

The Show Must Go On

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Even the most talented speakers "get stuck" at times. On the eve of TEDxTelAviv, the first TED in Israel, speakers' coaches point out some common obstacles speakers face and give tips about how to act and react.

1. Facing a hostile audience

The Problem: Chronic adversaries

The CFO of an international company hit a wall whenever he presented new ideas to the company's senior team. At times the audience would just stare at him and not react when he opened up the discussion to questions.

In other cases, the audience argued against each idea he presented. His automatic reaction was to fight back with more points that supported his original idea. So he found himself dragged into futile arguments with one person in the audience.

"Falling into the trap of controversy, argument, and wanting to prove and win results from mistakenly thinking, 'if I prove my point and receive agreement from the audience, it's a sign that I'm in control'. Actually, the last thing that works is to enter into polemics with the audience."

The Solution: Going with the flow

There is a principle in theatrical improvisation called, "Yes... and." The role of the speaker is neither to be right or to convince nor is it to show whoever disagrees that they are wrong. The speaker needs to create an atmosphere that invites dialogue and involvement, while maintaining control of the situation and avoiding being dragged into arguments.

If someone resists or argues, listen to them. Truly listen and you can also add a positive comment such as: "This is an interesting point" or "Thank you for your comment". You can even paraphrase the speaker "So, Uri, you are saying the change can't actually work, right?"

At this point, there are several options. You can be curious about the listener's perspective and ask a few questions (which may also decrease the resistance). You can say, "I'll be happy to talk about this after the meeting" and really mean it. You can open up the controversy for discussion with the audience: "That's an interesting point. I am curious to hear what others think and what their experience is with this."

The main principle to remember is to stay open and listen. Say "I heard you, and I respect your point of view" (not necessarily in those words, but in an open, listening manner), and offer a different perspective without making the audience "wrong," "dumb" or "not important. This is called "creating an invitation".



2. When technology fails

The problem: A talk based on PowerPoint slides

Some speakers create the slides first and then base what they say on each PowerPoint slide as it appears. Later, when they are in the meeting room, they find out that, due to technical problems, the PowerPoint presentation doesn't work.

Solution: Invite the audience's imagination

We recommend working the other way around. Look at any presentation, team meeting, lecture, talk or any verbal communication like a playwright who creates a play. Start strong, in a way that invites the audience, have a middle part that builds up the tension and a strong clear ending with a clear message that makes an impact. ("What changed after hearing the presentation?"). The role of PowerPoint is to add, just like the set and props in theater are elements that don't replace the story but enhance it. When we view the PowerPoint as an aid and the speaker as the center, and not vice versa, it's easy to overcome any technical problem. By the way, in case of tech failure, you can use the wonderful tool we all have - imagination. The speaker can always describe a slide that failed. "Imagine there is a picture of a sunset behind me". In this way, each person in the audience can create their own personal slide.

3. Blanking Out

The problem: Nerves

Some people freeze right before an important presentation. They forget the next thing they want to say, their mind becomes foggy, and they get stuck. You can see by the look on their faces that the speaker is blanking out, that they're excited, and their blood pressure rises.

Solution: Rely on your anchor

In these cases we suggest that the speaker remembers the main message of the presentation. It's always a great thing to hold on to. Even if the speaker forgets the exact words or the next point they were planning to make, this anchor serves as the spine of any presentation and allows the speaker to improvise and go to any part of their presentation.

We also remind the speaker that the audience doesn't know the speaker's text and what they prepared. The only way listeners will know that you have made a mistake is if you tell them. Another great tool is the pause. The audience doesn't know that you are pausing because you're panicking or thinking, "Oh no! I forgot what I wanted to say." The audience will actually think you are very secure and that you feel confident enough to stand there, observe and think.



4. Short time

The problem: A change in the agenda

Sometimes the schedule changes. A speaker who prepared for an hour talk finds they only have fifteen minutes. This is a classic case we encountered while preparing the TEDx speakers. The speakers have vast knowledge and many years of experience. They are used to giving professional talks that are long and filled with details, especially in front of a professional audience. At TEDx, the maximum length of a talk is eighteen minutes, and the audience is a general one. The temptation here is to want to squeeze two hours worth of material into eighteen minutes.

The Solution: Focus on the main message

The principle when you have a lot of material and a short time is not to try to include everything. Instead of touching upon many topics, we recommend finding the main axis, one main idea that you want to convey, and go deep. A short talk needs to create curiosity, to open up something new in the audience. The speaker not only delivers information, but also brings something personal, a unique point of view about what is important to the speaker, as a professional and as a human being.

