

Awkward Presentations

Tips and techniques to make them work

Patrick Forsyth



PATRICK FORSYTH

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TIPS AND TECHNIQUES
TO MAKE THEM WORK

Awkward Presentations: Tips and techniques to make them work

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Patrick Forsyth is a consultant, trainer and writer. He has worked with organisations large and small and in many different parts of the world. He is the author of many successful books on management, business and careers and prides himself on having a clear how-to style.

One reviewer (“Professional Marketing”) commented: *Patrick has a lucid and elegant style of writing which allows him to present information in a way that is organised, focused and easy to apply.*

In this series he is also the author of several titles including “Your boss: sorted!” and “How to get a pay rise”. His writing extends beyond business. He has had published humorous books (e.g. *Empty when half full*) and light-hearted travel writing: *First class at last!* about a journey through South East Asia, and *Smile because it happened* about Thailand. His novel, *Long Overdue*, was published recently.

He can be contacted via www.patrickforsyth.com

INTRODUCTION: MAKING PRESENTATIONS WORK

“The human brain starts working the moment you are born and never stops until you stand up to speak in public”

– Sir George Jessel

If someone had said, early in my career, that I would earn my future living largely by speaking in public I would have dismissed the thought out of hand. I could not do it, did not know how to do it and did not *want* to do it. The very thought terrified me. However, events led me in a direction that meant I *had* to do it – and this, in turn, meant I had to learn how to do it.

I still remember my first public speech with horror (though in the event it went okay). But this is a skill that most managers and executives must do and do well; and it is one that *can* be learnt. Given the apprehension many people feel at the thought of public speaking (if you get nervous, then you are normal!), looking for a little guidance is only sensible. Consider the task. It is all too easy for the ill-prepared presenter to go to pieces:

They stumble, they hesitate, they sweat. They begin every sentence with the word “basically”. They say “Um, err... at this moment in time we are making considerable progress with the necessary preliminary work prior to the establishment of the initial phase of the project” when they mean “We will begin soon”.

Just when they should be blinding their audience with their expertise, they upset or confuse them. At worst they go on too long, their explanation is inadequate, they pick holes in their audience or, worse still, their noses. Their slides cannot be read from the back of the room without a telescope and the only long word of which they are manifestly ignorant is apparently “rehearsal”. They are struggling, and they know it.

Of course, for some people making a potent, powerful, persuasive presentation is second nature. They know their stuff and how to put it over. Their first rule is to assume the audience is as thick as they look and will, provided the speaker hits the right level of impenetrable jargon, instantly conclude they are in the presence of an expert.

Of course, wanting people to understand the gist of their argument they take care. They talk v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y; use simple words and generally treat the audience as if they had the brains

of retarded dormice. They spell out complicated bits by talking IN CAPITAL LETTERS. They need only the briefest of introductions and they are away, moving quickly past the first – upside down - slide and rattling the coins in their pocket at 90 decibels. Blissfully ignorant of the fact that they are alienating their audience they seem to think that they can survive stepping into the lion's den just by saying "Nice pussycat".

I exaggerate somewhat... perhaps. More seriously, no audience will warm to a speaker who is ill prepared and who flounders through a talk that is poorly constructed and inexpertly delivered. The task must be approached from the basis of some understanding, some thought as to what might best be said and how it might best be put over, and with respect for the task, the audience and an eye on what must be achieved. It can be a daunting task.

This book is designed to help whether you face having to speak for the first time or if you have both some experience and proven competence. It presents only some very brief, though practical, advice on the techniques of presentation, a full run down is available in other books in this series including my own: *Avoiding Death by PowerPoint*. Here the main part of the book provides specific guidance in the form of a blueprint for a variety of individual speaking situations. These sections provide a quick check before you tackle a particular occasion; they also contain information, advice, and useful quotations that will extend your confidence for any speaking task. The intention is to make preparation quicker and delivery more certain, especially with topics you may find awkward and are just a little uncertain how to tackle.

THE TOPICS

Guidelines are given to how to tackle a range of typical speaking tasks listed in no particular order. These are designed to:

- Specifically assist you in preparing and undertaking these particular assignments
- Act as examples, providing information useful to undertaking something broadly similar to the examples
- Somewhat better equip you to get ready to speak on any topic, both those similar to the examples and others.

The examples are chosen to be representative of the kind of thing most managers may have to do; some topics will remind you of others which need a broadly similar approach. All may make points that can help in wider situations.

Always, whatever speaking task you may face, it is helpful to ensure you are absolutely clear why the task is necessary – what the objectives are – and to think through what needs to be said and how systematically.

After a few introductory remarks, each entry is arranged under the same headings:

The opportunity

Key things to include

Dangers to avoid

Clear structure

- *Beginning:*
- *Middle:*
- *End:*
- *Overall:*
- *Additional dimensions:*
- *Visual aids:*

Duration

Speaker's notes

Useful quotes

The intention is not to provide a complete blueprint (other study may be necessary, as has been said) rather to highlight those elements that are especially important with regard to an individual topic. In the few minutes that it takes to read the comments on a particular topic, you can pick up pointers and stimulate your own thinking prior to preparing something you have to undertake.

The topics now follow in the order listed in the contents.

1 GIVING CONGRATULATIONS

Here is an occasion that you *want* to occur regularly. It might follow any sort of success: a project successfully completed, a large sales order, a promotion, an extra effort. Success might relate to a routine matter or to something really exceptional. It might be one small part of what goes on or itself have a disproportional effect on operations. It might just have saved the day in some way!

The success might have been achieved by an individual or by a group of people; whoever has done what – you decide to tell them it was appreciated.

The opportunity

The immediate opportunity is to make the successful person (or people) feel good. This is clear “recognition of achievement”, straight out of motivation theory, and the job is to improve their morale. But, as so often is the case, there may be more to bear in mind. Such might include:

- Encouraging repeat action or still greater efforts
- Encouraging others to act likewise
- Explaining just how important such action is and how it helps
- Making up for past difficulties
- Acknowledging the specific nature of the achievement (perhaps it was done in adverse circumstances)

In addition, you may want to come over as caring, appreciative and impressed. This represents a good opportunity and one worth getting just right if it is to work hard for you.

Key things to include

Unequivocal praise (if not, why are you saying anything at all?).

A clear statement, or explanation, of what was done, if necessary how and in what circumstances and, often the most important thing, what results accrued. You may want to build it up for others present, or to link the specific result to more general points.

If you are going to mention other things, make the link clear and do not let anything appear to belittle the core congratulations.

Last, a small point, but with anything so personal, get peoples' names right!

Dangers to avoid

The key thing is *not* on any account to sound patronising. If it is thought you are *just saying something because you have to*, its value will not be lessened - it will be nil. Avoiding this is largely achieved through manner, tone of voice and choice of words. Even uncertainty about what to say (because you are attempting to wing it) may come across as uncaring. Similarly, do not be vague calling something *quite good* when it needs more of a superlative as this will just dilute its impact.

The second main danger is to bury the congratulations, by giving other things too much emphasis or time, and apparently belittling it.

Conversely, be careful too not to make the occasion sound too brief and informal if you want to use it to make serious points more broadly.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- Make it very clear right at the start that congratulations are in order: *Right, let's be clear, I want to say an enormous "thank you" to Mary. Some of us may not understand just what a success she has had, ...*
- Only then state the nature of your speech (e.g. just a thank you, or something more – encapsulating what it will be in just a few words)

Middle:

- Remain organised throughout
- Do not say too much, and keep any separate elements of the content well balanced
- Separate elements must be explained and put succinctly so as to be accepted
- Remember one useful rule about humour, and *never* say anything that will personally embarrass someone; this will rather negate the motivational nature of the occasion

End:

Always finish, at the heart of your theme, by repeating your congratulations and thanks. And link to anything that follows (for example, food and drink, which might be announced by a toast). A light or humorous touch at the end may well suit.

Overall

- Be sure to find some good phrases. Just *Thank you*, may be insufficient. *A very good result* sounds – is - bland and therefore risks not conveying much meaning. If you mean: *What a result! Unexpected – even by Mary – first class and more than any would have dared to hope – well done you, it's something we will all remember for a long time*, then say so
- In terms of manner, this needs to be done enthusiastically and with something of a feel of spontaneity; to achieve this you must prepare sufficiently thoroughly so as to become familiar with your intentions. You will then not have to follow every tiny detail of your notes, which can suppress the feeling of spontaneity.

Additional dimensions:

- A chance to reply? Maybe in a speech replying or maybe just by allowing an informal word or two: *It was a great result – what did you think when you heard Mary?* Equally you may want to protect someone from cries of *Speech!*
- Manage anything you have to cope with physically carefully (and think about it beforehand), thus if you need to produce, say, a bunch of flowers with a flourish think about where it sits meantime – somewhere safe and secret.

