SPEAKING TO INFLUENCE

MASTERING YOUR LEADERSHIP VOICE

DR. LAURA SICOLA

Kanyin®
PUBLICATIONS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

LEADERSHIP AND INFLUENCE

> *'Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?'*
> *'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.*
> *'I don't much care where—' said Alice.*
> *'Then it doesn't matter which way you go,' said the Cat.*
> *'—so long as I get SOMEWHERE,' Alice added as an explanation.*
> *'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough.'*
> —Lewis Carroll. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

I. INTRODUCTION

At some point or other, consciously or unconsciously, we all are like Alice, uncertain of our purpose, direction, or goal. Whether it pertains to something as big as our career path or the vision for our company, or as small as what we want to get out of participating in a conference call, we go through the motions without really thinking about how to get the greatest value out of the experience.

People who report to you may take Alice's role occasionally: They just want direction. At this point, hopefully you're more helpful than the Cheshire Cat, who provided no useful guidance at all.

The bigger challenge, however, is when you DO know where you want to go, but can't seem to get others to join you on the journey. At that point, it's time for a little critical self-analysis, so, ask yourself: "Do I come across as a leader with a message worth hearing and a vision worth pursuing?"

II. THE PERCEPTION OF LEADERSHIP

Did you notice I did not say you should ask yourself if you *are* a leader with a compelling message and vision? The question is whether or not you are *seen* as one, regardless of how competent and confident you feel inside.

Have you ever wondered how some people always manage to be persuasive, compelling, and influential? Why do some people's voices always seem to be heard, regardless of their volume? How do you get the right person's ear, and get them to hear not just what you have to say, but to hear *you?* That means not just that they hear you passively, but that they listen consciously to what you are saying, process it, understand both your content and your *intent*, and ultimately get on board with your vision. That's what this chapter is going to look at. The irony of it all is that when you think about it, leadership is an *image*, not an official job title or role. After all, do you know anyone whose business card has their title listed as "leader?" Neither do I.

Leadership is an *image*.

People follow "the person in charge" because they *have to*; that's implied in their job description. In contrast, they follow someone they *perceive* as a "leader" because they *want* to. It's a matter of trust, integrity, reputation… and whether or not others understand and appreciate where you are trying to lead them!

Whether it's your vision for something as small as what you want to accomplish in a meeting, the legacy you want to establish for yourself, or where you want to take the company over the next decade, you need to be clear on two things:

- you need to understand exactly what you want that outcome to look like, and
- you need to articulate your vision to others in a way that gets through to their minds and hearts (and sometimes, their wallets!).

Before we jump into how to achieve clarity on these two objectives, let's clear up a few common points of confusion.

III. PERSUASION, MANIPULATION, AND INFLUENCE: KEY DISTINCTIONS

Many people get stuck and end up sabotaging their powers of influence because they conflate the concept of "influence" with "persuasion" and "manipulation." Naturally, there is some overlap in desired outcomes for each, but if you want to reach your fullest potential as a communicator and leader, it's critical to recognize the difference.

A. Persuasion

Persuasion is a conscious, active effort that ultimately boils down to getting someone to agree to your specific, desired outcome. It's about convincing people to come to your side, whether you use a logical argument, a carrot-or-stick incentive, or an appeal to their emotions (for example).

For instance:

- if I as a supervisor need you to do a last-minute push for an ambitious sales goal, which would require a lot of late nights, but I offer you an extra bonus if you meet the goal, I will probably be able to persuade you to accept the challenge, assuming the size of the bonus "carrot" is sufficiently motivating, or
- if I (again as a supervisor) remind you gently that budgets have been strained lately and there have been talks of layoffs in the near future if the team doesn't make quota, this "stick" might be equally persuasive in motivating you to try to reach that sales goal, or
- if I as your employee strike up a conversation with you about a photo of your family on your desk, and get us to bond for a moment about some laughable moments of parenthood before I ask you for an afternoon off at an inconvenient time so I can catch my child's dance recital, it may be easier to persuade you to grant my request.

