

*part 1*

# OWN ANY OCCASION

*create the talk*

*part 2*

Mastering the Art of  
Speaking and Presenting

*perform the talk*

*part 3*

Erik Palmer

*use the blueprints*

# OWN ANY OCCASION

Mastering the Art of  
Speaking and Presenting

Erik Palmer

**atd**  
PRESS

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*For Greg and Ross, who became excellent speakers and fine men.  
I'm proud of you.*

*And for Anne, who listened and encouraged.*

# Introduction

Speaking matters.

You know that. And you recognize the great benefits that come with being well spoken. But you also know that oral communication skills can always be improved. Even brilliant, successful people, some with careers that involve daily high-level oral communication, still seek help. They don't feel confident or competent in all speaking situations. Let me share some personal examples of people who were motivated to seek my help.

Michael was the chief justice of the Supreme Court of a western state. Every year, when the new session of the legislature convenes, the assembled houses hear the "State of the State" from the governor and a "State of the Judiciary" from the chief justice. Michael wanted help crafting and delivering his speech. He believed the ones he'd given in the past were not as impressive as they could have been.

Dan works for one of the world's largest mining companies. He is a master electrician, and had trained electricians for a local company for years before being hired by his current employer. He was such a good electrician that his new employer tasked him with developing and delivering training materials for company electricians around the globe. He wasn't confident about his communication skills.

Katie was asked to facilitate a meeting of nurses to develop a better pressure-ulcer prevention program at the health facility they worked for. She was not satisfied with the training materials, but didn't have a clear idea of what could be improved.

Scott worked for a firm that helps retail clients find locations in shopping centers. While he was fine handling paperwork, he wanted to be part of the discussions with clients, where the big money was made.

Karla worked for a large CPA firm. Because of a new promotion, she began leading weekly meetings for her staff, but she didn't feel comfortable leading meetings.

Kelly was tasked with creating webinars for an association of nursing-home therapists. Now, therapists everywhere would be able to see and hear her, rather than just read the articles she had been writing for the association's journal.

Tom, a family practice doctor, was chosen to head all the family practice doctors affiliated with a major hospital. The new position required speaking in front of many doctors. Debbie wanted to make effective videos to promote her network marketing company. Betsy was a psychotherapist who wanted to get more business by speaking to clubs and organizations. Patrick needed to give speeches to raise money for the nonprofit TV station he worked for.

It's not just workplace worries that create a desire to improve oral communication skills, however. Sam wanted to be more effective coaching Pee Wee football and leading Bible study at his church. Eva was worried about the toast she was going to give at her daughter's wedding. Tanya wanted to speak better because conversations with her in-laws intimidated her. Mary Beth won her state's Miss Rodeo contest, but she and 11 other contestants in the Miss Rodeo America pageant wanted help with the pageant's oral performance piece.

Do you identify with any of these people? Most of us are called upon to use speaking skills every day. Are you confident in your oral communication skills? Do you believe they are adequate for the demands of your workplace or life? How many significant events will occur in your life in which your ability to speak well will matter?

## **Few People Speak Well**

Although speaking is important, you have probably noticed that few people speak well. Start with the workplace. Maybe you have been bored at a staff meeting. Perhaps you've had difficulty understanding what a co-worker was attempting to explain. Maybe you have suffered through a dreadful

webinar. Perhaps a professional facilitator in a training environment left you flat. Maybe you have been stunned by the poor verbal communication skills of a person you were interviewing for a job.

Now think about your social situations. Maybe you watched an awkward after-dinner speech or toast. Perhaps you talked to someone and noticed how inarticulate he was. Maybe the president of your service club or the principal at your child's school didn't speak as well as you expected. No doubt you can think of someone who impressed you, but I am certain that you have many more examples of people who were quite unimpressive.

You may even know people who often speak in front of groups, but still haven't mastered the art of speaking well. For example, I attended an awards dinner for many years that was designed to honor excellent employees at my business. Everett organized the annual event and always chose himself to be the emcee—year after year after year. He certainly relished his moment in the spotlight, but he was dreadfully boring—monotonous, humorless, rambling, and dull. Everett somehow managed to take the joy out of the event. Years of hosting it did not make him any better. This is why becoming an effective oral communicator will put you ahead of even experienced speakers.