Visual aids:

- Slides of any sort are not likely to be needed or appropriate
- Something to show might add to your manner (e.g. the award if there is one, or just waving the report announcing results enthusiastically might be enough).

Duration

Not too long for this sort of thing, and flag time in advance – *I'd like to take three or four minutes to...*

Watch the balance of time between the main message and any other elements

Speaker's notes: Probably brief, say a postcard or two.

Useful quotes

"The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary"

– Vidal Sassoon

"Some people pay a compliment as if they expected a receipt"

– Kin Hubbard

"I can live for two months on a good compliment"

– Mark Twain

2 TALKING ABOUT MONEY

For any organisation money makes their world go round. It is important on both sides of the balance sheet – the only money an organisation has comes from outside itself (in a commercial one primarily from customers). Costs are important too.

There is, however, a considerable difference between what people regard as “my money” and “organisation money”; and the latter may somehow feel less real.

The opportunity

The purposes of discussing money may be many and varied and may indeed overlap with other topics here. It can be for information, but may also link to action – for example if you are specifying a financial target of some sort for people, then their understanding it may be an essential preliminary to their taking action to achieve it.

So the key opportunity here is the achievement of clear understanding. This, like anything considered complex, may have a direct bearing on the way you are perceived. If you are able to get people understanding – perhaps surprised at the ease with which they are in fact appreciating something they expected to be complicated – then they like it: *I really see that now – I hadn't thought of it like that before.* This enhances the opportunity.

Key things to include

A clear spelling out of just what is going to be put over (and, as ever, why).

Sufficient background to the core content. For example, do not start talking about cost cutting without putting the need for it in context.

A careful, step by step approach to the detail, one that is well illustrated (see Visual aids later) and well exemplified.

And lastly, be particularly careful about checking understanding and remember that if you simply say: *Everybody clear?* It takes a brave person to say that they are not.

Dangers to avoid

Pitching in too fast and without sufficient run up.

Proceeding through too fast without pause for people to take in, and perhaps consider, the details.

Jumping straight to complexities, particularly if you appear to be assuming that everyone is keeping up.

Using too much jargon; with any financial terminology – sometimes even basics like *Profit and loss account*, never mind more technical phrases - and it is easy to lose people quickly. Too many abbreviations such as DCF (discounted cash flow) may also dilute understanding.

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Clear structure

Beginning:

- Make sure you get attention ahead of going into any detail
- If people are apprehensive about figures, say something early on to make it clear you will take care not to confuse and get them believing that they *will* understand.

Middle:

- The key here is a logical approach with the sequence in which you are going to proceed, and the reason for it, spelt out clearly
- Then a point by point progression that ensures clarity at every step along the way before going further
- Make sure that the reasons for detail, and the implications of the message, are not lost in a plethora of unexplained or peripheral figures.

End:

- Given the complexities that may be involved the key thing is to summarise the essentials, and end with a clear link between any detail that has had to be gone through and the implications and any action people in the audience must take.

Overall:

- Always bear in mind that many people in business are not as numerate, or as quick at grasping figures, as they would like (or sometimes as they pretend!). The apocryphal story of the businessman who, asked how he made his fortune said *I started a business buying at \$2 and selling at \$4, and it's just amazing how that two percent mounts up* makes a point. He was able to turn a profit, but not to explain the arithmetic involved. So, never underestimate the care with which financial matters need to be explained
- In terms of manner, this needs the impression of concern for detail and precision of explanation. This must underlie whatever else is going on, whether it is elation about record profits or concern for excessive costs.

Additional dimensions:

- Watch your language. It needs a particular kind of precision. For example nothing can be: *About 12.3 percent*. It is either: *About 12 percent* or it is specifically *12.3 percent*.
- Be careful to make figures relate to the people in the audience. Amounts of money that have relevance around an organisation may seem unimaginable to members of staff who may regard say £100 as a lot of money. For example, in one travel agency group the sum by which management sought to increase sales was a figure of hundreds of thousands of pounds. By talking about what each individual member of a branch's staff needed to do for the figure to be hit (perhaps an additional 2/3 family holidays sold each week) they made the task seem clear and manageable. This kind of amortising is often useful; another example is saying *Less than one hundred pounds a month* instead of *£1100*. Or vice versa; you might want to emphasise the larger sum.

Visual aids:

- The old saying that a picture is worth a thousand words was never truer than here. Figures can very easily be confusing, so slides or visuals of some sort in a form that clarifies are a real support. Graphs are particularly useful, a pie or bar chart can provide information – accurately – and at a glance which just talk or looking at the raw figures would take much longer to impart.
- Beware of slides created from reports, for example columns of figures most of which you ignore and from which you extract just one or two points. Use material specifically designed to make the points you want

Duration

Duration here is not a major factor in its own right. Though rushing through rather than taking time can dilute understanding, as has been said. Time to make matters clear will often be appreciated. Too long without a break or a change of pace may make it difficult for those with no great facility for figures to concentrate.

Speaker's notes

As slides are likely to be important here, these may be a major part of what you need in front of you. Be sure you have all the figures that you will need to quote clear and legible in front of you (watch the type size you choose if you print out material for your guidance). Organise material so that you *never* have to say *I think it was about £12000* when it matters that it was *£11,100*.

Useful quotes

"Money is the only applause that a businessman gets for his performance"

– Larry Adler

The two most beautiful words in the English Language? "Cheque enclosed!"

– Dorothy Parker

"It is not a sale until the money's in the bank"

– Overheard

3 HIGHLIGHTING A THREAT

Threats come in all sorts of guises. They may be external, from competition in the market place or government regulations. They may be internal, a cut down on costs or a “downsizing” affecting staff numbers. They may be long anticipated or they may appear overnight and surprise everyone. Almost always they need assimilating, their effects, or likely effects, considering, and then they need a response – in the form of action. Thus an unstoppable need for cost reduction may demand that you consider different ways of doing things, competitive action may necessitate product revision or improved marketing to combat it.

The opportunity

Given the circumstances described above, there are a number of different things that may need to be done here, for example to:

- Explain clearly *what* is happening (or predicted to happen)
- Explain *why* something is the case (and perhaps to make it clear no blame is involved internally)
- Set out – or discuss – the likely consequences
- Spell out whatever action is deemed necessary and, if necessary, how that will affect people
- Spell out also the degree to which this will solve the problem (some things just cannot be overturned, others may need a long campaign – in which case it needs to be explained that you are talking about phase one)
- Link to an action plan – who will do what and when.

As ever the need to be clear and define your differing intentions may well be important.

Key things to include

Clear differentiation between the negative and the positive parts of the message; this both in terms of signposting and actual content and presentation.

Clear differentiation also between the background, current or recent circumstances and so on and the conclusions drawn and the action to follow.

Any action plan element of the messages content must be clear and not diluted by any overlap with a display of fear or resentment about the difficulty being faced.

A nice thought to keep in mind here is the way the Chinese write the word “Crisis”. It consists of two characters, the first of which means chaos and the second of which means – opportunity. Perhaps whatever the threat, it is worth trying to see if anything positive can come, or be made to come, from it.

Dangers to avoid

In the words immortalised in the television sitcom “Dad’s Army” – *Don’t panic!* The greatest danger here is acting prematurely, so that lack of clear thinking makes what should come over as a considered and practical response appear to be ill thought out or a shot in the dark.

Lack of structure, poorly chosen words or expressions or a strident note can all give the wrong impression, so although there is perhaps a feeling of desperation in the background, this must not be allowed to show and a steady hand is needed in putting your message over.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- Make it clear that the session will not all be gloom and doom, even if you have to start with the dangers
- A summary of where you are going may be important and useful at the start – *Before we get into this at all, let me say that I’m confident that we can overcome the difficulty and ...* (touching on the new situation to be created).

Middle:

- A good, and well signposted, agenda
- A point by point explanation – that keeps facts and emotions separate
- A clear differentiation between the major topics of the session: for instance, the dangers, the action to be taken
- A clear link to the action plan.

End:

- There may be a good deal to be done here. Summary may usefully touch again on the dangers (and thus the importance of moving ahead purposefully), but must also highlight the action and end on an encouraging – *this is possible* – note.

Overall:

- Do not neglect the motivational element that may be necessary – ask yourself if you need to enthuse people and convince them that action *will* retrieve the situation or to put it more personally – *I am confident that you will be able to get this done and make this solution work*
- In terms of manner, in difficult circumstances a considered, panic-free approach will not just be appreciated - it will give confidence.

