

Three Ways to Become a Better Speaker

By Paul Buyer

For many years, I took for granted how important speaking skills were to my career success. Although I read many books on leadership and communication, I was not aware of the art of speaking as a craft. As percussionists, speaking skills play a large role in our everyday lives, and ultimately how successful we become. The quality of our speaking impacts our careers in many ways, specifically in our teaching, clinics, masterclasses, workshops, lectures, presentations, auditions, job interviews, mentoring, and networking.

A few months ago, I read *Talk Like TED* by Carmine Gallo. The book reveals the secrets of some of the world's greatest speakers and argues that the new gold standard for professional speakers today is found on TED.com. After finishing the book, I wrote an enthusiastic review on Amazon and decided to email Mr. Gallo with a question. A few days later, his wife, Vanessa Gallo, responded. Vanessa is an executive speaking coach for the Gallo Communications Group (<http://gallocommunications.com>) offering professional feedback on presentations and speaking skills.

After Vanessa provided a very helpful answer to my initial question, I asked if she would review one of the speaking videos on my website. Understanding a request like this usually involves a fee, I did not expect her to say yes, but she said, "Are you the same Paul Buyer who wrote the review on Amazon? I can look at your video and won't charge because we appreciate the review and you spreading the good vibes." I was blown away.

What followed a few weeks later was a comprehensive, professional, and high-end "Presentation Profile" of my four-minute speaking video. The detail and care Vanessa provided was unlike anything I had ever seen regarding a speech. This was the moment I fell in love with the art of speaking, and although I had been in front of students teaching for many years, my genuine respect and appreciation for this beautiful art form truly began.

"Seventy percent of employed Americans who give presentations agree that presentation skills are critical to their success at work. My first reaction? The other thirty percent don't know it yet."—Carmine Gallo, author and speaker

Over the past few years, I have been honored to give over 35 presentations on my book, *Working Toward Excellence: 8 Values for Achieving Uncommon Success in Work and Life*. Some of the more memorable events include five Clemson University Transfer Student Orientations, a session with the Clemson University Athletic Coaches, and the Emerging Leaders Reception at PASIC 2013.

Through my work as a teacher and speaker, as well as presenting percussion clinics and leadership workshops throughout my career, I have discovered three ways to become a better speaker. As you read them, you may notice some similarities to the skills we work to develop as percussionists.

1. PRACTICE

Professional speaker Victoria Labalme said, "Being on the platform is an honor. People are giving you their time and attention, and you have

an incredible opportunity to make an impact. Rehearsing a presentation means going over, out loud, and on your feet."

If there is one skill percussionists can agree is critical to their success, it is practice. When you give a presentation, you must deliberately practice what you are going to say, and how you are going to say it. This is best done out loud and well in advance, as "winging it" will not fly. The process you use to prepare for a recital or concert is the same as preparing for a presentation. In the end, practice leads to preparation and preparation leads to confidence—the most important quality of a good speaker.

Exactly *what* should you practice as a speaker? Here are some ideas.

- Practice your introduction. This is the first thing we can forget when nerves kick in, so if we start with a rock solid intro, we will set the tone and get off to a good start.
- Practice your sense of humor. Making the audience laugh is a great way to engage them, so try your humor on others first to see their reaction.
- Practice pace and flow. Pace is how fast you speak, and flow is the ability to connect your ideas. Many speakers talk too fast, usually due to nerves or trying to cram in too much information.
- Practice memorization. To go from "page to stage," write out your talk and memorize it, especially the transitions. Like music, practice in chunks and do run-throughs. Once memorized, get comfortable enough to improvise.
- Practice timing your presentation. Never go over your allotted time; it is disrespectful to the audience and the host, as well as the next speaker or clinician. In fact, audiences will appreciate it when you finish early, especially if food is next on the schedule!
- Practice eye contact. Looking people in the eye when speaking to them can be challenging at first, but with practice, it will go a long way toward establishing trust, credibility, and authenticity with your audience.
- Practice any gestures or movements you plan to use. As percussionists we are used to the physical and kinesthetic nature of our art form, but when speaking, it is helpful to practice pacing, using your hands, or acting out a story.
- Practice your words and articulation. We all flub words from time to time, but before speaking to an audience, practice articulating certain words clearly and consistently the same way you would repeat an exercise or musical phrase.
- Practice visualization. It is interesting how similar the visualization process is between performing as a percussionist and speaking to an audience. In both instances, you want to visualize yourself performing in your mind at your highest level and then, according to author Jon Gorrie, "Use your imagination to see, hear, feel, and fully experience the results you would like to achieve."

2. CONNECT

Author and speaker Emma Ledden said, "Imagine every single member of your audience has a remote control in their hand. How long do

you think you have with your presentation...before you lose them to another channel?"

Can you remember former teachers you had who were brilliant in their subject matter, but when it came to effectively communicating that subject matter to other people, they fell woefully short? Author and leadership expert John C. Maxwell stated, "Information is giving out, communication is getting through."