## **Be More Successful**

People who speak well are more successful than people who don't speak well. Not only does this apply to professions in which speaking plays an integral role, such as a trial attorney, motivational speaker, facilitator, professor, or trainer; it also applies to every other profession. No landscaper can get a contract without being able to communicate clearly. A hairdresser who is fun to talk to will have more business. Think of your workplace. Wouldn't everyone benefit from improved oral communication? Of course! Mastering verbal communication skills dramatically increases *your* chance of business success as well. Research shows that employers rank verbal communication as the number one competency they value in employees.

The National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) surveys employers every year to see what skills they value. In NACE's "Job Outlook



2016,” the skill that had the highest weighted average value was the “ability to verbally communicate with persons inside and outside the organization” (Williams 2016). The University of Kent combined results from a number of surveys from Microsoft, Target Jobs, the BBC, Prospects, NACE, AGR, and other organizations to determine which skills were most often deemed important. At the top of the list? Verbal communication.

And there is a good reason—verbal skills have been shown to contribute to workplace success. A study by two Stanford professors followed MBA graduates for 20 years after graduation and found that a good portion of an executive’s environment is verbal. Further, chief executives spend 70 to 80 percent of their time speaking or listening, and the majority of top achievers rated their oral skills at the “top of the scale.” The study’s conclusion was that “talking and persuading indeed are essential to the manager’s success” (Harrell and Alpert 1986).

But as I mentioned, speaking well is not just a business skill. You’ll also find that enhancing these skills will help you be more effective when communicating with your partner, your children, or the other people you interact with on a given day. You will be better able to advocate for your child at the parent-teacher conference. You will be more successful getting the refund for a defective product or substandard service. You’ll have the confidence to speak at the retirement dinner, the bachelorette party, the awards ceremony, or simply in everyday social situations.

## **Why This Book?**

I am not the first to recognize the importance of speaking well and to notice that few have mastered the art. Many people feel the pressure to improve their oral communication skills, and many people and businesses have responded to that desire. Just look in the business section of your local bookstore or an online retailer—you’ll find multiple books that have something to do with speaking. Some focus on general presentation skills, some on preparing speeches for specific events, and others on specific skills such as closing the deal, negotiating, overcoming fear, speaking in

social settings, or creating PowerPoint presentations. They all have useful tips if you have time to sort through all their pages.

But what if you don't want a 210-page book about negotiating a real estate deal, a 189-page book about communicating with negative employees, or a 245-page book about making a better PowerPoint presentation? What if you won't be on stage at TED or do presentations like Steve Jobs? What if you just want a book that simplifies the process of effective communication, rather than complicating it with advice about random speaking techniques?

This book is for people who want to speak better in general. It outlines how to be an effective speaker in all situations. The steps you need to take to be impressive in a job interview are the same steps that will help you succeed in front of an auditorium full of people. Preparing for an after-dinner speech involves the same process as preparing for a sales call. Getting ready to meet the in-laws requires the same thinking as getting ready to train new employees.

This book starts with a different perspective—that of teacher and trainer. I have spent decades in classrooms and offices teaching oral communication skills. Teaching is all about taking complex things and breaking them into simpler, teachable parts. It is also about teaching skills in order. You weren't taught about paragraphs until you were first taught about sentences; you weren't taught about sentences until you were taught about words; you weren't taught about words until you learned about letters. I think you will find the teacher's perspective easy to follow and easy to remember. If your English teacher did a good job teaching you how to write, you can write a paragraph on any topic. If I teach you well in this book, you will be able to speak well in any situation.

The path to becoming comfortable and competent as a speaker is easier to follow than all the books on the topic would lead you to believe. This is not to say that becoming an effective oral communicator is easy. It's like building a house. Without an effective blueprint, you have no chance to succeed. But once you have the blueprint, there is some serious work involved before the house is complete. This book is the blueprint for

speaking. The steps to follow are simple, but there is effort involved in becoming an impressive speaker.

I may share some ideas that were in the back of your mind, but never given much thought. There will be some ideas that cause you to totally rethink speaking. If you already have a lot of speaking experience, you may have moments of “I already knew that,” but you’ll also gain new insights. Some elements of effective oral communication will be easy for you to master, while others will be more difficult. What is difficult for you may be easy for someone else, and what you find easy will challenge others. We may all start at different places, but by the end of the book you will have the understanding and tools you need to be an effective speaker.