Additional dimensions:

- Accentuate the positive. Instead of saying: *We've got to do something about this*, rather say: *We will do something about this*.
- Be clear about intentions and about results. Talk about how things will be in the future and what effect planned action will have on the situation.

Duration

As with many topics here the complexity of the message dictates overall length. One thing you can try to organise, however, is the time spent on different elements of the message. The threat needs to be clearly described, but thereafter little time should be spent on speculation and possible ensuing disaster (though the result of inaction should be made clear) and most of the time should be spent on the action and the intended results.

Speaker's notes

Nothing special is required here, notes should reflect the structure you have selected and be sufficiently clear to allow you to give sufficient concentration to the tone and making it positive.

Useful quotes

"A man is not finished when he is defeated. He is finished when he quits"

– Richard Nixon

"Risk comes from not knowing what you are doing"

– Warren Buffet

"There can't be a crisis this week, my diary is full"

– Henry Kissinger

4 SPEAKING TO CUSTOMERS

In many ways there is no more important group. Customers are fundamental to any organisation's success. They may need speaking to in person on many occasions, some where you visit them, some where they visit you and some at other events (a trade fair or conference, perhaps). This always needs doing with care, and is always a significant opportunity.

Always too it is worth bearing in mind that whatever is said and however it is put over, it personalises an image already built up of the organisation and the way it works, and obtained from the wealth of less personal communications of which they are in receipt. These include everything from advertising to letters from your accounts department chasing for payment of you invoices

The opportunity

The ultimate opportunity is to play a part in making them buy. This may be for the first time or to encourage ongoing business.

En route to that a number of things may be necessary, these include

- Informing them (about everything from news of new products to promotional activity or financial terms)
- Persuading them – often anything addressed to customers is in the nature of selling
- Differentiating yourselves from competition (after all, however good your product or service, others no doubt make strong claims also).

These three need thinking about and skilfully blending together.

Additionally, you may well want to thank them for past business (though do not become like Uriah Heap), flatter them (carefully) or involve them, for instance canvassing their opinions or creating and building business partnerships.

Key things to include

Clear information pitched in terms that are persuasive (for example, stressing the benefits – this takes us beyond our brief into the whole area of sales skills).

A focus on something specific; as opportunities to address customers may be limited (certainly in terms of what you would like) there is a danger of throwing everything in and not doing justice to it all.

Views presented from their point of view.

Some genuine news and excitement.

Dangers to avoid

Never – ever – ask for customers *to support you*. This can all too easily sound as if it is no more than asking them to do you a favour (why should they?). You have to *earn* their support. In any case, you may be better to talk in terms such as suggesting: *You take advantage of this opportunity*.

An approach that mentions everything in sight (see above).

An introspective approach with everything starting *I, we* or *the company* when what is looked for is something that reflects their point of view, their needs and perspective.

Clear structure

The clarity with which things are done, evidence of care and preparation and a sound, logical structure are all especially important here as customers will infer a lack of respect for them if such things are not in evidence.

Beginning:

- If customer gatherings are rare then there is a need to make it feel a bit special
- Start with an immediate positive feel expressing something about the benefit of the occasion for those attending
- Set out a well considered and well organised agenda
- If customers are visiting you, make them feel at home and spell out how administrative matters will be dealt with (what happens if there are messages for them, for instance)

Middle:

- Follow the agenda
- Maintain interest (and excitement?) throughout
- Keep your eye on the objectives (to sell), but in parallel with their viewpoint
- Allow as much participation as is appropriate.

End:

- You want people to remember – and act on – this session, so make the action clear (and easy to take) and always finish on a high note.

Note: Have any follow up action ready and spell out what it will be. For example, having a letter on their desks the following morning may take a little organising, but it can be impressive and thus worthwhile.



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Overall:

- Any session here must have clear objectives and, while this is always important, here it is especially so that they are couched in terms of the audience – the customers.
- In terms of manner, always welcoming, appreciative and enthusiastic – without going over the top in any of these ways. Essentially it is useful to see this as a session that always focuses outward.

Additional dimensions:

- Usually there will be a specific focus here, like the launch of one specific new product, other elements need positioning carefully. There should not be too many of them and they should not be allowed to act to obscure the main purpose.

Visual aids:

- Anything that is used should not just be clear, but high quality (as it reflects your perceived professionalism)
- If you are speaking to a group of people from one customer it looks good to have their logo on your slides.

Duration

Whatever the duration it is important to publish it – and then to stick to time.

You may also want to allow for hospitality, the informal chat in any break may be very useful to all present.

Never try to do more than you can do justice too, it will always end up looking like a failure of organisation or planning and thus as a lack of courtesy or respect to those attending.

Speaker's notes

Certainly sufficient for you not to lose your way on what is an important occasion. Ensure a clear link between your notes and any visuals and handouts.

Useful quotes

"The customer is always right"

– H. Gordon Selfridge

"Satisfying the customer is a race without finish"

– Vernon Maxmin

"For every customer who complains, fifty walk"

– Anon

5 INSTIGATING A CHANGE

Two key points are worth bearing in mind:

- Everyone is in favour of change. Change is a good thing – right up to the moment when someone comes into your office and says *Right, there are going to be some changes here!* What happens in such circumstances? Many people are suspicious and fear the worst. Whether the objective is positive (improving performance) or negative (reducing costs), the natural reaction seems to be to anticipate difficulties. So, if this is the case (and it is), the only response is to address the issue and get past this reaction to make change possible. As Louise L Hay said *Change is usually what we want the other person to do.*
- Change is the norm. We live in a dynamic world. Any organisation must respond to changes of all sorts: these may include competitive action, technical development, government legislation, environmental controls, financial restriction and more. They may be prompted internally or externally; or both. Change is not an option, something to do if it fits in, it is essential to corporate survival.

The opportunity

To ensure that:

- The need for change, and the potential results of it, are accepted (together perhaps with the dangers of *not* changing)
- Any downsides are explained and minimised (and balanced against the advantages)
- Action is spelt out and co-operation is agreed.

Additionally, to ensure that the action to make the change goes ahead to plan and on time. Beyond that, the opportunity is in the nature of the change whether this is in money made or saved, improved customer service and subsequent sales, increased productivity of some sort or anything else.

Key things to include

Provide adequate background and explanation. Never just say: *This is going to change*, explain why and how and what the results will be, including those for the individuals.

Have a good overall structure, deal systematically with the detail and make clear how you will do so.

Make a link with something similar to the topic/project under discussion. Using this as an example helps peoples' imagination. If you pick carefully and conjure up memories of how much easier something else was than anticipated, how well it worked and how little it disrupted other things this will help remove fears.

Mention specifically: who will do what, the timing and any new targets.

Dangers to avoid

Muddling the past and the future will create confusion. Deal separately with what has happened in the past, is happening now, and what the situation will be for the future.

Allowing people to make unwarranted assumptions about any negative aspects, by not addressing this aspect up front.

While the dangers of taking no action may be considerable, and may need highlighting and exemplifying, do not allow this to predominate so that the session becomes primarily doom and gloom in nature.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- You need a clear statement of purpose, coupled with something early on that addresses peoples' natural fears (especially personal rather than corporate ones).

Middle:

- Be sure that your "agenda" addresses the various different intentions you may well have here separately
- Be sure you keep a cohesive flow and that the overall effect does not become ragged.

End:

- Given the complexity inherent here, a summary is likely to be important. Recap the reasons and what is to be gained and give emphasis to the action, timing etc. that will make implementation possible.

Overall:

- The intention here should be to combine allaying fears with a positive approach to whatever needs to be done and a clear guide to action. The details of whatever is being discussed need to be clear, together with the reasons for change. Remember people dislike tinkering and they dislike just being told – *do this because I say so* – without explanation and background it will always be more difficult to get the need for change accepted
- In terms of manner, your confidence in dealing with the matter should show. Other feelings may be there (surprise or concern perhaps), but people should take on board your confidence in a considered response.

Additional dimensions:

- Given the fact that “change is the norm”, one thing that every individual session of this sort should address is that fact. The need for change needs to be regularly described as normal, positive and necessary. Every session can play a part in making the next one go better because there is a greater acceptance of the facts.

Visual aids:

- The detail involved in such a session makes the use of visual aids desirable. These can be used to control the session and ensure a good structure is followed, and to assist explanation and spell out action required.

Duration

As long as the topic demands, but be sure not to underestimate the time needed for the early stages (background and explanation).

Speaker's notes

Use whatever allows you to proceed purposefully and do what's necessary.

Useful quotes

"If it ain't broke. Break it."

