

Give Your Speech, Change the World

HOW TO MOVE YOUR AUDIENCE TO ACTION

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INTRODUCTION

The Only Reason to Give a Speech Is to Change the World

THE ONLY REASON TO GIVE A SPEECH IS to change the world. An old friend of mine, a speechwriter, used to say that to me. He meant it as a challenge. It was his way of saying that, if you're going to take all the trouble to prepare and deliver a speech, make it worthwhile. Change the world.

Otherwise, why bother? Preparing speeches, giving speeches, and listening to speeches—each of these activities is fraught with peril. The opportunities for failure are many, and for success correspondingly few. An oft-quoted study suggests that executives would rather die than speak. Of all their fears, public speaking is

number one, and death comes much further down the list, just before nuclear war. That must explain why they often put off the task of preparing speeches to the last minute—or give the task to someone else.

If speechmaking is hard work for presenters, it's also hard work for their audiences. Most business presentations are dreadful—boring, platitudinous, and delivered with a compelling lack of enthusiasm. People don't remember much of what they learn from speeches—something on the order of 10 percent to 30 percent. With some business talks I've attended, that failure rate must be close to 100 percent. How many presentations have you sat through where your mind started wandering a few minutes into the talk and never really came back? Where you surreptitiously picked up your date book and started planning your calendar for the next millennium or two? Where you ended up more familiar with the number of acoustic tiles in the ceiling than the number of points in the outline of the speech?

So why do we bother? We bother giving speeches because of the opportunities they offer presenters with passion and a cause. There is something profound about gathering a group of people together in a hall and giving them the full force of your ideas presented “live and in person.” There is something essential about the intellectual, emotional, and physical connections a good speaker can make with an audience, something that cannot happen on the printed page. There is something powerful about the chemistry that happens in the moment of contact that no other medium can reproduce.

It's what I call the *kinesthetic connection*. It's something I've observed in more than seventeen years of teaching and coaching public speaking. When it happens, it's powerful. When it's missing, everyone feels it—even the hapless speaker. Helping you find that connection, which is at the heart of giving what I call the *audience-centered presentation*, is what this book is all about.

The need to speak is never-ending.

We still need speeches. We need them to move audiences to action. People may learn to believe in your expertise from the printed page. But they will only be moved to action if they come to trust you from hearing and seeing you offer a solution to a problem they have. That kind of trust is visceral as well as intellectual and emotional, and it only comes from presence.

From the audience's point of view, we still need to validate our impulse to action by seeing our champions, to test the sense of their messages and the integrity of their beings. Partly, we're reading their nonverbal messages, those gestures and habits that we learn to interpret unconsciously for the most part, the ones that tell us something about the credibility and courage of the presenter. Partly, we're testing to see if they can structure and present their ideas coherently in real time, abilities that tell us about how articulate and organized they are. And partly, we're watching to see if we can find some sense of common humanity in the speaker, in order to make common cause with that speaker's passion.

When Roger Mudd asked Ted Kennedy, on *60 Minutes* in 1980, why he wanted to be president, Senator Kennedy famously fumbled the answer. Millions of Americans watched Kennedy at close hand, thanks to the eye of the camera, and judged his incoherent, rambling answer to lack credibility. The campaign was over almost before it began. Kennedy had changed the world—not in the way he intended, perhaps, but inescapably and irretrievably nonetheless. Potential backers slunk away from the Kennedy camp. Potential workers joined other campaigns. Potential voters resolved to find another candidate. And all of that happened through the faux-familiarity of television. Imagine how much more devastating it would have been in person.

Does changing the world seem like a daunting challenge? There's good news buried in the challenge. With a powerful, *audience-centered* presentation, *you can change the world*. And that goes whether you're talking to a small group of employees or colleagues—or a keynote audience of thousands. The principles are the same.

And there's more good news to come: Regardless of how good you are now, you can learn how to give a better speech, one that makes a kinesthetic connection with your listeners. One that creates a sense of trust in you and moves them to action.

You need to listen to your audience.

At the heart of this connection lies a counterintuitive truth: *The secret to forming a strong bond between you and the people in the audience is to listen to them—from the very beginning.*

Wait a minute, you say. I'm the one that has to do the talking. How can I listen to them? And what do you mean by kinesthetic? You've already used that word twice.

