



CHAPTER ONE

HAVE AN ENGAGING MIND-SET

JANE, A NEWLY PROMOTED VP in a Fortune 500 company, was the one who kicked off the annual departmental goal-setting session. For fifteen minutes, she stood at the front of the room and pontificated her perspective on the team's purpose and her expectations. That quarter hour was an eternity to the rest of us in the room. By the end of her rambling presentation, she had subconsciously dragged an empty chair from the side of the room and blockaded herself from the rest of us. There were no questions, and we dutifully thanked her for "setting the tone." Unfortunately, she set the tone for numbness, not collaboration on the department's goals. As the group's professional facilitator, I was hoping Jane's opening comments would inspire her folks rather than put a damper on their enthusiasm.

When I chatted with Jane just a few days before the session, she was visibly excited about the upcoming meeting. If only she had been able to share the same engaging "presentation" she gave me then with her employees! What happened between our informal conversation and her actual presentation? In talking with Jane later, she agreed that she hadn't come into her speech with a focused, engaging mind-set. Something urgent had cropped up and she got distracted. Jane just wanted to get through the departmental meeting and back to putting out the fire.

Your attitude is intuitively felt by your audience, and they mirror whatever you bring into the presentation right back to you. If you are engaged, they will be too. If you are having fun, they will have fun as well. If you are distracted and preoccupied with something else, they will turn their attention elsewhere.

Audience engagement starts with you. You have the ability to *create* an engaging audience, and it starts with the mind-set you have about this activity we call a “presentation.”

IT’S ABOUT THEM, NOT ABOUT YOU

Giving a speech is one of the most stressful responsibilities you have in the workplace, especially if you do not give presentations routinely. It is easy to get caught up in the moment, thinking, “Will I make sense? Do I look all right? Am I going to embarrass myself?”

To be an effective, engaging presenter, you have to let go of your own internal conversations and focus on your audience. This means you have to *care* sincerely about and want to *connect* with each person in the audience. They need to know that you are putting their needs *first*. That means you need to know enough about them so they feel they can trust you and will want to listen to you.

RESEARCH. We all despise the speaker who delivers his presentation on autopilot, never changing a word. It is the same presentation for one audience as it is for a completely different audience. To engage an audience, a presenter needs to find out their hopes, fears, and interests. Take the time to understand the people, their backgrounds, and the collective culture—often called the “personality” of the group—so you can connect your comments with what they care about.

CONTENT. The actual message you share should address the issues that your audience cares about, not the ones you *think* they should care about. This is a subtle distinction with dramatic implications. If you do not address something that helps them make their lives better or improves the life of someone they care about, you are dead on arrival.



MAKE IT PERSONAL. Few things can help you bond and establish a connection with a group better than knowing and using people's names.

- Obtain a participant list ahead of time and read through the list out loud several times. If possible, learn the correct pronunciation of the difficult names.
- As you meet a new participant, say her name quietly to yourself a few times and make any associations that will help you recall the name later.
- With a small audience (and only if time permits), have each person share their name at the beginning of your program. As you listen to the introductions, silently recall their names.
- Make a small seating chart that you can refer to.
- Arrange for nametags or table tents with first names in large type.
- As quickly as possible in your presentation, begin using first names when addressing individuals in the audience.

MORE “WE” THAN “ME.” If you are truly focused on the audience, you will use more inclusive language. Rather than saying “I did this” and “Look at me,” you will inherently talk more about them, using either the words “you” or “we.” Which would you rather hear: “My client is . . .” or “You might have a client like this . . .”? It's a subtle difference, yet it invites participation rather than making it all about you, the presenter.

LISTEN. As you are speaking, shift your focus from how *you* are doing to how the *audience* is doing. When you “listen” to the audience, you are much more aware of their verbal and nonverbal reactions during your speech. Are they smiling and nodding their heads? Yes; you are in the zone. Puzzled looks? Hmm; you may want to share an example or an illustration. Are they paying attention to you or looking at their BlackBerries? Are they leaning forward in their chairs or sitting back defensively? Do they respond to your witticisms, your questions, and your stories, or are their eyes glazed over?

ADJUST. As you listen to your audience, you can either continue as planned or adapt your speech. Because you aren't going to hit the mark all the time, always prepare a plan B to pull out of your back pocket. Audiences are quite forgiving as long as they know you care about them. They want you to succeed. So if one technique doesn't work, try another until you do connect.

