

5 Universal Factors of Great Speakers

Ask yourself what it is that makes great speakers so exceptionally good? Is it passion? Confidence and enthusiasm? Thorough preparation and practice? Maybe these speakers have learned the Zen of presenting – and are able to rest in their center and just be “there”. As much as all these can help improve a presentation, there is still one quality that the very best speakers have in common that the merely good speakers do not share. The greatest speakers are *radically audience oriented*. They ask themselves, “What can I do - to help *my audience* - understand my message?” And then, they do it – without compromise. But an important question now arises. What is it that will help my audience, or any audience for that matter?

Not all audiences are the same. And many characteristics that we would describe as important are culturally bound. Enthusiasm, for example, though highly valued in the United States is less esteemed in Japan or Finland. So what factors do great speakers recognize that need to be part of every presentation and in every culture that will help them understand the speaker and the message? There are 5 “universal” factors that cut across culture:

1. Relevance:

Relevance is the degree someone or something (i.e. a person, information, a product or service) is perceived to satisfy one’s needs. The need for relevance is a basic drive in everyone’s life. And it’s an evaluation we seek to make with almost everyone and everything – everyday of our lives. It is the so-called “blip” that we scan for on our personal radar screens. And yet, many speakers fail to formulate the “opening” of their presentations in a way that the audience can immediately hook into. The best speakers will find a way – even if the topic is something as seemingly dull as roll of tape. They’ll make it relevant – and because of that relevance – it becomes interesting.

Indeed, relevance and the degree something is “interesting” are practically interchangeable. If you’re *not able* to tell your listeners – in the form of a statement, a question or an anecdote – how your topic is relevant, then they will lose interest and simply not listen. Great speakers do not assume the audience will just know or figure it out for themselves. They look at their own topic with the eyes of their audience. Then they find that facet of their topic that would be relevant to them. And then they articulate it explicitly – at the beginning.

2. Structure:

We are constantly inundated with information through our senses. To make “sense” of it, the mind seeks to impose order on the information before it gets filtered through to consciousness. This is quite a demanding task – especially when most information is just random. Often, the attempt to impose a comprehensible order on incoming information is perceived as simply too strenuous. And so, the mind simply closes down, or moves off to something else. Great speakers are acutely aware of a listener’s need for structure – and their propensity to quickly shut down if the information fails to fit into a logical and structured train of thought. They know they have a very brief window of time available to them to keep their audience’s attention; in many cases they have only 3 minutes before their listeners begin daydreaming about having a cocktail on some tropical beach. The structure, flow, quantity and relevance of information all play an important role in the audience’s ability to “follow” the speaker. To tightly structure your information is an additional key factor that helps your audience stay with you. Neglect this and your audience will be gone faster than it took you to read this paragraph.

3. The narrative structure (or the essence of a story):

Humans, across cultures, love to hear a good story. And if you look closely at any story – whether it is great literature or merely a popular Hollywood film - you’ll find that they all possess the same basic narrative structure. At the beginning there is an introduction to some of the main characters along with the setting in which they find themselves. Next, and very importantly, comes the conflict facing the main characters. The story then develops through a series of complications or obstacles which then leads to a final climax where the main conflict it is resolved successfully (Hollywood) or ends in tragedy (great literature?). Whatever the ending, it is this narrative structure that our brains have been hard-wired to hear. Indeed, human society – in every culture – has developed this basic structure found within stories for both didactic and entertainment purposes – over thousands, if not, tens of thousands of years. It has become part of our collective memory on how a narrative should flow.

Great speakers, almost without exception, tap into our expectations of wanting to hear a story in a certain way. They know they will get our attention if they answer two questions quickly. Who or what is involved – and what is the problem that needs to be dealt with. And then they carry us along – with quasi hypnotic powers - as they show us how they dealt (or are dealing) with the problem. How does it end? It really doesn't matter. What does matter is that they have our complete attention – using a method that was developed before the dawn of civilization.

4. The mechanics of hearing:

Listening to spoken language is relatively recent development in our human development. Language contains nuances of sound which conveys meaning and emotion. The ear can hear the speech sounds, but getting the brain to process the information through that channel is tough. The brain easily gets overloaded – especially when it's coming in too quickly or it's too complicated and disconnected. The brain then experiences a type of cognitive crash. And like a computer it freezes – needing to reboot before it can continue. Great speakers are aware of the precarious nature of processing information through the ear. That's why they use a number of strategies to make the mechanical/cognitive act of listening easier for the listener. For example, they slow down and stress words when something is important. It looks easy – but most of us need to train this skill. They might also repeat a sentence using slightly different words. This repetition is not just to help understand it from a slightly different angle, but more importantly, it gives the listener extra time to process the information.

In addition, great speakers are keenly aware of the need for listeners to visualize a concept as an aid to understanding – even when only using the spoken word. As a rule, the more complex a concept is - the more you'll need to build an image of it in the minds of your listeners – as Einstein always did. Examples, metaphors, and analogies will help the audience visualize complicated ideas. And finally the best speakers know how to use the humble “pause” - brilliantly. You would think it's easy to just say nothing for a second. And yet, training the pause is perhaps the hardest delivery skill to get our trainees to master. The pause is important not only to signal something important is coming, but it also essential to give listeners that needed “cognitive breath” – to help them process what was just said.

As we've seen, relevance, structure and the narrative structure are all keys to great presentations. But those keys must first fit correctly in the keyhole known as the ear – with its limitations for getting information to the brain. Stumble here and the whole superstructure of your presentation will come crashing down.

5. Proper use of visual support:

Great speakers rarely use any visual support. They know that most of the time their listeners simply don't need it. And let's be honest, most speakers who do use PowerPoint (or some equivalent) use it mostly as a script for themselves. In the end, we stand and read – and the audience sits and sleeps. And we reduce our presentation to an absurd exercise in PowerPoint Karaoke.

Much research today confirms what most of us already know. Text slides actually lower message comprehension, interest and concentration. Because text is not really a picture per se but a symbol (letters, sentences) of a symbol (a word linked to a concept). This double distillation away from direct visualization requires lots of concentration and energy – in everyone's culture.

That's why great speakers follow two very easy guidelines for when and how to use visual support. First, they ask themselves, “do I need it; is it *really* necessary?”. “Where will I need visual support to make some complex or complicated idea easier for my audience to understand?” Secondly, “how can I illustrate it effectively?” Visuals should not be complicated themselves – leaving the audience to scratch their heads and wonder what they're looking at. When looking at a visual (typically a PowerPoint slide) it must quickly provoke an “aha” effect, a “*now-I-understand-it*” effect. If it doesn't fulfil this simple criterion – there's a good chance that it needs to be re-designed or simply discarded. Text slides are fine as handouts – but a distraction for the audience if projected on a screen. Some visual support may be necessary. But the fewer slides one uses, the more the speaker will be able to speak freely to the audience. And that's exactly what great speakers do. They won't let themselves be chained to needless slides. Because they know in most cases it won't help the audience - no matter what language it's in.