### **It Isn’t Just About “Public Speaking”**

Most people think of public speaking as capital-*P*, capital-*S* “Public Speaking”—some type of occasion in which we need to use formal language while standing in front of a large group. However, when I refer to speaking throughout the book, I am not referring to only a formal presentation in front of a large audience, but all the forms of speaking beyond casual banter with friends. Speaking encompasses a wide variety of genres: interviews, training sessions, arguments, toasts, stage presentations, answering questions in a meeting, facilitating negotiations, working with clients, making sales calls, delivering webinars, creating podcasts, and many more. The framework I share for effective oral communication is involved in all those situations.

Don’t worry. You don’t need to become a master orator. You don’t need to compete with the motivational speaker your firm hired for the company retreat or the televangelist who can make his congregation laugh, cry, and shout during a 30-minute sermon. Don’t feel intimidated by that kind of talent. You simply have to understand how those orators create their magic and apply that understanding to improve your own communication skills. Your goal is to become more confident, more competent, and more impressive as a speaker—in short, to own any occasion.

# Part 1

## Before You Speak

At the Academy Awards, there are Oscars for screenwriting and there are Oscars for acting. In other words, some people are awarded for coming up with the right words, while others are awarded for saying them. This reveals an important but always overlooked insight into the art of oral communication. All speaking involves two distinct parts: creating a talk and performing a talk. *Creating* refers to everything done before you open your mouth; *performing* refers to everything you do as you are speaking.

Few of us have writers to create a script for us or can hire performers to speak for us. This means that we must master both parts ourselves because all effective oral communication demands both. You may be confident that you have a screenwriter's talents—you can come up with something worth saying, but are not necessarily confident saying it. Or you may believe you are a talented performer—comfortable speaking but concerned about the value of what you have to say. Or, you may think you are adept at both creating and performing, even though your audiences would strongly disagree. No matter where you are as a speaker, you can and will improve at both creating and performing your talks using the ideas in this book.

In part 1, the focus is on creating a talk—what you should do before you open your mouth. Obviously, speakers must create the message before they

can say it. Sometimes that message is created for us. In the workplace, corporate trainers are hired to present certain information, and managers may have to address certain topics. Sometimes we create our own messages. Often this happens very quickly, without even realizing we just invented something to say. For example, if I think the umpire made a bad call on strike three, my words come out immediately. At other times, we may work hard trying to come up with something to say, as I did before I dropped my son off at college a few years ago. But no matter the situation, we should be aware that we create the message before we speak it, whether the message is for one person or many, for in-person or digital talks, for work or for pleasure.

*Rule 1: Never speak unless you have something worth saying.*

You can think of people who violate that rule, but you do not want to be one of them. You want to craft an excellent talk, build a memorable speech, and impress every listener. Creating effective messages requires more than words, just as movies involve lighting, sets, and costumes in addition to screenwriting before the actors show up. In this section, I'll share the five steps that guarantee a well-built talk.



# Step 1: Audience

Nancy was the superintendent of schools for my local school district. Superintendents are asked to speak at Parent-Teacher Community Organization (PTCO) meetings, and I saw her often at PTCO meetings at our school. From the moment Nancy entered the room, she was personally engaging with people: “Hi, Jim. How’s your son doing? I heard that he got injured in the game last week.” “Karen! Enjoying the move from ninth grade to 11th grade?”

As she spoke, it was clear that she knew specific details about our school, not just general details about the entire district. It felt like we were listening to a friend and neighbor. Nancy knew about her audience.

## **Each Speech Is Different**

Do you speak the same way in the boardroom as you do in the break room? If you do, you might not have your job for long. Should you use the same words with a prospective employer that you use with your teammates in the dugout? Probably not, if you want to be hired. If you were asked to give a five-minute speech on office behavior, shouldn’t your first question be, “For whom?” It makes a difference if that speech is going to be for new employees, the CEO, your co-workers, or a comedy club audience. Adjust your speech to suit the situation.