I was once planning a major event to be held in October, when a client in the agribusiness world commented, "Oh, I'd love to send my whole staff, but that's right in the middle of potato-harvest season, and they'll kill me if I add one more thing to their calendars!" Knowing that several of the other clients I wanted to invite were also part of that industry, I moved the event to mid-

November. Although she wasn't overtly trying to get me to change the date, the evidence she offered persuaded me to do so.

B. Manipulation

Manipulation tends to have a negative, dishonest, or even underhanded feeling to it. Whether done overtly, covertly, or passive-aggressively, manipulation is about forcing someone to do what you want, typically when it goes directly against what they want, and it disregards their feelings, needs, or other reasoning.

In the movie *The Wolf of Wall Street*, Leonardo DiCaprio played a master manipulator, institutionalizing a strategy for lying to prospective clients about investment opportunities to trick them into investing far more than they could afford or felt comfortable spending. When on the phone with male prospects who claimed they wanted to check with their wives before buying anything, he would subtly challenge their manhood, telling them they shouldn't need their wives' permission to spend money that they (the men) had earned. He knew that for every dollar they lost, he would gain personally, and that's all he cared about, so he pressured them until they gave in and gave him their money.

Then again, manipulation need not be so sinister. My five-year-old niece, Michala, for example, is a master manipulator. At the end of a family holiday gathering, when her parents tell her it's time to stop playing and go to bed, she'll go around the room hugging and kissing people, saying, "I love you!" and continuing conversations with each of them. Upon second and third reminders that it's bedtime, she protests, "But I'm just telling Aunt Laura that I love her and I'll miss her." The more her parents try to coax and persuade her to go, the more she turns up the charm. She's not fooling anyone, of course, but she knows perfectly well that the sweet smile, big blue eyes, and loving words of affection to everyone in the room make it hard to reprimand her or get (at least publicly) angry with her, providing a great stall tactic that can delay bedtime for an impressive length of time.

C. Influence

Influence, in contrast, is a power that goes way beyond an immediate conversation or decision. It certainly includes the skills of persuasion, to be used as necessary, but the beauty of true influence is that you don't need to be present for others to see its effects.

> *A few years ago, I was teaching graduate courses part-time at the University of Pennsylvania, while building my consulting practice. I often hired my former graduate students as project interns. One year, when I offered the position to Allison,[1] a recent student, I suggested she speak with Diana, one of the prior year's interns to get the "inside scoop" on what it was like. Ultimately Allison accepted the position, and later she shared with me that the input she had received from Diana was, "It's fun, but it's a lot of work. When project deadlines draw near, you can expect to have some nights when you're up until 2:00 a.m. trying to get everything done. But the thing is, Laura will be right there with you until it's finished." And that was what convinced her to take the position. I had nothing to do with the conversation that ultimately persuaded her to join the team, but the impact of how I ran my company and my team created a reputation that influenced someone's decision and the outcome of my project.*

Your leadership style could motivate an employee, out of loyalty to you and a commitment to your company's mission, to turn down another job an executive recruiter offers them, or it could convince her to jump ship at the first opportunity to find greener pastures. Either way, you may never know what occurred. That's the power of influence.

Influence also has a ripple effect. During an annual review, a manager may give an employee constructive feedback with diplomacy, tact, and respect, leaving the employee feeling clear on his objectives and motivated to perform better, because that is how the manager has always received feedback from you as *their* boss. That is most certainly evidence of your

[1] All names used in the examples, anecdotes, and personal stories in this book have been changed, unless the persons mentioned have given me explicit permission to use their real names. I am grateful to all my clients, colleagues, and loved ones for the opportunity to use their learning experiences in this book.

influence and it is the kind of influence you want to have. There are times when you will win and times you will lose an argument, times when you will persuade someone to accept your view, and times when others will persuade you. But in the end, you want to know that your leadership style ensures that you get the respect you deserve and always has a positive effect on the outcome. One of the primary factors that determines this is how you communicate.