– Richard Pascale

*"Change is only another word for growth, another synonym
for learning. We can all do it if we want"*

– Charles Handy

*"When you're though changing, you're through. Change is a
process, not a goal; a journey, not a destination"*

– Robert Kriegal and David Brandt

6 SOUNDING A WARNING

The comments that follow under this heading are perhaps best described as saying “*No*” or “*This will not happen*”. What you are saying no to may range widely, and the situation may be long or short – no this week or no forever (though *forever* is a *very* long time, and perhaps nothing is ruled out literally forever).

The situation here can sound a warning but hold the action. Indeed it may aim to do more, to put something on one side so that it ceases to distract and take up time. Even postponing something temporarily may be useful. If growth indicates you will have to move offices, with all the attendant upheaval that suggests, then saying: *Yes, we will have to move* and setting out some parameters about how the disruption will be mitigated is one thing. This is a warning sounded well ahead. Saying *But we will definitely not be moving for eighteen months* can act to postpone the process which will lock in nearer the time. This is in effect a warning not to let the impending move interfere with current operations.

The opportunity

Obviously the first, and perhaps the most important, thing here is to prevent something occurring. Depending on the circumstances, you may well want to:

- Explain external dangers and how they will affect people – *The recession will limit our ability to expand as ideally we would wish, requests for additional funds for X are ruled out at least for the next six months.*
- Similarly with internal dangers – *The merger is going to mean a good bit of reorganising, but we cannot let this hold up our X project – so let’s hear no suggestions that it should please.*
- Clarify or lay down rules – *In future expense claims must be in on time, no claim no money and repayment will have to wait until the following month.*

Key things to include

The key things are to:

- Give any necessary background
- Spell out the danger
- Deal with any balancing factors
- Set out the rules and link to policy

Deal carefully with personal issues. The warning may be directed firmly to stop staff doing something – *No one is to use the Reception area – where there are nearly always customers waiting - as a meeting place, especially not to chat and exchange gossip.* It may be useful to single out examples in such circumstances, equally it can do more harm than good; so care is necessary.

Dangers to avoid

The greatest danger is that what you say comes over without conviction or without power. You need to be able to say *No* in a way that makes it one hundred percent clear that you do not mean *Maybe*. People have to believe that you mean what you say. This is especially true if there is an *Or else* element to the message; if you make threats you must normally be prepared to see them through or see your authority devalued for the future.

Similarly if you label something *Final warning* it had better be just that. Getting a reputation for crying wolf is not to be recommended.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- The more serious the matter the greater the need to get straight to the point
- Then spell out the agenda and, if both are involved, split the positive and the negative elements of what you have to say.

Middle:

- Use a logical approach and do not digress if you want to people to remain fixed on the main message.

End:

- This may need a stern tone and a heavy sentiment to end with. Certainly the ending must aim to restate the importance of what has been said – and make it stick.

Overall:

- In terms of manner, the tone is the most important thing here. No sign of panic must be in evidence and a calm, considered and positive approach must predominate. Control any anger that you might feel. There is a place occasionally for a display of anger, but never for a loss of temper
- If you are saying: *Do not do this* or *Watch out for that* then maybe there are things to say that can add a positive note.

Additional dimensions:

- As the overall topic here may be negative it may be worth seeing if you can link a warning to other, less negative matters, though sometimes the importance necessitates a stark, isolated statement to produce the impact that you want.

Visual aids:

- A short, sharp shock warning probably needs nothing but your own weight behind it, but a complex issue needs clear explanation. So if getting people to take heed of the warning is vital you will want to do justice to the explanation and visuals may help.

Duration

The topic of the session will dictate this. Firmness will be enhanced by your being succinct in what you say, so it may be wise not to go on too long (though you need to give sufficient time to background and explaining the why of the matter).

Speaker's notes

Anything you have in front of you must be clear and, where you want to sound firm, you may want to think about the precise words you use and how you can give it suitable weight.

Useful quotes

"The future has a way of arriving unannounced"

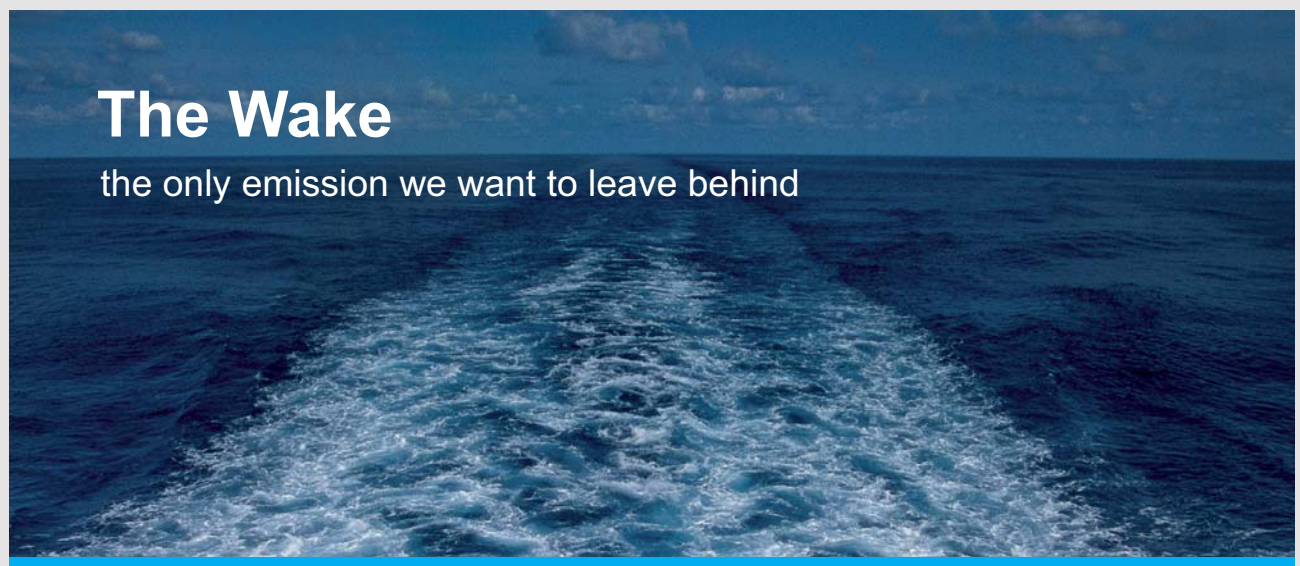
– George F. Will

"The best way to win an argument is to begin by being right"

– Jill Ruckelshaus

"It's a rare person who wants to hear what he doesn't want to hear"

– Dick Cavett




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7 HIGHLIGHTING A KEY ISSUE

Here such a session is taken as addressing something you want to bring to the front of peoples' minds, either temporarily or permanently (in the latter case what you say on one occasion may be part of an ongoing campaign to create and maintain awareness). Such issues might include overall factors such as productivity or accuracy, as well as more specific things like good time keeping or the need for prompt telephone answering in a department involved with customer care.

The opportunity

The opportunity is not to highlight something for the sake of it, it is to highlight it in such a way that action follows, and often so that it is maintained consistently thereafter. To take a simple example, if you highlight the need for good timekeeping then you do not just want people to turn up on time tomorrow, you want them to be on time every day.

Key things to include

Some decisions are needed here about what to include and what not to include. For example, if highlighting something is designed to improve it, do you want to castigate past performance in some way or is it going to be better just to enthuse people to do better? Anyway it may be that past performance *was* good, but new circumstances demand something different again; after all many managers subscribe to the view that *even the best performance can be improved*.

That said, you need to mix and match the following:

- A past situation – that must not continue or which can be built on
- The reasons for change – if change is implied
- The benefits of concentrating unrelentingly on whatever is being highlighted; demonstrating clearly why it is worth the effort
- The penalty or dangers of not so doing
- Any incentive, personal or corporate, for getting it right.

Given the list above, deciding the structure and sequence that you will employ is also important.

Dangers to avoid

Avoid being seen to nag or “cry wolf”. If your tone and approach, or the frequency of your inducements, are seen as exaggerated or over the top, then what they say will be devalued, perhaps ignored. Care may be necessary here not to use inflammatory language – do you mean *unacceptable* or is something a little softer more appropriate?

Clear structure

Beginning:

- Whether what you do is the first highlighting or yet another reminder, make it clear what you are doing. If is a “yet again” speech say so, and find a way to make what you have to say fresh early on
- Spell out your agenda. Is this to be just a word of reminder or do you need to review real detail?

Middle:

- Fit the main content to the substance of what needs to be done: a lengthy session will need more structure, a shorter one will need more precision, careful choice of words and some real clout to make its message stick.

