



Talking to the Top: Executive's Guide to Career-Making Presentations

By Ray Anthony

While written in 1995, this remains the best book on how to give an executive presentation that I have ever read. The knowledge contained in this book will help in your effort to be a leader in the business community. A voice for sound judgment and caring practices. Many suggestions mirror those contained in the report I wrote "Powerful Presentation Techniques." It is worth risking redundancy, especially because the points made are so valuable.

While I will summarize some of my favorite insights I strongly suggest you buy a copy for yourself and refer to it often.

Introduction

"Creative communication is at the heart of persuasion, and persuasion is the essence of effective leadership." – Warren Bennis

"True knowledge of the audience and its beliefs, attitudes, desires and experiences, coupled with honesty and well-prepared, concise and insightful messages will lead to successful executive presentations. Executives who offer their followers an important message and do so with an impressive style will emerge as effective leaders in the twenty-first century." – Ray Anthony

"New ideas are not only the enemies of old ones: they also appear often in an extremely unacceptable form." – Carl Jung

Chapter One: The Keys To A Successful Top Talk

"Top talks are different because higher stakes are involved, you have a limited time and it can be career lifting or diving." The points made in this chapter are as follows:

- Give a sincere and natural performance.
- Be yourself and be your best.
- Give an Academy Award quality presentation.
- You know your talk has been successful if you set challenging objectives and then you use preparation, execution and impression to reach all of your objectives as quickly and easily as planned.
- The impression that we want to leave with an audience is:

- I am a trustworthy professional
- My ideas are valuable and can help you
- I know my material
- I am a strong leader
- I am an excellent communicator
- I can handle any challenges
- I am an effective problem solver
- Preparation includes planning, an audience analysis, preparation of a great “script,” visual aids and resources, practice, practice, practice.
- Execution includes presenting skills, creativity, image and style, leadership.

The 10 characteristics of the ideal “top talk” are:

- Concise and to The Point
- Simple and Clear
- Interesting
- Relevant
- Friendly and Relaxed
- Interactive
- Effective and Efficient
- Strategically Focused
- Persuasive
- Motivating, Energizing, Entertaining

One of the challenges I face, along with most other content presenters, is being concise and to the point. We are so enamored with our content that we end up owning 100% of the content instead of 100% of audience. Focus on the 80/20 of your content. What 20% of things you to say have 80% of the impact? Focus on those things and allow you audience to interact with them. Remember, “No sinner is ever saved after the first 20 minutes of a sermon.” Mark Twain or, “The secret of being a bore is to tell everything.” – Voltaire.

Note – according to Anthony the ideal length of time for an executive-level presentation is 30 minutes or less. When giving multi hour workshops try to chunk them down to 30-minute segments where possible.

The biggest problem with handouts is they are distracting, too lengthy or too detailed.

Executives like visual aids, they most prefer overhead transparencies and least prefer films and flip charts. Multi-media is rapidly replacing the overhead approach.

Executives prefer speakers who are informal, relaxed and conversational in their presentation style.

The two worst deadly sins of a presenter are displaying a lack of integrity and time wasting.

Chapter Two: Knowing Your Audience

- Know your audience and don't waste their time!
- When analyzing an audience find out their: knowledge and experience with the topic, attitudes and opinions towards it, expectations regarding your talk, pain points they are dealing with and challenges they may impose.
- Before giving a talk, prepare for tough questions, potential sabotage, facts and opinions they may dispute, who your supporters are, and preconceived belief systems about your profession (i.e. don't like lawyers, salespeople, etc.)
- Interview prospective audience members before hand. Also talk to people who have given presentations to the group.
- Ask the audience questions such as "how many have you ..."
- Find out the audience's culture. It's always beneficial to weave in things such as their mission statement, ethics statements, values statements, industry awards, etc. For example, prior to giving a presentation to Compaq, I followed the history of their stock since I first bought a Compaq computer in 1983. I was able to share with the audience that had I instead put the \$5,000 I spent into the computer into Compaq stock that I would have over a million dollars in assets today. I pointed out to them the long-term value of investing in something you believe in (i.e. their job).

Chapter Three: Learning What Makes Executives Tick

"Really great men have a curious feeling that the greatness is not in them but brought through them." – John Ruskin

Today's most successful executives are motivated by the social and business impact they make and are driven by their sense of accomplishment and contribution. What do they fear? Losing power and embarrassment.

Learn how to push executives buttons. I like asking, "What commitments do you expect from your employees? How do they know that? How committed have they been? Why aren't they as committed as you hoped they would be?"