D. Communication and Leadership

Ultimately, the way you speak as a leader *will* have one of two possible effects: It will convince others to join you, or it will convince them *not* to. For example, beware:

- If your contributions are so technical that people can't follow them, they will lose interest.
- If you deliver your information dryly, it may seem like you don't care, or like you don't feel it matters.
- If you seem nervous or unconfident when speaking, people will doubt your expertise and credibility.
- If you are overbearing in asserting your opinion, people will avoid engaging in discussion with you at all, and resist before inviting you to join a team.

On the other hand, you can create a magnetism that compels people to pay attention and get on board:

- If you explain things in a way that makes sense to the audience,[2] it's easy for them to see your perspective.
- If you make them feel respected and valued, they will be much more motivated to partner with you.

[2] In this book, I use the term audience broadly, to mean the intended recipient of your message, in any context. Whether your audience is in a traditional "audience" setting as you give a formal presentation, or just listening to you over the telephone, reading an email you sent, or watching your facial expressions change as you listen to them talk, you are communicating something to them. The issue at hand is what message they are receiving, and whether or not it is the one you want to send.

- If you show the right level of confident, positive enthusiasm in making your point, they will be more likely to trust that what you are saying is correct.

Simply put, if you want to get out of your own way and gain (or regain) control of your future as a true leader, you have to build a following. A “following” is not just a bunch of people below you on the company org chart, but is instead a group of people who understand your vision and are loyally committed to you, to each other, and to seeing that vision become their reality. This includes employees, bosses, board members, clients, and vendors (to name just a few). You also need to create a culture and environment that reinforces and supports people in their individual and collective efforts to promote that outcome.

E. Culture

Organizational culture doesn’t come about as a result of writing policy or having staff memorize the company handbook. Regardless of what your company handbook claims, culture is learned and spread through a type of “osmosis.”

What I mean by this is that, for example, when you speak to people in any context, your voice fills the air and surrounds them. Those listening will absorb some or all of your message, depending on a variety of factors ranging from how diplomatic you are, your facial expressions, your efforts to listen, the examples you use or omit, your tone of voice, and more. More importantly, with that message, they will also absorb an understanding of what kind of communication style you value. By extension, they will infer what they think you believe leadership communication sounds like, and what speaking style the company values, and they will pass it along to others in the same way—for better or worse.

Alternatively, listeners may reject your leadership and your message, resist change, and perhaps even resent the situation, all of which leads to the creation of a completely different kind of culture. In that context, you are a leader in name and rank only...you have no true followers...and that eats away at the root of the culture you are trying to establish.

You may have knowledge, expertise, insights, and experience, along with an incredible vision of a future you believe to be possible for yourself, the company, or both. To achieve that vision, however, you need to get buy-in, which requires getting others to be as enthusiastic as you are—by seeing how their own roles and efforts can contribute to that vision becoming a reality.

F. Challenges

It may sound a bit ominous, but what it all boils down to is that no matter how good your technical expertise is, that's not enough to get to—and succeed at—the top. What obstacles do you face?

- Maybe you're frustrated because you want to take the company in a new direction. You need to minimize resistance and get everyone on board. When you speak, people *seem* to listen but they don't "get it." They might go along with it, but their hearts aren't in it. You don't want to be constantly arguing with people, but you don't want "yes-men" either.
- Maybe you're at the top of the corporate ladder (or at least pretty high up) and oversee teams across functions and cultures, and it is your responsibility to get them all to work together collaboratively and productively…which is easier said than done, especially if you're someone whose fight-or-flight reflex goes into overdrive at the slightest hint of conflict.
- Maybe you're not at the top *yet,* but you want your boss to realize unequivocally that you are the next obvious person for that big promotion.
- Maybe you suddenly need to be the public "face" of the organization, speaking at conferences, on promotional videos, client events, perhaps even giving a TED talk, and you need your natural charisma to shine through with confidence and polish.
- Maybe you lack the confidence to say what you really want to say in front of the right people, or you have a lot of information to share and stories to tell but you don't know how to do it in a way your target audience will find interesting.
- Maybe you know your product and company inside and out, but also know that you'd close more deals if you could connect better with prospective customers, board members, or investors.
- Or, maybe you lead or attend lots of meetings but feel like people don't listen to you, or simply aren't engaged when you talk.