Many speakers miss this point. When I train people, the message I share is essentially the same everywhere I go, yet my workshops in Saudi Arabia are quite different from my workshops in California. I make significant changes to my instructional design. While this may be an extreme example, it highlights this essential concept, which applies in non-work-related talks as well. (I will bounce back and forth between workplace examples and nonworkplace examples throughout this book to emphasize the broad applicability of the communication concepts.) You build a very different speech for graduates of the Electrical Apprenticeship and Training Committee than you do for graduates of Greendale High School, even though both are graduation speeches. The EATC graduates are generally older, have job experience, and are headed straight to a career as electricians. High school graduates are younger, largely inexperienced, and headed off to college, entry level jobs, or places such as the electrical apprenticeship school. Your best wishes for the future should be specific to the very different immediate futures that each audience has. Impressive speakers never use a generic speech because they know that to be truly successful, they must tailor the talk to fit their audience. You, too, should never consider making a presentation of any sort without analyzing the audience, whether that audience is one person, several people, or a crowd; in the workplace or in social situations; in-person or online. Modify your words for maximum impact with every listener. Most speakers don't spend enough time understanding the intended audience. Too many times, speakers simply go through their agenda—often created without the listeners in mind.

## **Consider Your Audience**

Recall that I spent some time teaching. I once attended a staff meeting that was scheduled for 4 p.m. on Friday, where a facilitator came in to work us through the process of developing some new procedures for dealing with problem students. She put up PowerPoint slide after PowerPoint slide, each filled with densely packed text or slick graphics with arrows indicating the feedback loops and processes. Perhaps this presentation

worked elsewhere—she had already given it to staff at other schools in our district—but we hated it. Why? The facilitator did not understand the mindset of the audience at 4 p.m. on a Friday. I have attended staff meetings where the facilitator spent 20 minutes going over information that everyone already knew, as well as meetings where the facilitator assumed the audience was familiar with a situation when in fact no one had any idea what he was talking about.

I once watched a local television celebrity give a canned speech at my children's school, asking students to “stay in school and stay away from gangs.” At a wealthy, suburban school with a 98 percent graduation rate? A great message—just not for this audience. I am sure you have your own examples of occasions when a speaker misjudged the audience. Avoid these mistakes. Analyze the audience.

## **That's Why Focus Groups Exist**

Some businesses take dramatic steps to understand their audience. You have heard of companies that pull together focus groups, right? The real purpose of the focus group is to understand the audience. Before a product is released, an audience composed of members of the target market is assembled. The company will try to learn everything it can about the group—its biases, its interests, and its desires—to design an effective product launch. One example of this is Red Bull, which grew from a small product in Thailand to one of the most popular brands in the world in just 20 years. The company succeeded by totally understanding its audience. It sponsors events its target market loves (windsurfing, motocross, snowboarding, and other extreme sports), and it puts its logo on clothing styles that are popular with the targeted demographic. The company's knowledge of its audience has translated into huge success.

Other types of businesses also understand the value of analyzing their audience. Years ago, I got a phone call inviting me to spend a day at a law firm to be on a mock jury. It seems there are firms that specialize in jury selection. Before a major trial, firms hire experts to analyze potential jurors and assist in *voir dire*, the process of selecting the people who will sit on the



jury for a trial. The analysts get quite specific: Argument A was very persuasive to females without college degrees age 18 to 35, but did not persuade college-educated women age 18 to 35; argument B was very persuasive to males age 25 to 40, but was not persuasive to males over 40; in general, men agreed with the plaintiff in the case, whereas women tended to find for the defendant. With this information, when the case gets to court, the lawyers can try to select jury members who are most sympathetic to the firm's arguments or adjust their arguments if the jury makeup is not what the firm wanted. If companies are spending millions of dollars analyzing audiences, don't you think you should spend more time analyzing your listeners?

## **Find Out as Much as You Can**

Find out everything you can about your listeners before you write your talk. It isn't hard to think of situations in which this information is crucial. Before an interview, isn't it important to find out who will be interviewing you? Should you emphasize your writing skills or your collaboration skills? You need to know something about the business you are applying for and what that business is looking for in prospective employees.

Before a sales presentation, isn't it important to ask a few questions about your potential customer? What does the buyer already know about the product? What is the most important feature in her mind? Is she going to want a logical presentation with facts only or should the focus be on gaining friendship and trust? What does your competitor offer?

Before presenting at the staff meeting, shouldn't you find out if everyone agrees or if your ideas are likely to be met with hostility, whether open or subtle?