End:

- Whatever the nature of the session it is likely to need a punchy finish, one that is action orientated.

Overall:

- The overall intention, beyond explaining, should be to kick start action and play its part if necessary in changing or reinforcing attitudes
- To do this it is important that people accept the message (agreeing that it is necessary and the results are worthwhile), make it attractive (so that people *want* to do their best) and manageable (so that people feel it is not the last straw and that they can accommodate the action necessary without jeopardising other responsibilities)

- In terms of manner, a degree of enthusiasm is necessary (to help show people that you really do believe this is important), together with a feeling that the main content is well considered.

Additional dimensions:

- Think about how you can put things in terms of the individuals you are addressing. You may think automatically in terms of financial years for example, but younger staff may think Friday week is long term. One example here is amortising figures, the overall corporate figures may just seem like enormous, unimaginable numbers whereas what is necessary per week or per month may make more sense
- Think too of how to put over any necessary empathy. If you want people to respond more quickly – *think speed* – then get them to put themselves in the shoes of those that more rapid response will help in order to bring the situation to life.

Visual aids:

- An ongoing campaign of focusing on key issues might benefit from a slogan and then that might lend itself to visual aids or the enhancement of them. One organisation adopting a focus on achieving key priorities usefully employed the slogan *Getting rid of the alligators* (based on the old maxim about objectives that: *It is difficult to remember that the objective was to drain the swamp when you are up to your arse in alligators*).

Duration

The duration here can vary owing to the range of different types of session that might come under this heading. The key specific thing to bear in mind here is that undue length might be construed as being unduly heavy or simply inappropriate – *Yea, yea – we know that*. If this happens the effectiveness of the message may be diluted. As ever therefore, chosen duration should be a considered decision not just something “that happens”.

Speaker's notes

Like duration above what is appropriate here will vary depending on the nature of the session. Repeated pleas should not use the same old platitudes however, so do not recycle your old notes – and phrases – revisit your objectives and prepare accordingly, then have your updated notes in front of you.

Useful quotes

"The only sure thing is that in business there are no sure things"

– Akio Morita

"Perseverance capitalises inspiration"

– Alex F. Osborn

"You have to be efficient if you're going to be lazy"

– Shirley Conran

8 SPELLING OUT PLANS

A well-known buzzword is “empowerment”, a word that encapsulated the thought of creating a commitment to things with staff which, matched by giving them responsibility, allowed them to carry matters through with little or no supervision. Put this together with another slightly jargon phrase, that of the concept of “ownership”, people committing more easily to a plan that is “theirs” and together these set the scene for what needs to be done here.

Involvement is one thing: people like it if consultation leads up to plans being implemented. This is somewhat beyond our brief here, suffice it to say that this is a good thing and makes effective implementation more likely. Understanding is another – people will always be more able and willing to see through something that is explained, and which they therefore understand (well, provided the explanation is clear!), that if they are just told *do this*.

The opportunity

The opportunity is clear:

- To inform people what a plan is
- To convince them it is sensible and should be supported
- To lay out the action elements, what needs to be done, by whom and when
- To make it appear manageable
- To motivate so that implementation is tackled in the right frame of mind.

And perhaps also to provide an opportunity for the plan to be challenged (when plans are still to be finalised) or questions to be asked.

Key things to include

To do a complete job here plans need to be described in terms of ten key stages. These are as follows:

- i) *Analysis of the current situation* (to move forward at all we must understand where we are at the moment: this stage it sometimes referred to as situation analysis), so details need to be spelt out under this heading

- ii) *The objectives need to be spelt out.* Remember objectives are the results you seek to achieve and must be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timed. If they are just vague intentions then the plan is flawed
- iii) *Creation of options.* There is rarely one “right” way forward so logically various options must be found or created as possible ways ahead
- iv) *Assessment of the options:* all may have pros and cons and an objective assessment of this is a key preliminary to the next stage, reasons for and against each may sometimes usefully be spelt out (if only to prevent some people seeing the plan as a second best to a another option which they prefer, but for which they do not see the snags)
- v) *Spell out the chosen strategy* (in other words explain what will be done – strategies are the routes to achieving objectives). This is an overview, the next stage takes matters further
- vi) *Put what will be done in action plan terms* (that is spell out the who, what and when of the plan). Often details here below a certain level must wait more individual briefings
- vii) *Make implementation procedures clear;* this is the first action of putting the plan into effect
- viii) *Explain the controls that go with the plan* (how progress will be monitored) and also how it will be fine-tuned if necessary as the period goes by. Change may range from minor improvements to major rethinks forced by external and unanticipated circumstances
- ix) *Link what you are saying to the longer term,* making it clear that time runs on and, for example, everything does not stop at the end of a particular period or of a financial year
- x) *Show the link between the action described and the continuing planning* that will ultimately take matters further on (the concept of a “rolling” plan).

This should encompass any plan or planning process that you have to describe, though for something simpler you may only need a cut down version of this. Some thought ahead of the session about the complexity and how much of the detail needs addressing is clearly sensible.

Dangers to avoid

Think carefully before abbreviating the list above too much and omitting elements that are important to the logic of what is being discussed. Plans that are thought to be ill-judged or not based in reality will not be supported with enthusiasm.

Given the importance of the kind of thing that comes under this heading (and the plan in question might be the complete annual plan for an organisation or department) any lack of clarity is dangerous.

So too is missing out something to address any particular intention that is inherent in the session. For instance, a plan might be explained but, without the question of motivation being addressed, it might still fail because its implementation founders in some way.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- The first job is to address the complexity and explain carefully to people what you will, do, why and how (and maybe mention specifically the level of detail into which you intend to go and the relationship between what you will say and documentation to be available later).

Middle:

- Like any complex session an agenda needs to be set, used and stuck to
- Be careful about giving people a written plan and then turning through it together. This can be made to work, but it is difficult to stop people reading page ten when you are trying to talk about page five. Perhaps a document can be introduced in the latter part of a meeting once a clear overview has been given.

End:

- Summary will be a major part of winding up here. This is a more difficult art than it may appear when done well by others; it stands careful preparation.

Overall:

- Plans are to be implemented. However they arise therefore, and they might represent emergency action to retrieve a difficult situation as much as the routine of driving the business forward, their presentation needs a positive approach and attention to detail

- In terms of manner, a businesslike approach is perhaps the overriding tone to be struck, your attitude needs to say that you approve and believe in the plan.

Additional dimensions:

- Plans are important. But they are nothing without people, it is they that make implementation possible. Getting things clear is a serious matter, but unrelieved seriousness can become boring – perhaps you should plan a light moment or two for such a session.
- The same is true of participation; think about where you may want involvement or feedback and how you will create that (both as a break in the proceedings or to get other peoples' views on the table).

Visual aids:

- The detail here makes visuals of some sort likely to be mandatory, especially where financial plans are a part of the picture or where complex timings and the interrelationships of various stages of a project need spelling out clearly
- For plans of any substance documentation is likely to be involved. If so link the written plan and any slides carefully. They should support each other, yet slides may need individually originating as copying pages from a report and turning them into slides may overwhelm people with inappropriate detail.

Duration

The detail involved will dictate the duration of such a session. With much detail, a great deal to take in, and much or all of it often being new, ensure you take adequate time and also build in adequate breaks.

Speaker's notes

This is a lengthy and detailed session so have adequate guidance and reminders in front of you. If you are highlighting key issues from a detailed written plan, then you may use the plan itself as part of your own running notes (suitably highlighted and annotated). But you may want other guidelines as well, ones that focus only on what you will say and do not allow you to be distracted by the sheer detail of a lengthy planning document.

Useful quotes

"Planning is only anticipating the inevitable, and then taking the credit for it"

– Overheard

"It is a bad plan that admits of no modification"

– Publilius Syrus

*"Planning is like duck shooting – if you aim where the
duck is now you will miss the target"*

– Anon

9 DEALING WITH STATISTICS

There is a crossover here with money, but it is worth looking at certain specifics of statistics. They are as apt to confuse as to illuminate. The very formality of statistically based figures, percentages and the like, gives them authority. Yet... there is a story of a man frightened of flying, his fears made worse by imagining a bomb on board. The odds were considerably against, but – he calculated – the odds against there being *two* bombs on board were astronomical; so he always took one with him. This is not, of course, quite how statistics work (or airline security!).

Unless such figures are used with precision, and accompanied by suitable explanation, they may not just be ineffective, they may confuse and create the reverse of the impact they are designed to produce.

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The opportunity

The opportunity is to make a point, perhaps a strong or dramatic one, by making the basis of something clear in terms of the figures involved.

It is only an opportunity if the way the figures are used is understood and thus able to make the chosen point.