If you find yourself nodding your head knowingly at one or more of these scenarios, keep reading, because this book is for you.

G. What This Book Is NOT

One concern I hear often from people is that they feel uncomfortable and "fake" when they try to modify the way they talk in order to become a more effective speaker. While we'll address these issues throughout this book, I'm not going to teach you how to act—I couldn't even if I wanted to. I'm not an actor or a singer. Trust me, if you hand me a script from Shakespeare, nobody will be happy with the result. And beyond singing in a church choir and the occasional karaoke night (I lived in Japan for several years; it's practically a religion there), you won't find me performing major works of art—it's enough of a stretch for me to refer to karaoke and "art" in the same sentence.

My training is not from the theater or performing arts world so you never have to worry about feeling like I'm trying to turn you into someone you're not. Unless, that is, I'm helping you become the person you genuinely *want* to be.

As a result, this book is not full of scripts, lists of decontextualized vocal exercises, blocking techniques, strategies for memorizing a script, or instructions for when to use which hand gestures in a speech.

Similarly, you will not find lots of questions exploring your psychological history, or other theoretical analyses, nor will you find a lot of technical medical descriptions of the mind or body. I am neither a psychologist nor a speech pathologist. I'm not that kind of doctor, and frankly, I'm not going to "fix" or "heal" you because you're not broken or sick.

That being said, many clients have told me happily that the discoveries they have made while working with me were "cathartic," "liberating," and "therapeutic." Others have said working together was "better than therapy."

H. What This Book IS

I am a linguist, so my work stems from an in-depth understanding of three areas:

- first, the nuances of the English language itself (and a few others),
- second, how the mind processes speech, and

- third, the kinds of social, psychological, cultural, or other contextual factors that influence how speech is expressed and interpreted (or misinterpreted).

My approach focuses on putting these factors together to understand the impact your communication style is having on your success as a leader and influencer.

1. *Identifying Your Blind Spot*

One universal blind spot we all have to one extent or another is in our understanding of the critical and defining gap between:

- how we *want* to come across to others when we speak,
- how we *think* we come across, and
- how we *actually* come across.

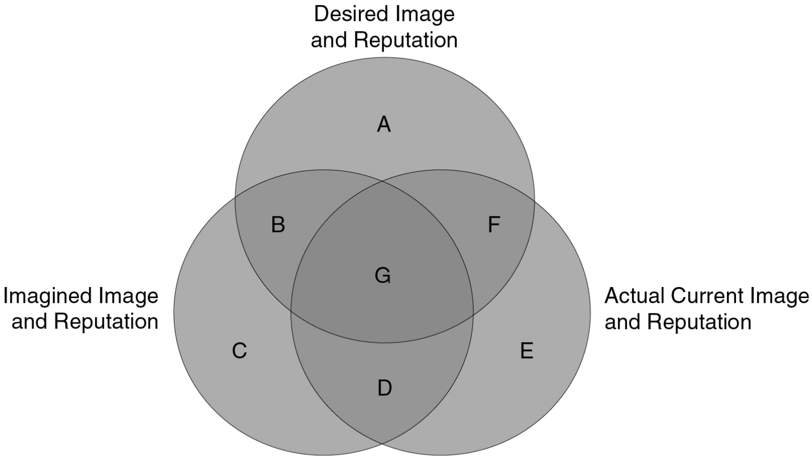
The first is the way you want to be seen, your desired image and reputation—what the Cheshire Cat might otherwise identify as *where you want to go*. You need to be honest with yourself and acknowledge how it does or does not match up with the impression you believe you make, i.e., *where you think you are* and *how far you think you have to go to reach your destination*. Then, what is most important for growth and success is to compare those views with your current image and reputation, i.e., *where you actually are now*, to identify where there's a disconnect between the ideal impact you want to have and the reality of the impact you're having currently.