## **Key Questions to Consider**

For every communication situation, asking questions will enable you to custom-fit your talk. Here are typical questions you can ask before creating your message. Not all will apply to every situation—some are clearly designed for large audiences, some for workplace talks, some for casual talks. While modifications may be needed, these are a good place to start.

## How Large Is Your Audience?

One reason to care about the size of the audience is to avoid the surprise factor. Somehow a crowd of 400 is often more intimidating than a group of 40, and you need to mentally prepare for the size of the group. (To some, a group of five is also more intimidating than a group of 40—they believe the closeness will make it easier to notice their mistakes.) Smaller groups may also require a more casual form of speech.

Additionally, you need to think about the logistical adjustments. How many handouts should you bring? What type of activities can you do? Think about your volume level; do you need to use a microphone? Do you need to resize any visual aids?

## Where Will the Audience Be?

If you are planning an interactive training course, you need to know that the room will be set up for that. Will listeners be seated at tables or in rows? You can use different activities with groups of eight people around a table than you can with people seated theater-style. Are you going to be facing the audience or performing in the round? You'll want to practice differently if the toast comes from the dance floor in the middle of the room rather than from a podium. If the audience will be standing at the time (as is often the case for quick meetings), shorten your remarks.

## How Tired Is the Audience?

A two-hour training session at 3 p.m. cannot be the same as a training session at 9 a.m. Hour two cannot have the same format as hour one. Ears get worn out, and people get tired of sitting. If I present later in the day and have been given 20 to 30 minutes to speak, I move to the shorter end of the range and remove some pieces from the agenda. One study suggests that after 15 minutes, less than half of an audience is paying full attention (Mills 1977). Late in the day, it is probably much less than half. Yes, you think it is a good story, but now is not the time.

Here's another version of tired: I once attended a wedding where the father of the bride gave his toast—his six-page, single-spaced toast—after

two hours of an open bar. Had he thought about his audience, he would not have been surprised that most of us stopped listening seven minutes into his 24-minute speech. We were hungry and anxious to get to the buffet. Yet there he stood, repeatedly asking us to quiet down and give him a few more minutes of attention.

### What Is Their Average Age and Age Range?

Often a good point is lost because it is not couched in an age-appropriate way. You should not use a *Casablanca* reference with your grandson or a Pokemon Go reference with your grandmother. When I speak to people much younger than I am at training sessions, I adjust my talk—but don’t pander. Don’t try to get all up in their business to avoid being zero chill. Adding language that doesn’t fit your style will work exactly as well as *all up in their business* and *zero chill* worked in the previous sentence. But you do need to know what matches the interests of your audience.

### What Is the Audience’s Educational Background?

Pick up an issue of *Time* magazine and an issue of *Harper’s* magazine. They have very different requirements regarding article length and vocabulary choice. It’s clear that they are designed for different audiences. Which one would you prefer to read? Similarly, an audience prefers a speech at their level. You have undoubtedly encountered a trainer who treated you as if you were a schoolkid, and you probably have had an experience with a speaker who was trying to show off her vastly superior knowledge.

It’s important to learn key words that the audience knows. A very bright friend of mine had seen the word *placebo* in print but had never heard it pronounced. In a sales pitch to a group of doctors he mentioned the “PLACE-boh” effect, not knowing, as every doctor does, that the word is pronounced “pluh-CEE-boh.” It’s a small error, but one that cost him a large amount of credibility.

### What Does the Audience Know About the Topic?

Do you need to explain the product features to a customer who already has the product and is just deciding whether to buy another? At an engagement

party, why would you tell a story about how Kevin and Diane met if all attendees already know how Kevin and Diane met? Figure out how familiar the audience is with the ideas you are going to present. It's not helpful to say, "I know you already know this, but let me just go over it again."

### What Does the Audience Want?

Most managers focus on what they want to say. They have a set agenda: Here is the new organizational chart for the firm; here are the new sales targets; this is the new "improve office morale" initiative; this is the way to do this procedure. The trick is that the audience may not want the program being delivered. For example, to effectively explain the new organizational structure, you should figure out what the staff want to know about it. Yes, they want to know who reports to whom, but maybe they also want to know why the change was made, who made the decision, if it is a lasting change, and how they will personally be affected.