Understand distinctions between speaking to senior management and middle management. Senior management is more involved with asset management, profit and strategic planning. They're in charge of company vision and mission, management techniques and balancing short and long-term goals. They are strategic, financial, long-term and wide focus. In contrast, middle management focuses on improving efficiency and productivity, employee morale and satisfaction, better customer service, quality improvement, systems policies and procedures, worker training, goal setting and incentive plans. They are tactical, operational, short-term and narrow focused.

"Strong relationships handle change and uncertainty. Weak ones do not." – Don Phin

Remember executives that you speak to want to feel that they have made a “real difference” and will be appreciated and remembered for it. Ask executives what they want their legacy to be. Is it financial growth and profitability, vision and values transcending “mere wealth,” continuity of management, enhancement of the company’s market position, or the improvement of employee’s skills, morale and loyalty?

In 1989, Korn/Ferry International did a comprehensive study of the executive profile. While it is now more than 10 years later, there’s little reason to believe that the responses have changed much. When asked what were the keys to their success, executives stated hard work 19.5%, effective execution 15.2%, interpersonal skills 9.9%, perseverance/family 9.6% and integrity 6.9%. Interestingly, the six top factors in a career turning point were given as: different functional responsibility 42.7%; luck 40.7%, improving performance of a division 34.5%, switching companies 33.5%, taking on high-risk projects 33.4% and aligning with the right people only 19.1%. What both sets of these statistics tell us is executives are focused on what they can do, rather than “who they are.” Interestingly their definition of success was the ability to effect change 59.3%, enjoying their work 56.9%, contribution to corporate profits 30.7%, position 28.1% and power 24.2%. Control and money came in sixth and seventh place respectively. Lastly, when asked what would cause executives to move on to another company, responsibility 27.9%, increased challenge 22.5% and better compensation 17.6% were the top reasons cited.

Chapter Four: Designing A Flawless Plan

The bottom line of this chapter is to plan, plan, plan, practice and rehearse and then plan some more.

During a presentation gauge their reaction, ask for questions, and then ask for their commitment.

Start off strong, and conclude reinforcing the initial points. Repeat the theme throughout your talk and speak in terms of threes. For example, the mantra of Fast Company is change, learning and leadership. I like to speak in terms of relationship, relationship, relationship. That is, the relationship we have with ourselves, the relationship we have with our workforce and the relationship we have with our customers. If you have more than three subjects, break them down into threes.

Let them tell you why employee relations, legal compliance, employee retention or any other matter you are talking about is important. Don’t you tell them, let them tell you.

When de-organizing your presentation, consider the following:

- | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Analogies | <input type="checkbox"/> Short stories | <input type="checkbox"/> Contrasts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Humor | <input type="checkbox"/> Research studies | <input type="checkbox"/> Statistics |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cartoons | <input type="checkbox"/> Test reports | <input type="checkbox"/> Exercises |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quotations | <input type="checkbox"/> Facts | <input type="checkbox"/> Explanations |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Definitions | <input type="checkbox"/> Assumptions | <input type="checkbox"/> References (to |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Descriptions | <input type="checkbox"/> Metaphors | news articles, etc.) |

- ❑ Anecdotes
- ❑ Illustrations
- ❑ Comparisons
- ❑ Examples
- ❑ Themes
- ❑ Testimonials
- ❑ Demonstrations
- ❑ Rhetorical questions

Chapter Five: Overcoming Boardroom Speaking Fear

All of us have heard that many people fear speaking over death. A lump in the throat, dry mouth, and a fast heartbeat are symptoms experienced by even the most seasoned speakers.

Anthony goes over how to deal with the four major phobias of speaking: stage fright, ridicule, failure, and fear of those in power. In my personal experience, fear first begins to fade when you have mastered your content. Sooner or later you will be able to make a presentation without looking at your notes. Once you can do that, you can then do a better job of interacting with the audience. Instead of telling them what something is, you can draw it out of them. Instead of telling them something, you can help them experience something. I have now gotten to the point where I would rather own 100% of the audience than 100% of my content.

Chapter Six: How Your Top Talk Can Make A Winning Impression

“You are the message. Everything you do in relation to other people causes them to make judgments about what you stand for and what your message is.” – Roger Ailes

When asked what are the five most important traits that a speaker should exhibit during his or her presentation to you, executives stated: knowledgeable 79%, organized 71%, logical 55%, confident 43%, thorough 31%. The highest paid speaker in the business, Anthony Robbins, has done an incredible job of taking a wide range of complex subjects, distilling them down to their essentials, and then communicating them in a powerful and experiential manner. He has mastered both his material and his audience.

