

LIVING

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Signposts: Presentations

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In a bookshop recently I came across a title that made me smile. The book, *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots: A Bullfighter's Guide*, turned out to be an entertaining but very real account of terrible corporate communication habits. As an executive coach it's my job to help people communicate well, turning them into more confident and effective leaders.

Henry is one of my clients. He is smart and successful, loves what he does and works more than he should. As the controller of a financial institution he is very precise and serious about his responsibilities.

He likes his employer, salary and colleagues, but there is one thing he truly hates about his job: presentations, particularly when they are for the board of directors. These "song and dances", as he calls them, make him feel uncomfortable.

During our coaching sessions, Henry and I discuss ways of making his presentations more inspiring for the audience. "It's all facts and figures," he says. "Who can make that entertaining? I usually just throw together a couple of slides, so the audience has something to look at. PowerPoint helps me get through it and makes my story a bit more interesting." But does it really?

Before you can even start to think about slides, you must think about

the story you want to tell. The best presenters are most often storytellers, people who can entertain their audience with their presence alone. Of course, this is more of a challenge when you are talking about the yearly balance sheet. Start by asking yourself the following questions:

- What does your audience already know about the topic?
- What do they want to know?
- What do you want them to know?

By answering these questions, you can fine-tune your story to your audience's needs.

Learning to give a presentation is like learning to drive a car: it takes time and experience. So get in the driver's seat and practise. Stand in front of the mirror, practise your gestures, eye contact and posture. If you can, record yourself and ask for feedback from friends and colleagues. Another thing to remember is that 70 per cent of all communication is non-verbal. This means that the sound of your voice and body language is more important than your actual words.

If you must use slides, use them for graphs and pictures, but avoid text. Your audience, however smart, can't read and listen at the same time. This has to do with the way our brain processes information: pictures are interpreted by the right side, language by the left side.

In *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*, authors Brian Fugere,

Chelsea Hardaway and Jon Warshawsky talk about the corporate world's addiction to PowerPoint. Their book says one of the reasons Nasa astronauts died in the Columbia space shuttle disaster was miscommunication due to the PowerPoint slides used during the briefing about risks. The slides, the authors explain, contained too many words. Therefore, no one really got the message that the risks could be catastrophic.

I explained this to Henry as we worked on personalising his pitch. We rehearsed a couple of gestures and, although he felt awkward at first, it helped Henry add more flow to his speech. He added a small anecdote to his introduction, eliminated six slides and created three new ones. Then he practised

his presentation, standing steady. He found it difficult, preferring to shuffle around. But pacing up and down has a negative impact on both breathing and speech rhythm. To keep him grounded I laid two pieces of paper on his feet as "weights".

Finally, I videotaped Henry. At first, he was quite uncomfortable watching himself, but, quite quickly, he was excited about his new style. There he was, standing confidently and using gestures, transformed into an engaging public speaker. It led him to the realisation that presenting with almost no slides at all had made him a better storyteller.

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