EXPERIMENT: USING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

During one of your presentations, have someone tally the number of times you use a personal pronoun and some form of the words “you” and “we.” The ratio of the number of times you use inclusive language versus the times you use the imperial “me” and “I” should, at a minimum, be 2:1. Ideally, you should aim for 4:1. Remember, it’s all about them, not you!

Please count the number of times I use these words during my presentation from the moment I start my program to the point where I begin speaking about “using inclusive language.”

		Total
Personalize using a person’s name		
You, yours		
We, ours, us		
I, mine, me, my		
Total		



BE PASSIONATE

It is hard *not* to like a person who is passionate about her topic and focuses her comments on what the participants need to know. If you are passionate about a topic, your interest in the topic will come through loud and clear and engage all the folks in the audience.

BE INTERESTED. If you want others to be interested in what you say, you should be excited about it too. Even if it is the most boring topic on the planet, figure out what makes it interesting and how the participants may be affected by this topic. There is always something you can dig up that will pique your interest as well as your audience's.

BELIEVE. You must believe in what you are saying, without any reservation. If you don't believe it, don't present it. Your audiences can detect a poser in a heartbeat.

KNOW YOUR STUFF. Be a master of your topic with a depth of knowledge that clearly exceeds your audience's knowledge about the subject. Especially when you are involving the audience in higher-risk techniques, you must be so well-grounded that you can bounce back from any situation.

MAKE IT YOURS. Even if you are handed a slide show to present, make it yours. Do something that can improve, enlarge, or enlighten the core idea. Insert a few techniques from this book so you can feel your imprint on the presentation.

LET IT SHOW. Don't be afraid to show your passion. Many speakers try to look ultra professional and keep a little distance between themselves and their audience. We tend to restrict our gestures, our voice, as well as our enthusiasm when we should be doing the exact opposite! Unless you are already a bouncing bundle of energy, give yourself permission to let your natural enthusiasm shine through.

BE YOURSELF

Everything that makes you unique—your quirky sense of humor, your stylish appearance, and your unusual stories—makes you an engaging speaker. Never doubt that you have what it takes to engage an audience. People gravitate toward

a real, genuine, and authentic speaker, not someone who is emulating some other great orator or adopting another person's material. Authentic presenters speak about real-world experiences they are passionate about. When you are authentic, the audience knows it; they respond better and open up to you.

HAVE CONFIDENCE. You have mastered the content and you have a solid process to engage and involve the audience. Don't get too cocky, but be confident in who you are and what you are doing. People want to know that they are in good hands.

CARE. Demonstrate or articulate how you genuinely care about the people in the room. In many small and meaningful ways, let them know how much you care, and they will care about what you say.

BE HONEST. There are times when you get asked the tough question or you find yourself on the spot. If you can, answer the question honestly and gracefully, without excuses or defenses. If you are unable to answer the question, be honest about that too. Your audience will respect you for your honesty more than for your attempts to fake an answer or an attitude.

BE HUMBLE. No one cares for a guru who pontificates from on high. Let your audience know that you are a mere mortal and have struggled with the same issues they have. A little self-disclosure goes a long way.

BE PRESENT. Unlike Jane, whom you met at the beginning of this chapter, you must be firmly rooted in the moment, participating with the audience, attentive to their needs, wants, and moods. You are not thinking about what might happen five minutes after the meeting ends. You are completely attuned to the here and now. When you give your audience your undivided attention, they give it back to you!

BE SPONTANEOUS. When you are in the moment, you can adapt your presentation easily, building on what was said earlier, reacting to real-time situations, and interacting with the participants.

BE TRANSPARENT. When something goes wrong—which, at some point, it will—acknowledge it and ask the audience what to do about it. If you lose your train of thought, which we all do at some time or another, tell the group and self-correct, either by taking a deep breath and focusing or asking the audience to remind you where you left off. Whatever happens, do not try to cover it up, gloss it over, or pretend it never happened. It did, the



audience knows it, and they might even be able to help you solve it. It is no longer embarrassing once everyone knows.

HAVE FUN. Although giving a presentation is inherently stressful, try to enjoy yourself. If you have fun, then the people in the room will too. If you aren't having fun, it's a sure bet they aren't either.

EXPERIMENT: WHAT MAKES YOU UNIQUE?