We tend to be oblivious to this last point. Need proof that this claim applies to you? How often have you watched yourself in a video made only seconds before, and thought to yourself, "Oh my gosh, that sounded so much better in my head!" "What was I doing with my hands there?" or, "That's so weird, why do I look angry?" If you're like most people, you know *exactly* what I'm referring to here.

If you sincerely want to identify your blind spot in order to get unstuck and make progress toward establishing your ideal reputation as a leader, start asking a *wide variety* of people to share what they see as your strengths and weaknesses, whether pertaining to your role or otherwise. Even—and *especially*—if you hear something you don't like, *thank* them for their honesty, and *treat that information like gold.* Those are people you know you can trust, and whose input will help you reach your goals, if you act on it correctly. You can start by mapping out your goals and findings in the following diagram.

2. Mapping Out Your Image and Reputation Goals

Figure 1: Identifying Your Desired Image and Reputation



In Figure 1, we see your three images of yourself: desired, imagined, and actual. They overlap as follows:

- Section A represents your Goal: These are qualities you want people to see in you, but they don't right now, and you're clear on that.
- Section B holds delusions and wishful thinking: These are positive qualities you *think* others already see in you, but they do not. This is in your blind spot.
- Section C is also in the blind spot, but would be a relief for you to discover. It holds your concerns that you have a negative reputation for something, but in fact you do not. Take comfort in discovering this part of your blind spot.
- Section D identifies the areas in which you already *know* you don't have the best reputation. You know you need to fix it, and this area should be a top priority to address. This Section goes along with Section A, confirming what you know you need to change.

- Section E is the Danger Zone in your blind spot: These are qualities you do *not* want people to associate with you, *but they do, and you don't realize it*. Seeking feedback proactively, sincerely, and humbly to identify what is in this space is paramount to getting you unstuck and heading in the right direction. This goes together with Section B as the hardest sections to identify because they reflect areas in which your perception of your own image is more inflated than how others see you. Accepting reality is both unpleasant and humbling, which often inspires resistance and denial, the kiss of death for true growth.
- Section F is a pleasant surprise: You want people to recognize these characteristics in you, and they do, but you didn't *realize* it. Take comfort and gain confidence in this new knowledge. This is the flip-side to Section C.
- Section G is the proverbial brass ring: This is the point at which you are confident in your knowledge that you are projecting exactly the kind of leadership image you want to project, and you are being recognized for it. Whatever you're doing is working successfully in your favor. As nobody is perfect, there are always pieces that don't fall into this spot at the moment, but as this section expands, your reputation will shift from being someone who *can* embody those strengths at times, to someone who consistently and reliably *does*.

3. Reverse-Engineering Your Communication Style

With that in mind, in the rest of this book, we will "reverse engineer" your communication style to determine what you are doing in your communication that is *causing* this gap, and figure out how to close it once and for all.

As a linguist, I'll show you the inner workings of why you are—or are not—influential and effective as a speaker. We'll identify the gap between what you think and want to convey, and how it actually "lands" in the other person's mind, and why. Then we'll explore some common communication pitfalls that can sabotage your success, and discuss better alternatives to maximize your powers of influence.

Most importantly, I promise you that we will do it all in a way that honors who you are, your values and beliefs, and your natural personality. I'm not trying to turn you into a "mini-me," "Stepford Wife," or corporate automaton. You will learn perspectives and skills that you can use (or not use) as you like and when you choose because you believe they will further your goals—and you will do so in a way that is 100% authentically *you*.

IV. LOOKING AHEAD

In the next chapter we'll drill down into both what creates the image of leadership and what creates your blind spot. We'll outline a simple framework for how to recognize the factors that determine whether or not we are able to project credibility and feel authentic at the same time. (Hint: It's virtually impossible to have one without the other.)