Poor speakers are like a tennis ball machine. They shoot out a constant stream of facts, information, and ideas non-stop and then expect the listener to somehow keep up. It is a "sink or swim" mentality that is all about the speaker and not about the listener.

Victoria LaBalme says, "Your speech is not a monologue, but a dialogue. Your audience speaks by nodding, smiling, thinking, taking notes, laughing, applauding, absorbing, considering, and processing."

The next time you present, avoid being a tennis ball machine. No one enjoys chasing down the tennis balls of content you are rapidly shooting out, hoping to occasionally grab a few nuggets of wisdom. Instead, connect with your audience by tossing them the ball and then allowing them to toss it back.

To be an excellent speaker, serving the audience should always be your top priority. After teaching a class, giving a clinic, conducting a workshop, leading a rehearsal, or giving a presentation, I never go back to my office, pat myself on the back, and say to myself, "Paul, you killed it!" Not even close. What matters most is how the audience responded to the experience. Did learning take place? Were they inspired to think? Did they ask good questions? Was I successful in getting them to put down their remote control? In short, did I *connect*?

Another great way to connect with people is to tell stories. Stories help us relate to, identify with, and get to know the storyteller. According to Carmine Gallo, "At Princeton University, Uri Hasson does research on storytelling by attaching electrodes to people. He finds that when somebody tells a story, certain parts of the brain light up. Those same regions are stimulated in the brains of those who are listening to the story."

Here is a story I tell at the beginning of my clinic, *Percussion from the Podium*:

Last year, I attended our state music educator's conference and had a conversation with a high school band director friend of mine. He had a dilemma and asked for my advice on teaching his percussionists and communicating with a band parent. He told me this: "I believe my percussionists should all learn how to play mallets, so my staff and I started teaching them. Soon after, one of my band parents said their son signed up to play drums and not percussion. The student [even] asked me why I didn't make trumpet players play clarinet."

To hear the rest of the story and how I responded, refer to my article "Percussion is Plural" elsewhere in this issue of *Percussive Notes*.

3. SIMPLIFY

Playwright George Bernard Shaw famously said, "The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place." How right he was. It is not the audience's job to try and catch information like bubbles floating through the air. It is our job—as speakers—to communicate clearly and effectively. Giving complicated, scholarly, wordy, rambling, or uninspired presentations, clinics, or lectures is the fastest way for your audience to change the channel or start reaching for their smart phones. According to research conducted by author and behavioral psychologist Susan Weinschenk, the average attention span of an audience member is 7–10 minutes at the most, and that is if the topic is of interest to the person and the presenter is good!

With that understanding and awareness, the key to becoming a better speaker who can hold an audience's attention is to *simplify your message*. In other words, eliminate the jargon, complexity, and fancy words from your vocabulary and have a conversation. Be passionate, authentic, down to earth, humble, and approachable. Complicated speakers, I have found,

make things unnecessarily difficult, overwhelm you with information, and like hearing the sound of their own voice.

The importance of simplifying your message holds true for speaking as well as writing, and although they are different art forms, it is something they have in common. Abraham Lincoln once stated, "I'm sorry I wrote such a long letter; I did not have time to write a short one." Make no mistake. Simplifying your message takes time and a lot of revisions, but will produce a high quality product in the end.

Another regular contributor to complexity is "Death by PowerPoint." Ironically, many speakers miss the point of PowerPoint, which is to *visually enhance* a presentation. The fatal flaw here is too much text on the slides. Instead, PowerPoint should be used as a visual aid by using titles, images, and photos to enhance your delivery and help your audience understand the content you are presenting.

According to Emma Ledden, "The top frustration and guaranteed way to turn an audience off is by having slides with too much text. A presentation is not about slides, it is about you presenting a great, clear message. The slides are not for you, they are for the audience, to help them understand and remember your messages. Your slides are supposed to create clarity. There are no sentences allowed on a visual slide. You, the presenter, are the full sentence. You are the text. You are the presentation. That is why you are there."

CONCLUSION

As percussionists, we train ourselves to perform for people every day. The valuable experience we gain in rehearsals, concerts, recitals, juries, auditions, masterclasses, and competitions condition and prepare us to be good speakers. We are also very good at practicing choreography, logistics, stage presence, bowing, breathing, and communicating through our repertoire as well as our teaching. This experience is significant because for decades, research shows public speaking is the most common fear shared by people in general. But as a musician, you are only a few degrees of separation away from applying who you are as a percussionist to who you can become as a speaker.

Professional speaker Ryan Estis said, "This job is a gift. Every time I speak represents an opportunity to make a difference. I want to make sure I don't waste anyone's time. It's an hour of their life they won't get back. Remembering that and preparing accordingly have helped me take giant steps forward on the platform."

I hope this article has inspired you to take a giant step forward as well—through your words, as well as your music.

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