MAKE YOUR PRESENTATION POWERFUL

If speakers want their talk to really take off, some basic strategies will help.

Erik Palmer

True story. It’s “work week.” The teachers have just come back from summer break, and they have this week to get ready for students. The principal schedules a staff meeting at 9:00 a.m. on the first day back. She tells everyone that this year, they’ll begin the push toward Common Core State Standards in preparation for the new generation of tests. The PowerPoint presentation begins. For the next 45 minutes, the principal reads aloud the words on the slides verbatim.

How do you think staff members react? There are two clear outcomes: They hate the Common Core State Standards, and they hate staff meetings. There’s nothing in the standards that turns them off. The problem is entirely in the presentation. Poor timing, poor speaking, and poor slides make the standards dead on arrival.

How did this go so wrong? The principal has a doctoral degree in education. On paper, she’s highly qualified. But nowhere on that paper is any mention of training in presentation skills.

I don’t want to pick on this principal. Her talk is merely an example of something that occurs in school districts every day. Administrators, staff developers, and teacher leaders are almost always just winging it as speakers. They’re well trained in their subject matter, but for most, speaking is not their forte. So despite great intentions, many ideas are doomed by the speaker’s lack of training in effective presentation.
A Mind-Numbing Model

I got an odd but wonderful compliment after a presentation I did at a conference. One of the attendees came up to me and said, “I was planning on doing a lot of work today during your presentation, but I couldn’t get anything done. I just had to pay attention!” I thanked him for the compliment and then pondered the dark side of that comment.

His statement was an indictment of education presenters. On balance, presentations are—and I’m trying to be nice here—partially engaging. We all know what to expect: PowerPoint slides loaded with bullet points and lots of text, with an OK speaker who often reads the slides at us. The model has been in place for ages, and we all accept that this is just how presentations go.

In truth, many teachers attending conferences and workshops expect to get work done there. They’ll often answer e-mails or grade papers—or play Candy Crush. Attendees typically believe that only a small portion of the presentation will be valuable. And they’re often correct.

That seems harsh, doesn’t it? After all, many well-meaning teachers lead staff development sessions and present at conferences. To suggest they’re not doing a great job seems rude. And what of the many great thinkers and writers of the books we all know and use in education? Am I saying their talks could be better, too? Heresy! But I’m saying it anyway.

How to Make Your Message Matter

Here’s the problem: Few of us have had training in presentation skills. I recently was working with education leaders in California, in the Stanislaus County Office of Education. Wisely, they recognized the importance of oral communication skills and the effect that improving them would have in so many areas. Powerful communications to parents could eliminate many problems, effective presentation techniques could make staff workshops more valuable and lead to more buy-in, staff could look forward to meetings rather than just endure them, and students would benefit from better-trained teachers.

The folks assembled at the workshop had massive experience in education and were good-hearted, intelligent people. At one point, I asked how many of them had any training in presentation skills. Two of 50. Four percent. Some had been staff developers for decades, yet no one had ever given them tips about how to craft and deliver more effective talks.

The education leaders in Stanislaus County saw the problem, and they were taking steps to correct it. We’ve seriously shortchanged students by ignoring instruction in this most important language art. For many years, I’ve focused on teaching students how to speak well, and I’ve written three books on the topic. As it turns out, as students, we didn’t get serious instruction in presentation skills either, so now that we’re adults, we haven’t mastered those skills. It’s possible to get a doctorate in education—and even principal licensure in some states—without one course in effective presentation. This omission has sapped the strength out of too many good ideas and too many valuable initiatives.

A first step in improving our presentations is to understand the framework for all effective oral communication. There are two distinct pieces: building the talk and performing the talk.

Build a Better Message

Before we ever open our mouths, we have to prepare what we’re going to say. Here are three ways to ensure that we build a powerful message.