The answers to these questions are related. Let's take the easy one first. *Kinesthetic* means being aware of the position and movement of the body in space. And to listen to the audience, you need to listen (and to show you're listening) with your whole body. To give a simple example, consider the nervous executive in front of the shareholders for an annual meeting. He has some less-than-spectacular numbers to report, and everyone knows it. He's prepared for the worst. He begins his talk with a curt, "Good morning," arms folded, staring tensely over the audience members' heads, looking into the middle distance, trying not to acknowledge the anger he sees in front of him. He immediately launches into a defensive talk aimed at minimizing the damage and second-guessing what the audience might ask him.

Not a pretty picture. Contrast that with a different executive in a similar pickle. She knows the meeting is going to be tough,

but she's ready. She stands up in front of the shareholders, smiles, and asks, "How are you?" Her arms are comfortably open at her sides. And she waits for a couple of seconds, making eye contact with at least one of the audience members on the right hand side of the room. Then she asks, no longer smiling, raising her eyebrows to invite response, "Are you angry about last year's numbers? [*Pause. Looking at someone else, on the left, now.*] You have every right to be. We're as disappointed as you are. Let's talk about them. What's on your mind?"

Not many chief executives would have the guts, frankly, to take the second approach. But which company would you rather hold stock in?

The second executive is well on the way to giving an audience-centered speech. She's going to find kinesthetic moments to connect with her audience, and she's begun by actually listening to them—reading their entire range of responses, including the nonverbal—from the start.

Indeed, in this simplified example, the key to success is in making those rhetorical questions real. When you ask, "How are you?" of an audience, wait to see how some members of that audience actually are. Don't continue until you've learned the answer, either verbally or nonverbally. It's a small but vital way to begin an audience-centered talk. Success in public speaking is made up of myriad little moments of connection like that.

And one big thing: charisma. That's the magic quality, isn't it? The one that everyone craves. And yet charisma doesn't come from doing something difficult or esoteric that it takes years to master (and lots of expensive advice from speech coaches like me). We know now, thanks to the communications research of the last thirty years, what charisma is. Quite simply, it's *expressiveness*. Expressiveness is the willingness to be open to your audience, both verbally and nonverbally. To show how you feel about your subject. To get past nervousness and self-consciousness and get to the stuff that you care about, and *give that to the audience*. That's why

they call it “*giving* a speech.” If you can unlock your own passion about the subject, and give that to the audience, you will be charismatic. The audience will not be able to take its eyes off you.

And so we’re back to audience-centered speaking, and kineshetics. The only reason to give a speech is to change the world. You accomplish that by moving your audience to action. To do that, you have to be willing to listen to the audience, and to give it your passion. To get to that happy state, you need to find kinesi-
thetic connections with the audience.

That’s audience-centered speaking in a paragraph. It’s as simple as that.

And lest you think that when I say “changing the world” I’m only talking about the big speeches (the ones that CEOs give to shareholders, for example) understand that I’m talking about *every speech ever given*. The principles and practical tools in this book (and we will get to the practical part soon) apply to all public speaking, whether to five thousand people or five, for a grand public occasion or simply a regular meeting to report on third quarter numbers. After all, if you give a brilliant, inspiring, audience-centered presentation about those third quarter numbers, you will change the attitudes of your team in the room with you. And if you change their attitudes, you just might change their behavior. And if you change their behavior, you’ve changed the world in the only way that counts.

So let’s get started. We’re going to range over a good deal of ground, and I’m going to give a great deal of practical advice for beginners and experts alike. You should feel free to apply those parts of the book that are most directly useful to you. The general principles apply to all kinds of speeches, as I’ve said, but you may not need to rehearse, for example, in some of the ways I’ve suggested. It’s up to you. What follows is a book, not a speech, but nonetheless I would like it to be as audience-centered as possible. You’re going to learn how to work the room by reading this book, and to do that effectively you need to develop an approach that is your own.

In part I, you'll learn, through a brief history of public speaking, why it works the way it does, and why most of modern speech making is so bad. Then, I'll introduce you to the audience-centered approach that will enable you to rise above the ordinary level of presentations and presenters.

