

# Being as Good as the Big Guys

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We have all heard speakers who are exceptional – their message is clear and it is delivered in a compelling manner. People like Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computers, Steve Ballmer CEO of Microsoft and John Chambers, CEO of Cisco Systems fall into this category. However, these gentlemen would be the first to tell you they weren't born being a gifted speaker. They practiced and practiced and received good coaching along the way.

Malcolm Gladwell, in his book, *Outliers*, says those who fall into the "Best Category," whether they are musicians, hockey players, surgeons or speakers, practice more than anyone else, a lot more. Gladwell says it takes 10,000 hours of practice to move into the "Elite" grouping. While you may be thinking, you might as well give up now; stop for a moment and think about how you can practice and be coached to improve your current standing.

We all attend meeting after meeting. In any one day, we may attend three or four meetings. Each meeting is an opportunity to share a well constructed message or idea and to deliver it fluidly. Each meeting is also an opportunity to receive coaching and formal and informal feedback.

Before an important meeting, do a practice session with your mentor, boss or team and elicit their suggestions on content and delivery and make the necessary changes. In a staff meeting where you will be a contributor, tell a colleague to give you informal feedback on something you have been practicing. "Hey Jack, I have been working at extending my eye contact to a full sentence or thought with people. When my update is over, can you pay attention to whether I am looking at people one at a time for a full sentence or thought each?"

In many organizations, communication has been identified as a key initiative. Everybody needs to work at getting better. Often a checklist is available for a boss or manager to complete on any speaker

they may hear. Formal checklists typically highlight areas of strength and areas for improvement. As you nail one skill, move towards conquering another.

Outside of the work, we may belong to professional associations or clubs. These environments are also great places to practice and count toward your 10,000 hours. Over coffee, while socializing at your accounting association's monthly meeting, practice a balanced posture. At your book club, when it is your turn to review this month's selection or offer an opinion, be sure you practice having energy or infection in your voice.

With our friends and family, we can have many opportunities. You can certainly practice eye contact around the dinner table, vocal variety while reading to your toddler, or broader gestures standing in your yard talking to your next door neighbor. You can even practice on your own in front of your bathroom mirror. Many diligent souls use their cell phones to monitor volume, fading or filler words, such as "Ums and Ahs."

If you think about it and are dedicated, you can amass a thousand hours in no time at all. However, you must make the commitment. You must want to be called "Best." Remember, people identified as strong communicators rise in an organization. Those with mediocre or poor communication skills eventually stagnate or are asked to leave. The payoff for hard work is well worth the effort it takes to practice.

**Question:** *We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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