An additional opportunity here is to score points by making what people expect to be complicated to be found to be (easily) understandable. Psychologists talk about what they call “cognitive cost” to describe the relative difficulty of something; a concept made clear to many people by saying that the instructions for many an electronic gadget almost certainly have a high cognitive cost! Offer people a low one and they love it.

It may be that there is a good reason to choose a way of presenting statistics that exaggerate a good picture, but care is needed here and it all too easy for an inappropriately exaggerated statement to come back to haunt you.

Key things to include

To maximise the effectiveness of statistics, indeed any complex figures, you should:

- Make the principles you will use clear, for example always describing a percentage as a percentage *of* something else (something specific)
- State the figures clearly and allow a moment’s thinking time for them to “sink in”
- Check understanding if necessary – *All clear?* – or ask a question to verify that understanding exists (remembering that people do not want to look stupid by asking what might seem to be silly questions)
- Illustrate wherever possible (slides are very useful here) and put things in the simplest possible form, for example a pie chart
- Link the figures clearly to the point you are making (explaining the link as you do so) – *So, if the increase is only 3% and we are aiming at five – that leaves us with a shortfall of 2% and that represents £X thousand of additional sales to make.*
- If action flows from the point then make what that is clear too.

Dangers to avoid

Assuming that your figures are accurate (are they?) beware of any kind of vagueness. An example, paraphrased from the excellent book *Innumeracy* (John Allen Paulus: Penguin), shows just how misleading (and worrying in this case) loose representation of statistics can be. A doctor is quoted, who in a matter of a few minutes, tells a patient their operation had only a one in a million risk associated with it, then that it is 99% safe and finally that it “usually went quite well”. I think I would have wanted to know which!

More specific dangers include allowing or inadvertently encouraging:

- *Inappropriate association of percentages*: for instance a product reduced in price by 40% and then again by another 40% has been reduced by a total of 64% (not 80% - you cannot add percentages in that way)
- *The vague use of “average”*: there is, for instance a difference between the “median” (the figure mid way through a group of numbers), and the “mode” (the value that occurs most often in a group), and the “average” (the number found by adding all the numbers in a group and dividing by the number of numbers in a set) – yet all may be called an “average” if no precision is employed
- *Maximising the percentage number*: as in a case where it is said something, a toothpaste’s ability to reduce cavities say, is 200%. Sounds impressive (and perhaps only means that it reduces them by 30% compared with a rival brand’s 10% (the 30% reduction is a 200% increase of the 10% reduction). A typical case of tweaking figures to produce something impressive-sounding and destroying meaning – and credibility? – at the same time
- *Adding percentages*: in manufacturing, if eight components rise in price by 5% then the total price rise is just 5%, not eight times that – 40%.

Even the wrong choice of one word may negate what you are trying to do. Forecasts are, by definition, only estimates. It is wrong to say something is estimated as 10.2456%. The four figures of decimals are likely irrelevant adding a misleading feeling of accuracy to what needs to be considered as a ball park figure. Computers will do calculations automatically and it is then all too easy just to read off what they say, however inappropriate.

This list can only give the flavour of what to look out for here – resolve to proceed with care whenever statistics must be presented.

Perhaps obvious, but any hint of a disjointed presentation – the: *And another thing* approach will quickly dilute impact.

Clear structure

Content is most likely not “just statistics” so structure will likely need to be for the overall topic, that said, with statistics in mind, bear in mind the following:

Beginning:

- It may be worth mentioning the need for statistics, what you are using them for – and how you will make them clear – before getting into the figures.
- Make it clear what handouts people will get, you do not want them spending time trying to write everything down if they will receive a summary
- That said a punchy start and a clear agenda are as important here as elsewhere.

Middle:

- Take one point at a time and do not move on until it seems to be accepted
- Maintain an overall, and well explained, logic throughout the session

End:

- Summary may be important to highlight any key figures again
- The topic will dictate other aspects of the conclusion (an action linked ending?)
- If a written resume of the statistical detail is available, say so

Overall:

- Clarity first, foremost and throughout should be the watchword here. Take one point at a time and never be overoptimistic about your audience’s ability to take in this kind of information (equally I guess one should be careful of treating those with a high degree of numeracy like a six year old, but the prime danger is the reverse).
- Figures can be dry and may seem dull, so create an element of interest (even of levity) where possible; or simply take a break
- In terms of manner, you must make it interesting and also appear businesslike and thorough in the way you handle the details; as describing statistics is not an end in itself, your manner needs to reflect the overall purpose of the session in which they play a part.

Additional dimensions:

- Be especially careful if figures are monitored regularly (as happens with financial results) and make sure that the starting point – last month's statement or whatever – is clear before moving on
- Remember that retention of the detail of figures can be difficult, so use handouts and summaries where necessary to create a permanent record.

Visual aids:

- These are likely to be a great help, however do not give all your attention to them (looking at a screen and not your audience, for example)
- Find ways of getting everyone to be able to focus quickly on the same thing – *Look at the graph and follow the red line* (make sure you choose colours that contrast and are easily seen and differentiated)
- Use slides that present only the information you want, not from which you have highlight one thing and ignore others; saying *Ignore the rest just look at ...* is very unsatisfying and people just wonder what they are missing.

Duration

As with discussion of money allow time to do a thorough job and achieve a real understanding.

Speaker's notes

Remember that hesitancy – *Let me see, that's 10%, no – sorry – it's 12%* - may easily be read as uncertainty and destroy any conviction that your message may be intended to carry. So make sure that what you have in front of you is clear, legible and that you can link easily to your next slide and keep the message progressing steadily.

Useful quotes

"There are three kinds of lies – lies, damn lies and statistics"

– Benjamin Disraeli

*"He uses statistics like a drunken man uses lamp posts
– for support rather than illumination"*

– Andrew Lang

*"I have yet to see any problem, however complicated, which when
looked at in the right way, did not become still more complicated"*

– Poul Anderson

10 CALLING FOR ACTION

Many a presentation might have a call for action inherent within it. Nevertheless the core aspects of getting a commitment to action are worth a word in their own right. It is no longer the case (if it ever was) that a manager can simply say *Do this* and people will. Real commitment and something being done properly and perhaps with enthusiasm demands more. You must put over a message that is understood, that is accepted and which prompts agreement to act (and perhaps also acts to prompt rejecting other options).

The opportunity

The task is to prompt action. Opportunity? Apart from just getting the action you want under way, the opportunity is to influence the attitude of people as they take action. It may be done, but done grudgingly; or done better and found motivational.

Key things to include

Much here will go with the topic, beyond that:

- Make *exactly* what needs to be done clear. This means thinking about the description beforehand so that it can be precisely and succinctly stated with no *sort of* s or other evidence of lack of thinking it through audible
- Use some of the time to *explain* the background and *why* something needs to be done and what the *results will be* (including how the people themselves will be affected)
- Provide evidence of what you say if it is necessary to really persuade people to a point of view
- Address in parallel the question of motivation: what will make this action interesting, rewarding or fun to take? Spell that out too.
- Summarise the *who*, *where* and *when* elements of the action without any ambiguity.

Dangers to avoid

The worst thing is to try to announce action too early, before it is thoroughly worked out. A plan begins to emerge, then so do problems or unresolved details, and the end result is that the whole thing appears as if people are being asked to take a shot in the dark.

Any kind of lack of precision where the reverse of this would be expected can dilute the effect of the whole.

If an authority to insist on action is needed, then the message will suffer if it comes over without the necessary “weight”.

Be careful of deadlines. Will they be considered possible? Reasonable? How will hitting them affect other planned activity? Just announcing them if they need explanation or justification can antagonise.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- As usual clarity of purpose is important, so too may be injecting a little excitement about what is to be done (it can be a challenge but still represent an attractive thing to do)
- Deal with the detail: for example announcing that a note will be circulated to summarise dates and other details that might otherwise keep people scribbling throughout the session.

Middle:

- The action plan element will probably dictate the structure here: one thing at a time and an overall “shape” spelt out ahead of going into detail will keep the session manageable – for you and the audience.

End:

- The end must leave no loose ends and demands a clear summary
- Do not revisit everything, and if a lot of detail has been gone through link it to a clear description of what follows (a summary memo, further meetings and so on).

Overall:

- The action required dictates the style here, initial statements should make clear that action is necessary and the explanation and detail that follows must be seen in context of getting it right and achieving the planned goals
- In terms of manner, again this needs to be a businesslike session; but a few human touches will bring it to life – for example, a few light touches ahead of a busy period of implementation may both be appropriate and be used to add to the injunction to act.

