***WHAT MAKES A GREAT SPEECH***

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You've got something to say that we need to hear. And if you know the subtleties of how humans are wired YOU MAKE THE CONNECTION and we have a match made in heaven - just the right sparks fly in just the right directions/proportions, and magic HAPPENS.

Well, sometimes. After all, there's a world of difference between Doctor King's "I Have a Dream" speech and some guy balancing out a lack of quality with an abundance of quantity.

So, what makes for a really great speech? Here are 15 suggestions:

1. Don't waste time with, "Hello, I'm really honored to be here." Nobody cares, right? You need a compelling answer to the following: “So what? Who cares? What’s in it for me?” Your first and last 30 seconds must be memorable. Start with a bang. Does “Imagine this:” get your attention in just two words? Give a startling quote or story. Don't meander when you hit the ground - run!

2 It goes without saying, but have a title. Whether you’re out to inform us, or entertain us, or inspire us, or amuse us start out focused and stay focused throughout, right down to the last semi-colon – there’s a world of difference between moving around and getting ahead. Your title is a foundational phrase of less than 10 words that governs everything you will say. "My dream is not for sale," for example. And as a necessary adjunct, limit your topic. "I've discovered the cure for cancer!" isn't nearly as riveting as the speaker might think.  Keep it much tighter. Remember, the cockpits of super-fast, super-efficient airplanes make very good use of the limited space available. Broad topics are ALWAYS easy to state - and ALWAYS make for clunky, unimaginative presentations.

3. Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Internalize your material so thoroughly that now you can focus not on you [“Oh my God: What are they going to think of me?”] but on your audience and meeting their needs - which is where your focus belongs. And insofar as you’ve given a ton of time to crafting your message down to the gnat’s eyebrow, to rehearsing every gesture, every pause, every raised eyebrow, you’ll have your audience in your pocket. They’ll hang on your every word if you’ve invested hours for every five minutes of your presentation because they’re on the receiving end of a presentation that is truly mature, not one that comes across vaguely as half-baked. They’ll automatically give you their rapt attention – you in turn will feed off that attention. Thus, you will have engendered a match made in heaven!

4. Think, “service leadership.” Don’t assume they're as interested in your topic, or your take on their topic, as you are. That is as dangerous as assuming they're as much in love with the sound of your voice as you are! They’ll care how much you know when they know how much you care. Find, then meet, their needs – every time!

5. Structure your information - "these are the five questions I'm asked about most often." Then "Number One, "Number Two," etc. Don’t assume that every single person in your audience will pay rapt attention to every single thing you say – even when you’re preaching to the choir. Their minds are going to wander - bank on it! A structure both clear and simple will help them find their way back.

6. Be generous with pauses - it may sound counterintuitive but that's when the connecting happens, that's when they'll digest what you present. Think of pauses as your presentation taking a breath. Rushing headlong through your presentation is merely pandering to your nervousness. Instead, be like a contemplative monk: make silence your friend - get comfortable with it!

7. Whenever possible substitute dialog for narration every time. "Jim told Bill he was nuts" isn't nearly as gripping as "Jim said, 'Bill, you're nuts'!" That subtle shift from third person to second person is enough to keep their attention right where you want it! Dialog also opens the possibility for emotional content. Think of it: a phrase like, “I’m home” can come across as sarcastic, as prosaic, as transcendent – so avoid this temptation: “Bill said sarcastically he was home.” Instead, it’s “Bill said, “I’m home?” and put the sarcasm in your voice when you say it. Works every time!

8. Pay attention to all the non-verbal components of your presentation. Every bit as important as the words you choose is how you use the real estate of the stage, or how you dress yourself, or how imaginative/vibrant are your gestures, or how you fine-tune the emotional state of your audience by calibrating your own.

9. Have more content than you have time for, then choose carefully. Including the really good story that almost fits is the mark of emotional immaturity and, as such, is a tiny betrayal of your audience’s trust in you. Calibrate the thing down to the gnat’s eyebrow. In short, BE RUTHLESS WITH YOUR CONTENT. As one of my favorite speech coach mentors puts it, “My job is to help you murder your darlings.” If you don’t have a coach make sure you do the murdering!

10. We’re far more interested in a little old lady who had her purse stolen than all the muggings in the country. So have a story to back up each of your points. And make sure those stories are emotionally true - you don't have to give all the details, or maintain literal truth. Hey, nobody's going to ask your brother if he really did what you said he did. But integrate the details of your stories with your point.

11. Don’t apologize, don’t thank. If you’re apologizing for some reason then why should we have to listen? And don’t thank at the end. Think of it: you did all the preparation, and all we did was sit there. So what, exactly, are you thanking us for? In short, never apologize at the beginning, never thank at the end. Both break the magic.

12. End with a bang. Tell them what, exactly, you want your audience to do, think, become, feel, change as a result of your presentation. That’s not an easy question to grapple with, but trust me: without a clear answer to that question you're wasting your time - and theirs!

13. Make very careful use of visuals. For example, if you’re talking about the need to reconcile, don’t tell us we all have a distinct vantage on an issue – just put a vase of flowers in the very center of the room and ask us whose vantage is correct. We’ll get the message you want us to get, and all the more firmly not because you told us but because we “discovered” it on our own. And in a world overrun with technology be really careful of an essay transferred to PowerPoint, and then the “speaker” reads at us, one b o r i n g slide after the other. Leave Death By PowerPoint to the amateurs.

14. Finally, humor. Don’t leave it out. In the world of paid professional speakers the answer to the question, “Should I include humor in my talk?” is, “Only if you want to get paid.”

On the other hand don’t decide, as a kind of after-thought, to stick in a little humor when the preparation is all but finished. For example, you show your own emotional immaturity when you tell a joke that almost fits, but not quite. Neither you nor your audience may even be aware of it, but you will have inadvertently let the air out of your own tire, and the sense of authority you absolutely require will start to leak out, never to be recalled.

So what do you do? Well, as is the case with all humor, it’s hiding in plain sight all around us. Part of the fun of preparing a speech, like part of the fun of life itself, is uncovering the humor and sparking it into life. So also here: uncover the humor that’s already there.

Where, exactly? That’s for you to discover, right? And when you do the grunt work this implies you’ll be just like that concert pianist applauded before he’s played a note – who then justifies that applause by going on to play flawlessly!

CONCLUSION

Public speaking is scary. Almost all of us can resonate with the following: “I’d rather be the guy in the box at the funeral than the guy talking about the guy in the box at the funeral.” But keep your head about you: the good news is, your audience WANTS you to succeed. Earn their trust like that concert pianist. Do whatever it takes to prepare well, to integrate all the disparate pieces into a harmonious whole with no wasted words, because a speech that you've molded to perfection will be as much a joy to listen to as it is a joy to deliver. Remember, success, in this or any other human endeavor is always available to the one who pays the price required by life in the proper coinage. And in this arena when you the speaker succeeds, the audience succeeds.

In other words, you plus this topic plus this audience really IS a match made in heaven!