

Great Presentations are a Conversation

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Picture yourself attending a staff meeting. How happy are you when the host of the meeting drones on about the numbers or the specifications of a product. Most of us hate lectures. What we do like and appreciate is a great conversation. So how do you as a speaker turn something that seems like a formal presentation into a more relaxed conversation?

First, it can't be one way. You need to plan for interaction with frequent check-ins with your audience. For example, you might say to your listeners, “Does that make sense? Do you all agree?” Instead of making a rhetorical statement where people simply nod or smile, ask open ended questions. “Charlie, I know you have had issues in past. Can you share what happened? Does anyone else have a comment?” Then, listen and build off of what is said. “Yes, that makes perfect sense. We definitely have to go to another supplier or we will be in a bind.” Think ahead of the questions you might ask that would spark discussion.

Secondly, speak the language of your listeners. Keep your focus on who is attending. Do what it takes to make everyone understand. Don't think that big words make you look smarter. The simpler you speak, the more you insure that people will get your message. Kathy Sierra of the *Head First Series* says the simple approach actually allows you to go deeper with technical information than if you had used formal language. Acronyms or technical jargon may confuse people and prevent them from staying on point. I recently attended a meeting where the executive talked about his strategic glidepath. By the looks on people's faces, he might have been speaking a foreign language. Additionally, if some attendees are people from other cultures, expressions commonly used in the U.S., may not be understood.

Thirdly, sneak in a story. People love stories as long as they can follow the point and it's interesting. You might even include a video within your story. Get in and out of your story. A long story makes people forget the importance of your original idea or recommendation.

Show some enthusiasm. Someone once said good conversations are filled with verve and fire. Don't hold back and worry about being “over the top.” Very few people are ever perceived as “out of control.” If you don't sound interested or passionate, why should anybody else! Emphasize key words or phrases. Add some exaggerated pauses and strong gestures if you really want someone to get it.

Always be talking to someone. People who talk to their slides or notes definitely do not look like they are having a conversation. Talk to one person at a time and give each listener a piece of information. Notice their reaction before you continue. Are they nodding, smiling or frowning? Scanning the room will make listeners feel you are talking at them, but not to them.

When you present conversationally, Sierra says the brains of your listeners think they are in conversation and so they have to hold up their end of the conversation by paying attention. Audiences appreciate speakers who are relaxed and natural, who give the impression they are talking to friends, versus “Presenting.” Remember, great presentations are conversations others can continue.

Question: *Think about your own presentation style. Is it conversational or more formal? Does your style change depending on your audience? 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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