When I attended my son's graduation from Pomona College, the commencement speaker was the prominent anchorman Walter Cronkite. At the time, the Iraq war had just begun, and his speech was essentially about the folly of the war and how the lessons of Vietnam had been forgotten. He warned the graduates that the world was in a horrible state and things were bleaker now than they had been in almost any time he could recall. I'm sure many people thought Cronkite was correct, but still, what a downer of a commencement speech! The world is horrible? In a world as bleak as this, who cares about your degree? Commencement speeches are supposed to celebrate accomplishments and send kids off with best wishes and hope for the future. Yes, Cronkite avoided clichés as I recommend later, but his general tone was inappropriate for the occasion. He should have given more thought about what his audience would want in a commencement speech.

### Is the Audience Likely to Be Receptive?

Listeners come to your talk with preconceived notions. I once worked for an organization that had a new latest-and-greatest practice every year that the staff needed to be trained on. Anyone who had been with the organization for a length of time got pretty cynical, myself included. If you

know the employees are in that position, be more aggressive in persuading them that this program is different from all the others. (If the program isn't different, don't do it!) If you know they are receptive, you don't have to waste time with those explanations. Many employees come into compulsory training sessions with a negative attitude, so be prepared for that. At your neighborhood association meeting, know which neighbors are likely to oppose the fence replacement project. Be ready for them.

### What Are Their Biases?

If you walk into the National Rifle Association meeting with an anti-gun pitch, you should not be surprised if you receive a very cool reception. That is an obvious case of bias, and your job as a speaker is to find out the obvious and the not-so-obvious cases. Sometimes, understanding the bias means understanding what topics to avoid. It is also useful to know the political orientation. If an audience has a liberal, conservative, feminist, or other political posture, you need to know that. Don't lie about your beliefs to fool them, but you can keep some of your beliefs to yourself as the situation warrants. Maintain neutrality in the workplace.

### What Are Their Interests?

This will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7, but it's important to pick up some things you can use to relate to the audience. Years ago, when I was running a commodity brokerage firm, I went to a breakfast meeting in Goodland, Kansas, to try to convince some farmers to open accounts with my company. My pitch was a disaster. I had my agenda and my standard sales talk about the importance of commodity trading and hedging, but I had no idea what their life was like, and I had no way to connect with them. I didn't even know biscuits and gravy was a breakfast item. I was simply a young city slicker who hadn't taken the time to find out the slightest things about their lives. And it was clear to the audience. You could see "Who is this punk?" written on their faces, and many walked out before I finished.

Make sure you find out nontopical things about your audience to avoid making the huge mistake I made. What does the audience do in their spare time? Do they hunt? Scrapbook? What sports teams do they follow? And

food, that's always a good topic. Know about popular restaurants and food choices in the area. (You now know that biscuits and gravy is popular for breakfast in the Midwest!)

### Are There Geographical or Regional Factors to Consider?

Do you believe that people in Manhattan, New York, are going to be the same as the people in Manhattan, Kansas? What about an audience in Seattle, Washington, compared with Selma, Alabama? Certainly, there will be more similarities than differences, but there will be differences. For example, after waiting for the roar of laughter to die down, comedian Ron White told a Denver audience that he had told the same joke in Georgia earlier on the tour and got no reaction. It happens.

Don't think only of cultural differences from one region to the next. Are there local festivals happening? Is the area known for a local landmark? When I was in Plymouth, Massachusetts, I made a point of visiting Plymouth Rock before my talk and tossed in a comment about it. Are there other kinds of local features that residents are proud of? And don't go to Milan, Ohio, and say "mih-LAHN." They pronounce it "MY-lun."

### Are There Any Cultural Issues?

When I trained educational leaders in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, the classroom environment was very different from that of other programs I have led. The male teachers were on one side of the room, the female teachers on the other, and a divider was placed between the two groups. The men and women never mixed, even in small group activities, and it would have been totally inappropriate for me to say to one of the women, "Here, these two men need another person for this three-person activity, so you go join them."

Again, that situation is more extreme than most, but cultures do differ. Western cultures tend to be individualistic and motivated by competition; Eastern cultures tend to be group-oriented and value cooperation. And remember, culture does not refer only to racial, religious, or ethnic groups. A football team's culture is different from the marching band's culture, and a speaker at the awards banquet should understand the difference.