In part II, you'll learn how to prepare the content. Most speech coaches will tell you to focus on your clothing or your smile. But people do go to presentations to hear content first, and it's essential to get it right. You need to deliver your talk in a way that respects the audience's need to make a decision about the argument you're presenting to them. Accordingly, I walk you through a process that begins with understanding the audience, and crafting an elevator speech that fits that audience. Then we address the psychological needs of the audience, find a story that fits the event, structure the content in a way that makes sense to your listeners, plan the journey that we're going to take that audience on, and figure out how to get them involved in the most dynamic way.

In part III, we'll talk about how to rehearse the presentation you've developed. I'll show you how to rehearse certain aspects of your speech to find its truth. I talk about how to choreograph your speech kinesthetically, so that you use your body to reinforce your message rather than detract from it, as most speakers do. We'll focus also on what the audience needs in terms of kinesthetic, aural, and visual learning, and we'll close with some help for the very nervous and some technical information.

Finally, in part IV, I'll take you through the day of delivery itself, and give you some warm-up tips to help you cope with nerves and maximize your performance. We'll talk about how to put the energy of the audience to work for you. And I'll wrap up the section with a chapter on a variety of specific public-speaking issues, such as question-and-answer sessions, the media, video-conferencing, and the like. By the time you've worked your way through the book, you should be prepared for most public-speaking challenges, and you should have a good grounding in audience-centered speaking.

A brief note on terminology: Many businesspeople make a strong distinction between a “speech” and a “presentation.” The former is a big deal to a lot of people, and the latter is something more informal, perhaps a talk in front of colleagues or employees. Part of the argument of this book is that there is no real distinction between the two. The same principles apply no matter how many people you’re talking to. In fact, it’s easier to apply these principles to small groups than large. Thus I will use the two terms, speech and presentation, interchangeably.

Remember

- The only reason to give a speech is to change the world.
- Effective speeches move their audiences to action.
- Effective speakers listen to their audiences.
- Charisma comes from the ability to be emotionally expressive.
- To deliver a successful speech, find kinesthetic connections with the audience.

CHAPTER 1

How Did We Get Here?

I'LL BEGIN WITH A BRIEF HISTORY OF HOW we got to the rather sorry state of public speeches and presentations we find ourselves in today.

Trust me; it's important to help you understand why kinesthetic speaking is so vital to success in the modern, post-television era.

The Ancient Greeks invented public speaking because they had to.

The idea that ordinary people should stand up and deliver public presentations began with the Ancient Greeks. In their legal system, the opposing sides were expected to speak for themselves in court. Around this dire necessity, a whole lore of public-speaking tips

and advice developed. Soon enough, the plaintiffs and defendants began to hire expert *rhetors* (think lawyer) to speak for them. The field of rhetoric grew up in response to this need for private citizens and their representatives to speak clearly, cogently, and powerfully in public settings where a lot was at stake.

At the same time, political figures found the need to speak on matters of public moment, much as they do today. Both these strands of public speaking led to the creation of a good deal of advice on how to give great presentations, and some classic speech examples. Much of this body of rhetorical knowledge is still useful today. The Greeks have left us with excellent, detailed advice on how to recognize faulty arguments, how to create elegant *tropes*, or turns of phrase that will move listeners, and how to structure a persuasive speech that works in front of an audience.

In addition, they gave some very practical advice on how to deliver a speech. Since we have no direct knowledge of what the best Greek speakers actually sounded or looked like, the practical advice is limited to a few concepts and stories.

Demosthenes, for example, was a noted Greek public orator who began with what must have been sloppy pronunciation or perhaps a speech impediment. He practiced his speeches on the beach when no one else was around, taking smooth pebbles from the sand and putting them in his mouth. Once he could speak clearly with pebbles, he removed them and found that he quickly became known for the clarity of his delivery.

That technique has come down to us today, and there are still speech coaches who recommend that their “mush-mouthed” students practice their speeches holding a pencil between their teeth or the like. It remains a good idea for people who have difficulty enunciating clearly in public settings. But, of course, it’s not the whole story, as we shall see. Far more confusion is generated by speakers whose verbal and nonverbal communications are inconsistent, or who present their material in confusing and poorly structured ways, first annoying and then alienating their audiences.