Ask your friends and coworkers this simple question: "As a presenter, what makes me unique?" Then, just be quiet and let them respond. Take notes. Ask questions for clarification but *do not* answer them. Just take in the data. After you do this a few times, you will see some themes recur. Is this description the real you? Or is there some other facet of your personality you want to show more?

HAVE A CONVERSATION

Whether you are speaking to a few people or to a packed auditorium, present your information in a conversational style rather than a stilted "this is how presenters present" style. Most of us are pretty engaging when we speak one-on-one or to a small group of close friends. So why not take that comfortable, casual style with you onto the stage or to the front of the room? Your local television news anchors and reporters have a more conversational tone, and so can you.

CONNECT. Strive to make your speech a personal conversation with everyone in the room by connecting with audience members individually. When you start your presentation, find a friendly face. If you know the person (or you can see the person's nametag), you can address that individual by name as you would in an informal conversation. When you finish one train of thought, find another friendly face. Then have a chat with that new person.

CHAT. Think of your conversation as a series of small chats with different members of the audience. When you chat *with* someone, you simply can't have a one-way transmission of data. Instead, there is a verbal and nonverbal exchange between you and the person you are chatting with, plus each and every member of your audience.

CLEAN IT UP. Be careful about being too chatty, however. Our informal conversations can sometimes sputter, ramble, and lead us down a rabbit trail. They are full of wild gestures, meaningless words, and vocalized hiccups like “um,” “er,” “ah,” and “you know.” Audiences will expect you to be as chatty and as eloquent as the personalities they see on television. Speak the way you normally do, but with a tad more intentionality about what you say and how you say it.

COLLABORATE WITH THEM

If you want to involve the audience at a deeper level, you can move beyond just a conversation to collaborate with the participants. Because you care and have connected, a collaborative mind-set is established, and the audience will do what you ask them to do. Once you set the process in motion, the wisdom within the crowd will create something better than anything you could—in large part because they created it. Their fingerprints will be all over it. When the audience creates the outcome, they have more ownership in actually carrying it to completion.

Collaboration gets dicey for some people, and frankly, some people just cannot let go of being the sage on the stage. When you collaborate with the audience, it only *feels* like you lose a bit of control—not knowing where the audience is going to go, how they will respond, or how you can get them back on track. If you have a firm grasp of the *process*, it becomes much easier to let go of the content.

It starts with an outcome, that is, the reason you are giving the presentation. You design a process that takes them on a journey where they discover their own “aha!” You are not really the presenter sharing your insights; you are more of a facilitator who guides the process (see chapter 13).

LET THEM CHOOSE. Allow the participants to set the agenda, select the best choice, determine the path forward, discern the next steps, assess the situation, and so forth. As much as you can, give them options where they can choose where they want to go.

ASK FOR INVOLVEMENT. Bob Pike, a renowned champion of participant-centered training, says, “Never do for your audience what they can do for themselves.” Unless you ask the audience to do something, they will



be passive, compliant listeners. Turn them into active, engaged participants by asking them to do something. The more collaborative speakers reach deep into their repertoire to involve the participants as much as they can in unusual and surprising ways.

BE SPONTANEOUS. When you collaborate, you must be quick on your feet, able to go with the flow, and be spontaneous with the audience. When you know your content thoroughly and you have thought through the process (along with a plan B for when things go wrong), you can deal with anything that comes your way.

TRUST. Once you put the process in motion, get out of the way. Let the participants follow the process so they can bump into their own magical moments of discovery and enlightenment. Their moments may not be the ones you predicted or even your own revelations, but be assured, they will be meaningful to the audience, and that's what counts in the end.

THE GLOBAL TRENDS TOWARD CONNECTION AND INVOLVEMENT

Brad MacMillan, C.A., president, and CEO of Meeting Professionals International (MPI)

Two of the biggest trends happening in businesses all over the world are collaboration and personalization. These two trends are having profound effects on the meeting experience in particular, because it's not good enough now just to have a topic and say, "Here's what I know, and here's what I have been working with for years, and here is what you need to know." It doesn't work like that anymore. Audiences' expectations have evolved so much past that mind-set; if we are not considering how to personalize the experience and actually collaborate with our constituencies we will not be successful.

The number one thing that an audience wants is to feel involved in the actual creation and development of the session. When they are involved, they are much more connected, they feel it is more personal to them, and they get more out of it.