## What Is Their Mood?

The office mood at 4 p.m. Friday is different from the mood at 8 a.m. Monday or 12 p.m. Wednesday. Occasionally, it may be your job to adjust the mood of the audience. My sister, for example, works for a company that provides outplacement services, and she is called in to work with people who have just been laid off. She has to pick them up off the floor and inspire them to begin their search for a new career. She can't begin by being overly cheerful about their exciting new opportunities; a somber start is needed to match their mood before trying to change the tone.

At some point in your life you will be asked to speak at social events. Obviously, the mood at a eulogy is different from the mood at a bachelor party, and a story that works in one place may be a disaster in the other. Be aware, though, of more nuanced moods every time you speak.

## What Motivates Them?

People are motivated by different things. I have a friend who reads *Consumer Reports* and checks many online sites before making any purchase. I have another friend who bought a case of beer he had never heard of before because someone representing the brewery gave away coasters with the brewery's logo at the store that evening. I bet you have a friend who wants to save money on everything, as well as a friend who will overpay simply to have the status of owning the latest, coolest thing, right? The former is driven by logic, whereas the latter is driven by emotion.

I believe that most people are in that second group and offer Apple as proof. Apple has made the emotional connection a huge part of their business model. When a new iPhone is released, customers wait in lines that snake around the block. Are their old phones broken? No. Did all of them study the specifications of the new phone and compare them with other smartphones? Probably not. They just love Apple and love the feeling they get from being among the first to own Apple's latest product.

As a facilitator, manager, or trainer, do not assume that all listeners share your motivation. Indeed, do not assume that all listeners have the same motivation. Offer something that appeals to your specific audience.

## It's Worth the Effort

Gathering all that information seems like a lot of work, and it is not always possible to get all the data you want. However, it is well worth the effort; sometimes it's even crucial. My doctor tells a story of a drug representative who wanted to talk to another doctor in the office, but he would never agree to meet. The drug rep offered to bring in lunch for the office to entice the doctor to show up, but even free food was not enough. The doctor didn't show up. During the lunch, though, the sales rep found out that the doctor loved hot dogs and considered himself to be a hot dog connoisseur. So the sales rep offered to do another lunch—with hot dogs—and sure enough, the doctor came. But he didn't stay long because the sales rep only brought ketchup. Any hot dog aficionado knows that hot dogs should be paired with mustard. The sale was lost. Learning everything you can about your listeners enables you to tailor your message to perfectly fit the audience.

## Getting the Information

How can you get information? Visit the group or company website. Talk to a member of the organization or to the person who invited you to speak. Query the head of the department about the group. Read a local paper to pick up something about the community. Talk to someone in the same field or who fits the same demographic as the people you will be addressing. Send questions to the organizer. Visit the site of the speech in advance. Be creative to find the information that will allow you to get inside the head of the listener.

Sometimes you don't have the option of gathering information in advance. If a prospective buyer walks onto your sales floor, try to collect all the information you can in your first few minutes of conversation. It shouldn't seem like an interrogation, but you should sneak in questions like the ones discussed in this chapter. Don't let something like ketchup get in the way of your success!



# The Devil You Know

A final caveat: Don't forget to apply an audience analysis to groups you know well. For example, the seven people on Marcus's team have all been with him for a while: between 18 months and six years. They know one another well, so this should be the easiest possible audience to analyze. However, these types of groups are often taken for granted. It is easy to fall into a trap such as, "Well that's just how Sam is. She is cynical about everything. Don't worry about it." Do worry about it. If Marcus writes off Sam and fails to address her attitude, he has failed to do his job—the job of reaching every listener—and has possibly opened the door to letting her undermine his message later with other staff members. Marcus doesn't have the power to change Sam's nature, but he has to let Sam know that he understands her and her concerns. He should anticipate subsequent conversations and pre-emptively deal with possible problems. When Marcus prepares for a staff meeting, analyzing Sam and every other member of his team is imperative.



## Key Points

- Each audience is unique, so each speech must be unique. Build your message for each group. Even if your topic doesn't change from group to group, make sure the talk isn't generic and adjust your words to your audience.
- Think about the listeners. It is your job to get inside the heads of the audience members and understand as much about them as possible.
- Ask questions. Find out everything you can about the listeners. Spend time at the outset to learn about audience interests, characteristics, and biases. Don't ignore the obvious.
- Don't pretend to be someone you aren't. Adjust your words to be effective, not to fool the listeners.



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