Anthony and I agree that being personable goes a long way towards establishing audience rapport. Before any workshop I attempt to meet and shake hands with as many of the audience members as possible. Make sure to make eye contact as well. Communicate with your audience, not at them.

Anthony also talks about his secrets for capturing the audience. He wants them to like you, respect you and trust you.

Anthony also reminds us not to make mistakes, use poor judgment, annoying statements, and so forth. One of the biggest mistakes is to tell someone that they are wrong or to use “you” phrases. Better to speak in “I” terms when debating a point.

Anthony concludes the chapter by talking about dressing for success. When in doubt I will ask the host to tell me if formal or informal dress is preferred.

Chapter Seven: Developing Your Leadership Aura

Anthony begins by telling us to take command at the podium. He says the following traits, characteristics and behaviors create an aura of leadership:

- Decisiveness
- Energy
- Integrity
- Confidence
- Knowledge
- Personal touch
- Big picture
- Visionary
- Passion

“Visionary companies stand out partly by setting ambitious goals, communicating them to employees, and following a core ideology – a purpose behind making money.” – James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porris. According to the authors these companies perform eight times better than their competitors and five times better than the general market.

Anthony gives some ideas to help craft your vision. Among his many suggestions are to make sure you know the emotions and feelings you want the audience to experience as a result of your vision. What themes, metaphors, slogans or speech devices can strengthen the message? How can you create a vision that will grab the very souls of people and provide a sense of purposefulness and ownership into the future?

Anthony reminds us to be careful with our humor. He mentions the following quote: “The kind of humor I like is the thing that makes me laugh for five seconds and think for ten minutes.” – William Davis. Experts tell us that the value of humor can not be over estimated in the business environment. However, we are not talking about a jokester here. Your humor has to be relevant, tasteful, and well timed.

Chapter Eight: Creating Stunning Visuals

There are a myriad of different ways we can give a presentation today. The irony is we don't even have to be present to give a presentation!

One of the conclusions presented by Anthony is that executives are most impressed with overheads. This however, was before multimedia could be surveyed.

Now matter what your visual aid, avoid too much detail, too many visual aids, distracting from the message, or misusing the visual (i.e. leaving it on after it is needed, etc.).

Don't get caught in the trap of reading visuals word for word.

Anthony gives many good pointers about visual presentation. Some of them include:

- Use large, clear, bold letters.
- Limit a visual to between 35 and 45 words.
- Lower case letters are 13% faster to read. Use as few words as possible to complete an idea.
- Use no more than three basic colors per visual. Yellow/White on a background is the most visible from a distance. Visuals with light backgrounds have an abundance of reflective light and are distracting.
- When it comes to handouts, he advises us to keep them brief and simple. The biggest complaint are that handouts are either distracting, too lengthy or detailed or grab too much of the speakers focus.

Chapter Nine: Using New Multi-Media Technology

I won't spend time summarizing the points made in this area. In part because the material is already dated and in part because I think it is in your best interest to go to a multi-media professional and have them set you up. There's simply too much learning curve involved for it to be worth your while to learn it all. Unless designing multi-media is your highest and best use – have someone else do it for you.

Chapter Ten: Creative Communication Leadership

Anthony goes through an excellent summary about creativity. He gives seven excellent examples of creativity in action. As Anthony says, you need to mentally toy with highly imaginative approaches that tickle, massage or hug the audience's beliefs, desires, principles, values and motivations. People pay close attention to that which is out of the ordinary.

How can you make your presentation more of the following?

- Surprising
- Shocking
- Curious
- Stimulating
- Stunning
- Hilarious
- Dramatic
- Inspiring
- Spiritual

He asks us to ask idea-spurring questions. He tells us to turn our talks inside out and upside down. What can we combine, what can we reverse, what can be added or taken away, what can be rearranged, substituted, and what new uses can you find for unrelated things?

Consider how you will use any of the following:

- ❑ Illustrations, pictures and other graphics
- ❑ Music and sound effects
- ❑ Flip charts, transparencies or 35 mm slides
- ❑ Humor
- ❑ Grab the audiences attention from the first start
- ❑ Relevant and cleaver props
- ❑ Costumes, hats, etc.
- ❑ Novelties, magic tricks, bells and whistles
- ❑ Posters, banners and art work
- ❑ Blow up pictures, cartoons, etc.
- ❑ A short skit
- ❑ Games, exercises and demonstrations
- ❑ Examples and stories
- ❑ What kind of out of the ordinary presentation conclusion can you burn into their brain

Conclusion

As stated from the outset, this book is a “must” read if you are doing presentations. The book concludes with an excellent appendix of reference sources.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead