



Leadership Letter

How do you connect?

A year ago I wrote a letter on the importance of dialogue in our teaching and training. I would like to focus in this letter a little more on the elements that enable us to connect with our audience. TED talks have become very popular over the last few years with millions giving their time (18 minutes per talk to be precise) to listen to speakers from all walks of life, talking about their passions. When you observe the best speakers they all have some things in common, which are outlined in Carmine Gallo's book 'Talk like TED.' So let's explore some of the principles of the book.

Have you ever tried to do the maths on the number of sermons and messages you have heard over your lifetime? Let's just say, it's a lot! The bigger question however is: How many messages do you really remember because they made an impact on you? Probably not too many.

People come in all shapes and sizes with different personalities, different gifts, different approaches and speak in a wide variety of ways. In one sense there is no set clinical formula to put into practice in order to impact people, yet there are some key elements that help tremendously. I have read about Jonathan Edwards, who held his notes very close to his face because of his bad eyesight and read in a monotone voice but with a heart after God, experienced revival taking place right in front of him. Then on the other hand we see a former lawyer, Charles Finney, who was an orator and gifted speaker who also was the key communicator in a revival. God uses all sorts of people, which means he can use you and me. That's the good news.

Leaders, teachers and communicators have different motivations for speaking. Some are sharing a dream for people to catch, others are looking for a response to their inspirational messages, others are wanting to pass on vital information or encourage the use of a tool, and others are looking for a change of heart or repentance in their audience. So the first step is to be clear in what kind of outcome you desire and gear up your message appropriately. The following points are things that I have recognised as being important and outlined in Carmine Gallo's book.

1. What are you passionate about? Sometimes you have to dig a little deeper than your first response. I have said for years that I am passionate about developing leaders. If I think a little more, what I really desire is to put tools in the hands of leaders so they can be transformed. I want to see leaders engaging and applying truth and being changed through the learning environment that they experience. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, 'Nothing great has ever been achieved without enthusiasm.' Passion is easy to spot. Effective stories, PowerPoint slides and body language are important components of a persuasive presentation, yet they mean little if the speaker isn't passionate about his or her topic. The first step to inspiring others is to make sure you're inspired yourself.

2. Master the art of story telling. You can reach people's minds through a presentation but you can only touch their hearts by telling a story. The Greek philosopher, Aristotle, believed that persuasion occurs when three components are represented: ethos, logos and pathos.

- Ethos is credibility. We tend to agree with people whom we respect for their achievements, title, experience, etc.
- Logos is the means of persuasion through logic, data and statistics.
- Pathos is the art of appealing to emotions. (the most persuasive talks have the highest percentage of pathos!)

Researchers have discovered that our brains are more active when we listen to stories. A wordy PowerPoint slide with bullet points activates the language processing centre of the brain, where we turn words into meaning. Stories do much more using the whole brain and activating language, sensory, visual and motor areas.

The best communicators tell three types of stories: 1. personal stories that relate directly to the theme or topic, 2. stories of other people who have learned a lesson the audience will relate to and 3. stories involving success and failure in connection with the theme. Stories turn abstract concepts into tangible, emotional and memorable ideas.

Many have completed an LDC assignment on the timeline and thought about all the experiences in their lives where God was teaching a specific lesson. We can then tell our personal story with the lesson and principle that we have learned and it can powerfully relate with our listeners. We illustrate our message with these practical real examples.

3. Have a conversation. It takes practice to appear natural. Authenticity doesn't just happen. It takes a lot of work, to identify the right words and speak from your heart in a way that people will be able to understand and be connected with you.

The four elements of verbal delivery:

- Rate: speed at which you speak
- Volume: loudness or softness
- Pitch: high or low inflections
- Pauses: short pauses to punch key words

When you read printed text, it would be natural to use a highlighter to emphasise an important word or phrase. The verbal equivalent of a highlighter is these 4 aspects of rate, volume, pitch and pause but if you don't have the rate of speech right nothing else matters. Most slow down their rate in giving a presentation which sounds unnatural. How you say something leaves as deep an impression on the listener as what you say. So be aware of your tone and body language as you speak and make sure they are congruent with the content you share. Unfortunately few leaders think about how they talk, walk and look until they see themselves on video!

4. Teach me something new. Reveal information that is totally new, repackaged or share a topic in a new way or use a novel way of dealing with an old problem. The best ideas will fail

to inspire or capture an audience unless they are packaged well. It is helpful to think about this question: What is the one thing I want my audience to know? It should be easy to remember, catchy and be able to say it in less than 140 words (twitter friendly).

5. Deliver jaw dropping moments. Some call this an emotionally charged event. Like Bill Gates unleashing mosquitos into the audience as he was speaking about the plight of millions dying from malaria every year. Emotionally charged events persist longer in our memories and are recalled with greater accuracy than normal memories. We have discovered that we see things that are emotionally touching us with greater clarity than those that are more mundane. Whether they're positive, for example a first kiss, the birth of a child, winning an award – or negative, such as traumatic events, breakups, or a painful and humiliating childhood moment that we all carry with us, the effect is the same. If you connect to an audience's emotional response then they will perceive the information more vividly, be less distracted and will be more likely to remember it. Use very concrete and meaningful examples to illustrate abstract points.

I was speaking recently on mentoring and asked myself the question, 'Does my presentation need a prop?' So I brought in a spider plant with its spiderettes of young plants. It is a beautiful picture of multiplication and the passing on of DNA to the younger plants. There is nothing like a prop to give a mental image of the concept.

6. Lighten up. Don't take yourself or your topic too seriously. Our brains loves humour, so give your audience something to smile about. Humour is important in our speaking because it lowers defences, and enables us to be more receptive to a message. It also breaks the ice in a group, helps people to relax, bond and makes you seem more likable. Humour has been found to reduce hostility, deflect criticism, relive tension, improve morale and help communicate difficult messages. But don't try to be funny, so avoid telling jokes. Use anecdotes, observations and personal stories. Videos are also a very effective way of bringing humour into a presentation and it takes the pressure off you to be funny. Most PowerPoint presentations are dreadful because they have so little – if any – emotional impact. I often incorporate a humorous photograph or video clip to lighten the mood. It takes courage to be vulnerable, to poke some good natured fun at yourself and your topic. Studies show that humour is good for your health. Laughter lowers blood pressure, strengthens the immune system, improves breathing, increases your energy and just makes you feel good.

7. Keep it tight and to the point. TED has a strict 18 minute rule for presentations which has been found to be ideal. So how does that fit into our YWAM teaching mode? Well, our brains have a limit of how much we can take in at one time, so we need to break it up. After 18-20 minutes we need to have soft breaks with stories, videos, demonstrations, break out groups, exercises, etc every 10 minutes or so.

Your brain cells need twice as much energy as other cells in your body. Mental activity rapidly depletes glucose. That's why an 18 minute presentation works so well. People complain that they need more time - Albert Einstein once said, "If you cant explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough!"

E.F. Schumacher said, “Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex. It takes a touch of genius and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction. It takes courage to keep things simple. It takes courage to put one picture on a PowerPoint slide instead of filling it with tiny text that most people in the audience won’t even be able to read. It takes courage to reduce the number of the slides in a presentation. It takes courage to speak for 18 minutes instead of rambling on for much longer.”

The rule of three. The rule of three simply means that people can remember three pieces of information really well. If you add more items, the retention falls off considerably. In writing and speaking three is more satisfying than any other number. The number 3 pervades our society: The U.S. declaration of independence - life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. 3 wishes granted to Aladdin, 3 little pigs, 3 musketeers. Painters understand the 3 primary colours, Newton discovered three laws, scientists the 3 elements that make up the atom, 3 pieces of cutlery, 3 wise men with 3 gifts for Jesus, the trinity, most famous brands – bbc, cnn, ibm, ted, etc... So perhaps use 3 stories as the outline for your presentations!

8. Paint a mental picture with multisensory experiences. It is better to present an explanation in words and pictures than solely in words alone. When the brain is allowed to build two mental representations of an explanation – a verbal model and a visual model – the mental connections are much stronger. And if possible go one step further and deliver presentations with components that touch more than one of the senses: sight, sound, touch, taste and smell, then you have a winner.

Replace words with images on PowerPoint wherever possible. Use PowerPoint as a backdrop to the story, not as a focus of the story. It’s hard for audiences if we ask them to listen intently to our words and read a lengthy PowerPoint slide at the same time. Use visuals to enhance words, not duplicate them. Ted recommends no more than 40 words in the first 10 slides.

9. Stay in your lane. Be authentic, open and transparent. Most people can spot a phony. If you try to be something or someone you’re not, you’ll fail to gain the trust of your audience. You have to leave your own mark on people. When you deliver a presentation your goal should not be to deliver a good presentation. It should be to inspire your audience, to move them and to encourage them to dream bigger. You cannot move people if they don't think you’re real. You’ll never convince anyone of anything if they don't trust, admire and genuinely like you. To be an impressive public speaker, you have to believe in what you are saying. And if you speak with conviction and you’re passionate about your subject, your audience will be far more forgiving of your mistakes because they’ll have faith that you are telling the truth.

So to communicate well and for that communication to be remembered and acted upon, there is a lot to think about and prepare. Speaking and teaching is a high calling so let’s put our best into it. Remember the 5 P’s of public speaking: Prior preparation prevents poor performance.

Until next month

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