Additional dimensions:

- The focus here is important. With detail to be gone through and action to get right, it is usually best not to allow the confusion made possible by any digression or doubling up of intention; an action session should be an action session, no more, no less

Visual aids:

- The key specific thing here is to use visuals to reinforce the detail that it is necessary to get over, and perhaps also speed up the process and avoid anything that smacks of over-engineering.

Duration

If a session is to spell out action and see to it that it happens, then sufficient time must be spent to achieve this. If adopting the action is seen as straightforward and the session makes too much of a meal of it then this may be resented and the message diluted as a result. At worst, too elaborate a briefing may be seen as patronising.

Speaker's notes

What is necessary will depend mostly on the topic and the detail involved. One straightforward action may need only a few words as a checklist to put over. A complex series of actions demands clarity of detail in your material as a prerequisite to achieving clarity in putting it over.

Useful quotes

"Never confuse activity with achievement"

– Anon

"90 percent of success is turning up"

– Woody Allen

"Ready, aim, fire is always the best order in which to do things"

– Anon

11 ANNOUNCING RESULTS

People like feedback about how things are going, and particularly about how their bit is going and also how it is contributing to the whole. Natural enough - after all who would enjoy a football match if there was no one keeping score? So, this may be a regular one to undertake, indeed remember that the time scale on which you report to people should be based, in part at least, on their perceptions. Probably the rule should be sooner rather than later (though obviously some results are definitive such as those representing the financial year).

The opportunity

At one level the intention is simply to keep people well informed; and there is nothing wrong with that, indeed people like it. Given the continuity involved, the information about *how well have we done so far* links to the future, highlighting also what must be done next in the way that half year results highlight the following six months.

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In addition, the results may:

- Reward people, giving a sense of achievement and thus acting to motivate (indeed they may link to tangible rewards like bonuses or commission)
- Act as an incentive and – linked to other action – encourage future efforts and make it more likely that subsequent targets are hit
- Highlight failure, large or small, and act to admonish people for it. Though it should be said, by way of reminder, that sticks work best in parallel with carrots.

Information about results may also influence actions, as record sales leading to an out of stock situation on a particular product leads to different action in handling customer orders and enquiries – at least for a while.

Key things to include

What you say will depend on the actual circumstances – whether results are good or bad. That said, and using positive results as the example, you need to:

- Decide and describe the period you will discuss, for example how far back do you need to look to get things in perspective? (Be careful to compare like with like – a great improvement may appear only because of a comparison with a period of famine)
- Make the results clear, being especially careful with financial figures and other statistics
- Make the figures live, or even exciting, for example by making interesting comparisons or descriptive analogies – *The amount of product shipped this week would cover ten football pitches*
- If appropriate, give credit where credit is due and make it personal if this is merited
- Look ahead, whether this is a major or minor part of your overall intentions

Dangers to avoid

Blinding people with science. For example using large figures that have no meaning to people at the level at which you are discussing matters.

Failing to relate the overall situations to particular matters within, say, one individual department allowing it all to seem somewhat academic.

Gong through the motions but not using the opportunity to link to personal issues or future action.

There may be negative points to be made if results are poor, and if so you need to do so. But do not overdo this, after all you cannot wind the clock back and the only task now faced is to make things better in future. The balance here may be important.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- With several possibilities in terms of overall intention, be clear at the start about what it is you are going to do – *With excellent results in the last month, I'll first have a look at what we have done, see if I can ferret out what made this possible, and then look ahead. We do not want to let one good month end up allowing us to rest on our laurels.*

Middle:

- Take one point at a time
- Take time to allow you to bring complex matters to life
- Separate past, present and future and make sure that, if you have multiple intentions, each is given the attention it deserves.

End:

- This is another topic where complexity and figures may make a clear summary necessary
- Touch again on any personal mentions or thanks that are necessary
- End looking ahead, on a positive note and with any action points for the future clearly spelt out.

Overall:

- If results are positive this should be a motivational occasion. If not you may still need to motivate and must do so by looking ahead
- In terms of manner, this must follow the nature of the results and may, on occasion need a note of sobriety, but ultimately looking ahead must take the spotlight and that needs a positive tone.

Additional dimensions:

- The key overlap here is with the future. You need to take a view of what can usefully be said about results to date using that as a springboard to a variety of things you might want to say about the future.

Visual aids:

- Use what is necessary to match the complexity of any details or figures involved, and use graphs and other such devices to ensure clarity.

Duration

This can vary a good deal, some results deserve no more than a minute or two in a departmental meeting, while others are a major issue deserving their own meeting or a major section of an annual review.

Speaker's notes

The same thing applies here as to any situation where detail, and figures are involved – be careful to have the right details clear and in front of you.

Useful quotes

"Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently"

– Henry Ford

"Nothing recedes like success"

– Walter Winchell

"It is as hard to stay on top as it is to get there"

– Hugh Cudlip

12 ADDRESSING A COMING CHALLENGE

The topic here implies something that may be prompted by something negative (the need to make up for some difficulty or failure), or by something positive (tackling something that is best described as an opportunity – but which will present some difficulty. The difficulty may be inherent because of something complex or new, perhaps. Or the task may be made difficult by something else, a tight deadline, say.

The opportunity

The opportunity, indeed the task, is first to inform. Secondly, to specify the task and to do so in a way that helps make it seem possible. Thirdly, to motivate people to want to act or even to view it as fun.

Key things to include

First make clear what the challenge is and then, in an organised, way set out why it is necessary, how it can be done and link to any action plan that is also necessary.

Where appropriate, make it sound interesting and exciting. People like a challenge, certainly they like tackling one and succeeding – it produces a sense of achievement and may link to that being recognised in some way, which they like even more. There is evidence that people like, and respond best to, a big challenge – one worthy of the name.

Dangers to avoid

Overusing the term, making a mountain out of what is not even much of a molehill will not interest people, much less get them fired up to do something.

Projecting a lack of confidence that makes what needs to be done sound unreasonable or impossible.

Using a dismissive: *It's no problem* or *Of course you can do it* approach without saying anything about *how* success will be achieved and why, therefore, it is possible.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- Define the challenge and begin to look beyond just the sheer difficulty involved as soon as possible
- Set out an agenda in a way that makes it clear that you will talk about how it is possible, indeed that you believe that it is.

Middle:

- As ever, a logical approach is needed here, do not let enthusiasm overpower organisation
- The detailed structure will come from the nature of the challenge and the extent to which there is a detailed action plan to be gone through describing what must be done.

End:

- There is only one place to end and that is on a note of belief in success, this may usefully combine several different factors – *It is difficult* (but we will do it) - *We know how to tackle it* (action plans) - *Doing it will ...* (results), and *it might even be fun*.

Overall:

- This needs a businesslike approach that submerges the difficulty in a sheer weight of can-do factors both motivational and practical. Whilst the challenge should be accepted and not hidden, the session is to persuade people that it is possible to get to grips with what must be done and make it possible.
- In terms of manner, three things are key – it should be positive, positive and positive.

Additional dimensions:

- The major link here is between describing the challenge and persuading people that the task it represents can be successfully accomplished, and spelling out the details of how it can be done which adds a whole separate dimension to the session
- Consider too whether there needs to be some tangible incentive linked to the task designed to motivate, make it more interesting and help ensure that it does get done successful
- Given the weight of the matter, and the motivational aspect running in parallel with it, unrelenting seriousness may be wrong and an occasional light touch can help the session along.

Visual aids:

- Visuals that *illustrate* tackling a challenge successfully may be helpful, but too much or trite things along these lines may well be seen as patronising.

Duration

This topic may link to setting out a plan of action and if this is the case then it may take a little time. Time spent at this stage that results in something being done right and that, in turn, produces a successful outcome is much to be preferred over time spent to rescue a difficult situation that is progressing badly.

Speaker's notes

This area, like others, will be influenced by the complexity of the whole session, and whether it includes an action plan or not. A plethora of detail needs more organising and more of an aide memoire to help it get delivered in the right way.

Useful quotes

"If you think you can, you can. And if you think you can't, you're right"

– Mary Kay Ash

"Champions keep playing until they get it right"

– Billie Jean King

"Success is not the result of spontaneous combustion. You must first set fire to yourself"

– Fred Shero

13 MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

People hate feeling ignored or taken for granted. They also hate being kept in the dark, so sessions that acknowledge progress and completion of whatever work is being done are always valuable. Some may have a kind of *So far so good* brief, some overlap with a: *Well done*. The key thing reviewed here is the acknowledgement of something being completed or of a significant stage being reached.

Regularly done this kind of session need not take long and can be made informative and useful; and is appreciated.

The opportunity

The opportunity is primarily one of information. Such sessions keep people posted, and this is valuable in its own right and much better than the alternative of them feeling neglected.