Then Chapters 3, 4, and 5 will each address in depth one of the three broad categories of communication cues identified in Chapter 2. You will learn to see and hear yourself through a new lens, and discover your hidden blind spots.

Chapter 6 answers a nagging question: "Can I change the way I communicate, using all the strategies discussed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, and still be myself?" Discovering the key to doing so is essential to unlocking the growth potential within you.

Chapter 7 pivots from individual behaviors to how they affect your results in different contexts, ranging from conference calls to networking meetings to formal presentations and beyond.

Chapter 8 looks at the other half of the communication conversation: Listening. If your instinctive response to this is a reluctant, "Yeah, I know, my (spouse/boss/friends/kids/other) always complain that I don't listen to them," then this chapter is for you. Then again, if you're frustrated that people don't listen to *you,* particularly in more heated conversations, this chapter is for you too….

Finally, Chapter 9 helps you get a clearer vision of what is possible. It looks at some of the challenges of putting these guidelines into practice and offers some strategic and practical tips for doing so in a way that will help you get unstuck quickly and to easily reach your goals.

V. POINTS OF IMPACT

1. Leadership is an image you create, regardless of your role or position.
2. Influence includes but is not limited to persuasion, and its effects are visible even when you are not present.
3. Your communication style will create an organizational culture by identifying and modeling what matters most to you. That will be the foundation of your legacy.
4. To achieve your desired degree of influence, you have to be willing and able to identify your blind spot and close the gap between how you want others to perceive you, how you think others perceive you, and how others actually perceive you.

VI. BLIND-SPOT CHALLENGE: CREATE A BASELINE

Video record yourself as if you were talking to someone about an important topic, with the goal of getting them to respond in a certain way—however you want to define that.

- Speak for one or two minutes. Possible topics might include pitching or suggesting a product, service, or idea to a client, boss, employee, the board, a family member, neighbor, or your child's principal.
- Do NOT overprepare. Take a moment to organize your thoughts, then just *be yourself.* This is not a Hollywood production, so you should *not* rehearse or re-record until perfect. The goal is simply to get a clear picture of your usual, *unrehearsed* communication style.
- Stand up and set the camera (such as on your smartphone or laptop) so that it records your full body, head to toe, while you speak.
- DO NOT WATCH YOUR VIDEO…yet.

CHAPTER 3

VERBAL

... 'There's glory for you!'

'I don't know what you mean by "glory,"' Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. 'Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!''

'But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument,'' Alice objected.

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all.'

—Lewis Carroll. *Through the Looking-Glass.*

I. WHY DO WORDS MATTER?

This seems like a silly question in some ways. Words are the essence of your message. If you are writing to someone, whether in an email, a text message, or an old-fashioned letter or birthday card, your words are all they have to go on—short of drawings or increasingly popular "emojis"—to understand the meaning and purpose of what you want to tell them.

If your goal is to maximize your ability to influence others' thinking and behavior, at its core, the root content of your message needs to be crystal clear. The words you choose, your accuracy and jargon, your degree of detail and diplomacy, and the organization of your thoughts are all at the root. When the root content is well developed, the foundation of your message is strong.

When you are working with the First C—*command the room*—you need to make sure that your verbal content is logical and speaks to the needs, interests, and emotional temperament of your target audience. Are your words accurate, relevant, and essential, or are they vague, tangential, or excessively detailed? Do they elevate, educate, and empower? What about the degree of technicality in your material? Does your audience have to be an expert to follow your jargon, or do you explain it in a way that any interested person can understand? Not to mention, there's always the internal tug-of-war between diplomacy and directness: at what point does "diplomatic" slide into excessive sugar-coating and avoiding the real issue? On the other hand, where is the line between being "direct" and "blunt," even hurtful? Your voice, body language, and facial expressions can be perfect, but if your words are off, the foundation of your message is weak and will not lead to your desired result.

At the very least, your words have to be accurate. When I was a child, my father would sometimes make a slip of the tongue such as saying "… when you go to school tomorrow," on a Friday. Since "tomorrow" was a Saturday, we would leap at his error and exclaim, "Tomorrow?!" Dad was ready with a favorite response: "Listen to what I mean, not what I say."