Now let me give you an example. When Don Tapscott, author of the best seller *Wikinomics*, was our keynote speaker at MPI, he did a great job in advance of reaching out to all of our attendees. He blogged with them, invited questions before the

event, and considered them; he built them right into his presentation. So, in essence, he built his presentation around the interests of his audience even before they got there. The audience felt like they were personally involved. They felt like they could see their fingerprints all over the content he delivered. And so they got more out of it. And Don went the extra step and engaged with people after the fact, too. It really was an end-to-end experience. It was personal, and the people who were in the audience felt that they had collaborated and created something remarkable.

PREPARE FOR INEVITABLE RESISTANCE

I was sitting in the back of the training room watching a fellow professional speaker give a presentation on retention strategies. After her opening remarks, she asked us to break into small groups to discuss the biggest challenge we were having retaining people. A big, burly man looked at me and growled: “I don’t do small groups. I came to hear what *she* has to say, not what *you* have to say about it.”

He had a point. Even though adult learning theory tells us that men and women will retain more information if they are involved in their own learning, many seated in the audience—especially the Baby Boomers—are more comfortable with the old presentation paradigm, which merely requires them to sit back and listen.

You can count on it; some people are just going to resist getting involved. Don’t take it personally; it is a normal, natural part of the process. You can increase their participation, however, with these five distinct strategies.



CHANGE EXPECTATIONS. There are a slew of techniques you can use to set the tone for interaction even before your audience walks into the room (see chapter 2). Those who still don’t want to participate will either opt out or sit in the back of the room.



THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE WHO WON'T BE HAPPY!

Kit Grant, CSP, HoF Speaker Hall of Fame

As a keynote presenter, I discovered the best way to fend off these unwanted and potentially damaging audience reactions is to “pre-call” as many of the customary objections as possible, preferably in the opening remarks when I set the stage for what’s to come.

Here are a few I’ve found to be effective, based on my style (which is not particularly touchy-feely):

1. I explain very early in the presentation I am not there to be liked—I am there to make them think about the message. I warn them that in doing so, some people may be offended, so everyone should be prepared. For the few who really enjoy being offended, this presentation could be the highlight of the entire event.
2. I tell them what I will and will not do. I expect their involvement, but I won’t bring people up on stage or make them do some uncomfortable interactive exercise with people they don’t know. This usually puts them at ease.
3. I suggest they may have some fun and jokingly warn them that if I see they are not having any I may come out in the audience and confront them on the spot. I wouldn’t do that, of course, but it keeps them on their toes!

PREEMPT OBJECTIONS. You know what the objections will be, so address them up front. For example, if you want audience members to share ideas with their neighbors, you can say, “I know you are thinking, ‘I don’t know that person.’ Well, now is a good time to meet a new face, so say hello and share your idea!” By voicing their objections, it gives them permission to act.

MAKE IT OKAY. Even if you have set the tone and preempted their objections, a few may still not want to play. That’s okay; that is their *choice*. You don’t need 100 percent participation. In fact, the best participation is voluntary rather than gained through pressure or intimidation. Even though some may not play by your rules, they are still participating in their own way.

RECOGNIZE PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS. Be aware of anything that might limit someone’s ability to participate, and adjust appropriately. The

most common obstacle you will face is the room configuration, which we will discuss in chapter 2. Keep in mind that you can also have participant limitations. For example, don't take a straw poll by asking people to raise their hands if there is a participant with no arms. No kidding, I have actually seen this happen! Ask for a verbal response instead.

BE TRANSPARENT. If there is something going on in the crowd but it's obvious only to you, you may not need to say anything. If it is obvious to everyone in the room, and is therefore a distraction, you cannot ignore it. You need to acknowledge what is happening. Either calmly deal with it or ask the audience for help. A simple example would be a projector malfunction. Don't get flustered. Tell the audience what is going on and ask for help to fix it, or forge ahead without it.

CHAPTER ONE RECAP



You have the ability to create an engaging audience, starting with the mind-set you have about your presentation. To be engaging, sincerely care about the audience, reach out and connect with them, and make what you say a conversation about them, not about you.

- Do your research about your audience.
- Know what the participants care about.
- Make it personal.
- Use inclusive language.
- Be genuinely and uniquely “you.”
- Listen to your audience as you are speaking.
- Adjust your behaviors in real time if you are not connecting.

ACTION PLAN

Based on the information in this chapter, I intend to

Continue _____

Start _____

Stop _____