It is also an opportunity to:

- Praise and motivate, to acknowledge what has been done to date and work on ensuring that the remainder of a task is completed satisfactorily
- Fine-tune action. For example, to speed something up aiming for completion ahead of an original deadline or add something in, perhaps to achieve greater quality
- Address shortfalls. Finishing stage one late may still be an achievement and if more remains to be done then a “mission accomplished” approach to moving ahead may still be relevant
- Focus on an individual contribution.

Key things to include

A clear *Well done* (and consider the extent of this *I must say* or *Everyone thinks* or *The M.D. asked me to add their congratulations* – or maybe they should be there).

If some people are unaware of it describe what was done and why it was a challenge.

In addition, you may want to talk about:

- How something was done
- Lessons learnt from doing it
- How different people played their part
- Particular, perhaps unexpected, hazards overcome along the way
- The results now occurring or in prospect.

Dangers to avoid

Any apparent lack of sincerity or going through the motions will negate a session intended to thank and acknowledge achievement.

Similarly the achievement must be real, if minor things are addressed in a way that exaggerates their importance, perhaps just to find an opportunity to motivate, then it will devalue real achievement.

Clear structure

Beginning:

- Make the congratulatory nature of the session immediately apparent
- Then set out the extent of the statement or review that follows, as the duration and extent may vary.

Middle:

- Think about the extent of your comments – the opportunities referred to above – and order them appropriately in a way that gives pride of place to the key issues and achievements and fits best with your overall intention
- Keep ongoing comment, for instance about what happens next, separate from talk about what has been done.

End:

- Whatever else is necessary to summarise and pull together loose ends, always end back on the good things and the congratulations

Overall:

- In terms of manner, this should be businesslike and perhaps enthusiastic, congratulatory and done in a way that expressing gratitude where appropriate (to both the team and to individuals).

Additional dimensions:

- This is a topic that may well have multiple intentions and examples of such are made clear under “The opportunity” above.

Visual aids:

- Unless such a session is extended to overlap with other topics or used as much to set the scene for the next stage of something as to look back, then visual aids are probably not necessary.

Duration

There can be short and long versions of this. The short version may do little more than acknowledge the completion of something. Longer sessions will be made so primarily by also setting out what comes next. At the short end it must be sufficiently long to give the matter unequivocal importance.

Speaker's notes

Congratulations alone may not need much documenting, though you need to be careful to get facts, times and names right. Longer sessions will need a greater amount of detail in front of you

Useful quotes

“Good luck is the reason for other peoples’ success”

– Anon

“Whatever doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger”

– Marlon Brando

AFTERWORD

*“Talking and eloquence are not the same:
to speak, and to speak well, are two things”*

– Ben Johnson

The whole concept of this book - a focus on key issues and particular tasks - precludes an elaborate summary. So the following does not attempt to be comprehensive, rather just to touch on certain key issues with an eye on increasing the likelihood of your presentations getting better and better:

Consider the alternatives: dangers or opportunities

The dangers of poor presentations cannot be set out here in detail. Suffice to say that they have both business elements - not meeting your objectives or achieving what you want in terms of results and actions - and personal ones - which range from feeling mildly inadequate to seeing a rapid death as preferable to continuing to speak for another moment.

Both are to be avoided.

The incentives to do so are very real. Presentational skills provide opportunities, and can sometimes do so in a major way. Once acquired these skills can help you in your job, in your career and in achieving things large and small in either the long or short term; or in any or all of these ways.

So acquiring them is worth working at and, although you may not achieve the standard you want instantly (or without some effort) - remember the old saying: opportunities often come disguised - as hard work. In fact, you may quickly turn in a workmanlike standard - and be surprised at just what you can in fact achieve.

*** Deal with the negatives**

Accept that - for whatever reason - most people seem to anticipate difficulty with presentations. Accept also that there are many disparate matters that can easily conspire to make presenting effectively more difficult. But work to defuse such factors. The balance analogy referred to

earlier is a good one. So too is the idea of mental reach. Your mind can only stretch itself around so many things at once (at least mine can!). It is a bit like a juggler with a number of balls in the air at the same time, faults - even tiny ones - quickly add up and they may find themselves not just dropping one ball, but several or, at worst, them all.

Similarly, if a part of your mind is busy thinking say: *what do I do with my hands?* - *My hands are so awkward - everyone is noticing*, then there is a little less of it available to focus on delivering an appropriate message in the right way. So, every problem or potential problem that you deal with - *I'm comfortable with one hand on the lectern and the other holding a pen* - in whatever way, reduces the feeling of pressure of trying to concentrate on a dozen things at once and *yet still* deliver the presentation.

The first step to success here is simply the adoption of a way of approaching this. That leads to dealing with problems one by one until they are insufficient to dilute in any serious way what you are trying to do. Of course, you cannot reduce them completely. Certainly few people ever get over some feeling of nervousness, particularly as they start to speak; indeed many would say a little apprehension at that stage is a good thing - the adrenaline it produces fuels the job to be done. If the feeling still worries you at least label it positively: I once heard one speaker saying he never had nerves, but that he admitted to a feeling of what he called "creative apprehension".

*** Understand the process**

Not only was it said earlier that presentation deserved some study, but at this point you have done some. There may be more to do, but certainly you will have been exposed to many of the fundamental principles that make for good presenting. Knowledge of these factors gives you something to aim for. If you understand the power of a dramatic pause, say, and how to hold it long enough to create the effect you want then there is more chance of you not only trying it, but deploying it successfully. So too is it with other techniques and tricks of the trade.

*** Never neglect preparation**

Bernard Shaw may have said that: "*the only golden rule is that there are no golden rules*", but here - to use an old device - there are three: preparation, preparation and preparation.

It really does make all the difference.

To begin with, preparation may seem like chore. Certainly it can be time consuming. But if you evolve a systematic and consistent approach to how you prepare – one tailored to suit you - then it will not only be useful, it will get easier and quicker to do. Good preparation is both a sound foundation to your presentations, and knowing that it has been thoroughly done is a boost to your confidence.

* **Practice**

This book has not disguised the fact that presentation is a practical business, success cannot come simply from reading a book - though my intention was certainly that this one should help - it also demands practice. Sometimes this is in the form of rehearsal – from trying it out on the bathroom mirror to having a dry run with colleagues. It also means learning from experience.

For some people a good idea here is to *contrive* practice. Let me explain that. I know people who make very few presentations. Their job simply does not demand more. Yet when they do them, they are very important. So in some organisations steps are taken to get round the low rate of experience that results from this. For example, I have suggested to more than one of my clients that they use internal meetings to help develop skills. And I can think of one where it became mandatory for a while for formal inputs to such meetings to be made only if the participant stood up (and in another case if at least one slide was used). The good results were noticeable, such actions accelerated the practice and skills improved more quickly than they would in the normal course of events.

A similar case might be made for certain more formal occasions or invitations. Are you, for instance, currently turning down requests to speak at any sort of event on the grounds that it is not sufficiently important for you to take on? And would it be more accurate to say you just do not want, or do not have the confidence, to do it? What could - should - you take on, in part for the experience it will give you? No presentation, no practice is hardly a recipe for improving standards.

Practice may include some further study, and this is a well provided area of business literature. But there is another element of practice that should be mentioned before we end: training (skills based training can clearly help here, but details are beyond our brief).

Working on a presentation is certainly an activity where you can get so close to things that you cease to see the wood for the trees. An objective view (which might equally be from a colleague within the organisation or, say, a trainer) can help move things along in a way that repeated private rehearsal may not.

And finally

At the end of the day, after all is said and done, when push comes to shove... sorry no false endings. A final few words. If you understand the principles involved, the tricks of the trade as it were. If you are well prepared in every sense - whether it is in terms of having thought through what to say, how to say it and what materials to have in front of you while you do so, or are just comfortable with the environment and not worrying about how to stand or whether your slides will be legible from the back of the room, then your presentation will stand a good chance of going well.

And that is all there is too it. Well, at least it is more than enough to get you started, indeed to get you well under way. Even the most practised and accomplished presenter can continue to learn as long as they continue to present. So perhaps the last thing to be said is that you should actively plan to go on learning from experience. Good habits help here. After every presentation there will be something to note. If you make a point of noting it - *I must find a better way of explaining that - that's clearly a good description, I mustn't forget it* - then you will always be able to say that you were satisfied with your last presentation (even if never one hundred per cent satisfied!). And know that your next one will be even better.

So, what next? Ready? Take a couple of deep breaths, maybe a sip of water, look your audience in their collective eyes and begin - *Good morning...*