionals provide. Whatever the particulars of your forum, it’s critical to “practice as you play.” That means running through the blocking, choreography and mechanics of your presentation and its tools before the big day. There is no substitute.

### 10. Make the choice

Great speakers are not born. They’re made. They choose to be awesome. They decide, “Today, now, at this moment, I will get on that stage, and be outstanding.” It takes courage to go big. You might not know precisely what you’ll say. But you go “all in” because this is not about you; it’s about them—your audience. They—and your organization—expect and deserve nothing but your best.

One client, the president of a multinational company, told speakers preparing for his company’s annual marketing conference, *“This is not a meeting. It’s a performance.”* While that may be intimidating to subject matter experts, technical personnel, or numbers people, leaders know when the situation requires them to up their game. And great leaders are great communicators. Be great. Go all in.