



IMPORTANT PEOPLE: How to present to them

10 Keys for Success

We work at senior levels in business and the government, and that means that we're often presenting to some big kahuna or helping someone else do so. That work is always interesting, usually fun, and has taught us a few rules along the way. Here are some of the rules that have served us best.

THE ÜBER-RULE IS NOT THE GOLDEN RULE

1. You aren't presenting to yourself, so forget the Golden Rule here.

It's very unlikely that the mucky-muck you're addressing will have your same objections, your same passions, or your same patience with the topic. Nor will she necessarily process information like you do, or prefer the same communication style or the same communication vehicles. She is not you, and that's terribly inconvenient. But getting past the "assumption of similarity," as communication guru Milton Bennett calls it, is the first step to actual communication.

PREPARING THE BRIEF

2. Really, really know your audience

Relative to presentation style, you will need to reconnoiter a bit, if you don't already know the senior leader from personal experience. Talk with his staff and others who may know him. You should be able to answer:

- What *type* of questions does this person ask?
- What are his body language signals, such as when he is done with a topic and wants to move on?
- What idiosyncrasies does he have with regard to presentations, such as number of slides, level of detail, format, and so on?

Relative to his perspective, you need to be able to answer these questions, which are much, much harder:

- What is the person receiving the presentation trying to get out of it? (You'll need to know her problems, preferences, and frame of reference.)
- What is the real issue, from the audience's perspective?
- So what? What makes your information, solution, or proposal different or worth noticing from the perspective of the audience?? Remember the Über-Rule, above.

3. Get the medium right

Your deliverable – the material that you prepare for your audience – matters a lot: what it is and how well it's put together. Ask yourself these questions:

- What's the best medium, given my goals? Is it PowerPoint, a document, or something else? If you want to make the case that lousy maintenance is



causing injuries, you might do better to put a rusty widget on the table than to project a pie chart.

- ☑ Have you got the housekeeping details right: pages numbered, correct spelling, careful grammar, and so on? Flubbing these details marginalizes you and your message.
- ☑ Have you storyboarded your presentation, or outlined it, or otherwise assured that the logic and transitions all make sense in the aggregate? Each page or slide can be a masterpiece, but the *big picture* has to make sense, hang together, and flow.

4. Keep it short & simple

Of course mileage may vary, but *most* senior leaders we've worked with want short presentations. Often, they'll impose restrictions such as "no more than 10 slides," in an effort to get people to get to the point. One vice admiral we know advised, "We call it a 'briefing' for a reason; if we wanted verbiage, we'd call it a 'longing'."

Boiling something down to its essence isn't easy and it takes a considerable investment of time. As 17th century French mathematician Blaise Pascal famously quipped, "I'd have written a shorter letter but I didn't have time." There are no shortcuts to short (and simple), but here are a few questions that might help:

- ☑ Have you asked yourself, "What really, really is the point of this presentation?" If you haven't stared into space, genuinely meditating on this question, you may be wasting everybody's time, including your own.
- ☑ Have you eliminated boring obligatory slides (often: mission & vision statements, org charts, and such)?
- ☑ Have you fallen in love with a slide, a picture, a graph, some words, or something else that doesn't truly bear your main point? Rip it out! That is the single best way to improve any presentation.
- ☑ Have you shortened the presentation by simplifying it, or by using tiny type and miniscule diagrams? The latter is cheating and misses the point altogether.
- ☑ Can you illustrate a complex concept with a simple diagram? Often, senior executives think in large chunks; diagrams and illustrations allow your audience to do a quick glance-and-grasp. One leader advised, "More pictures, fewer words." (He wasn't talking about clip art!)

5. Make your objective clear

A surprisingly large percentage of leaders will sit patiently and politely while inwardly wondering, "where the hell is this going?" Give your audience the context right away.

- ☑ Are you seeking a decision? Say so.



- ☑ Are you seeking the honcho's help? Say so. (Usually, she *wants* to help, if the cause is right.)
- ☑ Is your presentation "informational"? Say so, and say why your information is relevant to what she's working on.

6. Prepare Credible Alternatives

If you are presenting a problem, then also present alternative solutions. For example, if you want funding for a project, show what different levels of funding will buy, including the positive and negative ripple effects of each. Most senior execs don't get to where they are by being wimps. They are eager to make decisions – and your job is to give them *real alternatives* from which to choose.

Most senior execs are not stupid, either. So ditch the old trick of giving three options, one of which you are promoting and two of which are transparently lame. That approach builds neither trust in you nor confidence in your thinking.

DELIVERING THE BRIEF

7. Don't read the slides

There is no faster way to bore your audience, while simultaneously insulting them, than to read them slides. People who sit through a lot of presentations have an especially strong negative reaction when they are read to. One senior military leader asserted, "I can read your slides as easily as you can. More easily in fact. If you insist on reading your slides, read them to someone else and then send that person to brief me."

Obviously, if you're using material other than slides, the same idea applies: don't read for your audience what they can read for themselves.

8. Know your stuff & don't BS

You want to look positive and confident, conveying that you and your material are worth paying attention to. Apart from having a healthy attitude, pulling that off requires that you:

- ☑ Know your material cold. If someone else has prepared your presentation for you, you will have to work especially hard to learn and remember all the content and sequencing. Practice does help, so that when you present, you can think about delivery and not worry about content.
- ☑ Never present any slide or other material that you can't explain. (An obvious corollary.)
- ☑ Just say so, if you are asked a question that you will need to research; don't tap dance.

9. Stay Alert & Flexible

Okay, you've prepared a fabulous six-course meal and you think your audience should enjoy every bite, one course at a time. But that's not always how reality



works. Sometimes your audience will want to skip a course, or go right to dessert, or order off the menu.

- ☑ Look for body language that says, “I’ve got it. Now move on.” Or, “Something about this part bothers me.”
- ☑ If a senior decision-maker wants to digress, then go along with it; you’re there to serve them. But if somebody from the sidelines wants to digress (often showing off to the boss and taking up your precious time), ask if you can cover that with them after the session.
- ☑ Make sure *you* never digress; stay focused on why you are there.

FINISHING UP

10. Clarify, for their benefit and yours

People often end meetings with everybody acting like they know what happened, but nobody actually knowing. Help your audience and help yourself:

- ☑ If decisions have been made or actions agreed to during your presentation, then summarize them as part of your wrap up. If not, then ask for decisions and recommend actions as part of your wrap up.
- ☑ *This is no time to fake that you understand something when you don’t.* If you are unclear on directives or decisions – especially those affecting you – then probe until you do understand.