1. Analyze your audience.

Who are your audience members? What do they want to know? What mood are they in? How will they receive the message at 8:00 a.m. Monday as opposed to 3:30 p.m. Friday? Do everything you can to get inside their heads.

Typically, we speakers focus on our purpose. We think about the message we have to deliver, and we fail to think enough about the people hearing the message. Although our message may be the same (Response to Intervention, equity training, and so on), each audience that hears it is different. Elementary teachers differ from high school teachers—indeed, early-elementary teachers differ from upper-elementary teachers. Parents hear the same message differently than teachers do. As for students, there are huge variations in that group, so no one message will fit them all.
Here are three ways we can tailor our message to different groups.

Mentally trade places with the audience. Put yourself in the audience members’ position and ask yourself whether you would be receptive. For example, every year there seems to be some new initiative. You should realize that some veteran teachers are cynical because they’ve seen so many initiatives come and go. We can’t be effective until we understand and acknowledge the cynicism.

Explain why what you’re presenting is valuable and needed at this time. (If it isn’t valuable and needed now, don’t introduce it.) Learn subtraction: If something is added to everyone’s plate, something else must be removed or deemphasized. Explain what will be removed to make room for the new initiative.

And we can’t continue to ignore the mood of the building. Too often, teachers feel embattled, attacked, and overwhelmed, yet building leaders press on with their agenda as though nothing is wrong.

Stop. Give teachers a break. Schedule a faculty meeting and when staff members show up, do no business. Provide food. Hand out acknowledgements. Ask teachers to share great stories from their classroom successes. Put everything on hold until the atmosphere lightens up.

Make each talk unique. Your bullying presentation to the staff at Village Elementary must differ from your presentation to Creek Elementary. Learn something about each school and adjust the talk to fit the group. Include small talk: “Congratulations on a successful Village carnival last week!” “Thanks for taking time out from preparing for Creek parent-teacher conferences next week. That’ll be a couple of long days, won’t it?”

Include specifics about the schools. If Creek Elementary is in a more affluent neighborhood than Village, with many of its students owning cell phones, you might include a special focus on cyberbullying when you talk at Creek: “I usually only talk about this in middle and high schools, but given the number of students who have cell phones here, let me share some ideas with you.”

Eliminate jargon. “Some of the exemplars will make clear that the tiered approach lead to greater differentiation in the way the manipulatives are used”: We’re so close to our subject that we don’t realize that others may not speak our language. Educationalese exists—avoid it with most audiences.

And acronyms? “ESC has shared that SARC has a class explaining how to use RIT scores and MAPS testing in creating 504s, ILPs, and IEPs.” Few listeners will enjoy or even find meaning in such statements. Avoid acronyms, too.

2. Consider how much to include.

In the opening example, the principal does have to present the Common Core State Standards. But how much material should she include in the first talk? Should she just dump everything on the staff all at once? Unfortunately, that’s what often happens. “I only have one hour, and I’ve got all this information to present, so here we go!” This never works. The audience does not get it.

Which would you prefer: to give 100 percent of your talk and have the audience remember 10 percent of it, or give 25 percent of your talk and have the audience remember 80 percent? (No audience remembers 100 percent.) If you did the math, you realized you were twice as effective when using the scaled-down talk.

So how do we decide what to include?

Consider the audience analysis. If you see that the audience is not in the mood for all you want to say, scale back and include only the information audience members will be inclined to hear. Be sure to answer the real questions they have, such as, What’s in it for me? and Exactly what do you want me to do?

Consider time constraints. Never go past the announced ending time. A 10-minute standup meeting in the commons needs to be 9 minutes and 59 seconds or less. “But if I can just have a few more minutes to wrap up . . . .” Nope. You’ve lost your audience’s receptiveness.