Now that example is innocuous enough, but many people seem to operate under the misimpression that as long as their words get the main idea across, it's good enough. It's not.

In speech, your word choice can convey countless underlying details, such as telling someone, directly or indirectly, that you are trying to include them or exclude them from participating in a conversation. For example, if you are with two people who are discussing a meeting they attended together in which you did not take part, they have three choices.

- First, they can continue to rehash details between them and ignore you and the fact that you can't participate since you don't have the background. This option is *exclusive* in nature, whether they are doing it intentionally (which is passive-aggressive and socially rude), or unintentionally (in which case they are oblivious to the fact that you are left out).

- Second, they can provide you with additional information so you are up to speed and can participate more fully in the conversation. This is *inclusive* and *collaborative*. Your two colleagues are ensuring that you are *not* left out.
- Third, they can change the topic to something more relevant to all three of you. Maybe the original issue wasn't particularly time-sensitive and there was no need to include you in that discussion. Such a change in subject would be an effort both to include you in the conversation of the moment and to exclude you from the details of the aforementioned meeting. In this case, you could interpret their intentions in a variety of ways, depending on whether or not you *wanted* to be in on that meeting in the first place.

Your words also show your level of expertise and understanding. Of course, part of the way people want you to demonstrate your expertise is to explain things to them in a way that they can understand easily and simultaneously makes them *feel* smart, even though they are *not* experts. That's why avoiding unnecessary jargon and overly technical details is critical. Unfortunately, when presenters feel insecure, their instinct is to do just the opposite: They rely on lots of big words and technical details as a crutch to prove how smart they are, as if that will somehow compensate for the fact that they are not totally sure of what they are saying or that they are feeling self-conscious.

If you are familiar with any TED talks from some of the modern leadership gurus, such as Simon Sinek or Amy Cuddy, you know that the beauty of their performance is that they are using simple conversational language, yet they do not sacrifice meaning or credibility. In spite of their conversational style, you are still confident in their expertise.

Of course, if they were presenting their work at an academic conference, sharing some of the research on which they built their careers—and their TED talks—with other professors and researchers in similar fields, I am fairly certain their speech would be different. They would use lots of technical jargon and terms from psychology, game theory, and organizational dynamics and behavior, but that's because they'd be speaking to an audience who shares that language (or that *lexicon*, if I were writing this as an academic textbook).

Remember the second C? *Connect with the audience*. A critical rule of thumb is that you have to know your audience to determine what words will work best for the job. There is a big difference between the personal stories a presenter will tell when working with a room of venture capitalists and investors in Silicon Valley, for example, compared to when they are running a workshop for high school students. There is a relatability factor that begins with "speaking their language" fluently, even when the goal is to teach the audience the language of the presenter.

Here are some factors to consider when choosing your words in order to master all Three Cs.

II. FILLERS

I remember my third-grade teacher who, upon hearing anyone say "like" as anything other than a verb or simile, would quickly blurt out, "Like-like-like-like-like!" It worked well to condition a bunch of eight-year-olds to break a bad habit. Similarly, anyone who has ever attended a Toastmasters meeting has met the "um-counter," whose sole job it is to count the number of fillers you use during your speech, so you can attempt to do better next time, ideally with no fillers at all.

Fillers are those little words, non-words, and phrases such as *um, uh, like, I mean,* and *you know,* that get peppered throughout your speech. They're called "fillers" because they fill the silence that would otherwise be left as you hesitate to choose your next word, or decide what you want to say. Fillers leave the impression of uncertainty. While one or two may go unnoticed, too many will interrupt your flow of thought, chop up your sentence, make you sound tentative and doubtful, and ultimately undermine your authority.