Be ruthless about cutting irrelevant information. I watched a PowerPoint presentation given by one of the Common Core assessment consortia about what the new tests will look like. One overcrowded slide told me, among a slew of other things, that there was “a workgroup engagement of 90 state-level staff,” that each workgroup included “six or more members from advisory or governing states” as well as “one liaison from
the Executive Committee,” and that a workgroup responsibility was “to determine and monitor the allocated budget.” Who cares? We just want to know what the tests are apt to look like!

3. Use visual aids.
We’ve fallen into a rut. Education presentations are almost all the same: densely packed PowerPoint slides with text, bullet points, diagrams, and an occasional picture. Although a Prezi may spin the slides at us instead of presenting them linearly, the concept is the same. We all laugh at Don McMillan’s 2010 “Life after Death by PowerPoint” presentation (www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbSPPFYxx3o), but in the intervening five years, we don’t seem to have changed our behaviors. Our slides are still overcrowded, overdecorated, overbulleted, and unimaginative.

Here are some tips that will help:

- **Be a speaker, not a reader.** Never put complete sentences on a slide. If all the words are on the slide, the speaker is redundant. Send us the slides, and we can all go home.

- **Use images on slides instead of words.** Show me one picture of a computer lab with antiquated Apple IIe computers, and then tell me the statistics you were thinking of putting in bullet points on the slide: “57 percent of our computers are more than 10 years old; 72 percent of our schools don’t have Internet access in all rooms; a shocking 81 percent of our teachers say they avoid tech activities in their classrooms because of outdated tools. We must do something!”

- **Simplify.** One powerful image or word is worth more than lots of text, arrows, or bar charts. Think of the slides you’ve created that are covered with text and bullet points. Still want to use them?

- **A visual aid should be—visible.** As soon as a presenter says, “I know you can’t see this in the back of the room,” you know that he or she has made an enormous mistake in design. An aid isn’t visual—in fact, it’s not even an aid—if the audience can’t see it.
A Note About Performing

Of course, a well-built talk is worthless if it’s not performed well. I typically avoid the term delivery because I believe that every meaningful talk is a performance. Whether we’re speaking one-to-one or in front of an auditorium, we have to powerfully communicate our messages, and that requires something special.

In a recent article I wrote for Educational Leadership, I shared the framework for performing a talk (see “Now Presenting,” in the November 2014 issue). I discussed the multiple traits required to be an effective speaker—poise, voice, life, eye contact, gestures, and speed—using student examples.

The rules are the same for adult presenters. Let me emphasize one element here.

If an audience doesn’t hear the passion in your voice, they won’t care about the message.

Put Life in Your Voice

What’s the biggest weakness for almost all speakers? We lack life in our voices. Effective oral communication requires feeling, emotion, passion. Are you enthused about the new initiative? Then we need to hear enthusiasm in your voice. (If you aren’t enthused, then why are we doing it?) Are you dismayed by the condition of the computer lab? We need to hear dismay. Are you proud of what the staff did? We need to hear pride.

This is a stretch for many of us. We aren’t at the level of Martin Luther King Jr. But stretch we must because if an audience doesn’t hear the passion, the audience won’t care about the message. “The principal doesn’t seem to care much about the new standards, so why should I?” You’ve received compliments that made you swell with pride, and you’ve heard others that made you think, “Yeah, whatever. I know he didn’t mean it.”

The difference? The life in the voice. Work on developing more passion in your words.

Improve Your Odds

What if improving your presentation skills made your messages twice as effective? Would you work on those skills? How about 50 percent more effective? I’d love to give you an exact number, but I can’t. I’m confident, however, that improving how we build and perform our talks will greatly improve our effectiveness, no matter what audience we address.

You’ve noticed that some speakers command more interest than others. You know that being well-spoken matters. Now commit to developing the skills you need to make your messages more powerful.

1 See Teaching the Core Skills of Listening and Speaking (ASCD, 2014); Digitally Speaking: How to Improve Student Presentations with Technology (Stenhouse, 2013); and Well Spoken: Teaching Speaking to All Students (Stenhouse, 2011).

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