An HR director once hired me specifically to help Jack, one of their senior executives, stop saying "you know." The problem was not the existence of the occasional filler, or even the annoyance of a frequently used one. The problem was that Jack used it *so* frequently that sometimes his coworkers would stop paying attention to what he was saying in meetings, and instead make tally marks on paper to count the number of times they heard it. Then they would compare "scores" with each other afterward! The HR director told me that one tally came to *nearly fifty instances in less than a four-minute stretch*. That's nearly one "you know" every 4.8 seconds!

More importantly, however, the effect of this bad habit was that the executive team had started denying Jack opportunities to speak at conferences and other events where his qualifications would have made him the natural choice. Remember: leadership is an image, and they felt that he would not reflect the right image for the organization until he got his "you know's" under control. In short, lacking that aspect of executive presence was completely undermining his credibility and influence.

There are also what I call "educated fillers," meaning words and phrases such as *actually*, *really*, and *basically*, which tend to fly under the radar because they are real words that sound "intelligent," but ultimately are sprinkled uselessly throughout people's speech the same way people use *like* or *um*.

At home a couple of years ago, I realized that my then-thirteen-year-old son had developed a habit of using "pretty much" as his filler of choice. One day mid-conversation I interrupted and said to him, "I challenge you to get through the rest of the story without saying 'pretty much.'" He shrugged as if to imply the quintessential teenage "whatever." He continued his story, and a moment later it slipped out again. I simply echoed: "Pretty much?" He rolled his eyes and repeated the sentence without the filler, but from then on, every time he said it, he caught himself and growled in frustration. The frustration was not so much that he used a filler, but that he had to admit that I was "right," which, of course, is the last thing most teenagers want to have to admit to a parent in such circumstances. Within a day or two, he had quickly broken himself of the "pretty much" habit.

Interestingly enough, *sometimes* inserting an occasional filler can be beneficial. I'm not suggesting you imitate a stereotypical "Valley-girl," littering your speech with *like* and other fillers. But if you find yourself in a position where your role or status might be intimidating, the (very) occasional *um*, or *you know* can make a conversation feel more casual, and put people at ease. This is also an important aspect of getting people to open their minds to your ideas: establishing comfort, which brings its own kind of influence.

III. DIPLOMACY

The big question is when speech should, and should *not*, be personal. Naturally, you *DO* want to help people see how participation in your vision will benefit them personally; but you *DON'T* want to make personal insults if they disagree with you somehow. To ensure that you are appropriately balancing directness and diplomacy in each situation, there are two important rules of thumb.

A. Objective vs. Subjective Language

The first rule to keeping your language diplomatic is knowing when and how to incorporate objective vs. subjective speech. *Objective* language is strictly fact-based, emotionally neutral, and opinion-free. *Subjective* language reflects opinions and can be emotionally charged. There is a time and a place for each. If you know that diplomacy will be paramount to a successful negotiation, such as when you are looking to discuss accountability or other sensitive issues where emotions could flare up and you want to avoid drama, make sure that your language stays objective and neutral.

For example, there is a big difference between hearing someone say, "There are some errors in your report that need to be addressed," and, "This report is garbage. You're useless—How can you be so incompetent?" Think about it: How would you feel if someone said each of those comments to you?

The first example is neutral, objective, incorporates passive voice ("…that need to be addressed,") and focuses on the report. It indirectly implies *who* needs to address them, but doesn't directly state or command it. As the writer of the report, hearing this news in this manner would allow you to find out what happened, clarify misunderstandings, apologize if needed, and fix the problem (and perhaps your reputation).

In contrast, the second approach is subjective and personal, focusing on you, the person who wrote the report, rather than on the report itself. It directly attacks your worth. It magnifies the initial embarrassment of having mistakes in your report, but beyond that, it evaluates your abilities overall, and identifies a reputation you would need to overcome to redeem yourself publicly. This kind of accusation makes your fight-or-flight reflexes kick in, which is unlikely to result in collaborative, efficient, or effective solutions, both short- and long-term.

Suzanne, a director at a marketing agency, was notorious for such blunt comments. She claimed that to do anything other than speak her mind directly was to be disingenuous and made her feel like she was "walking on eggshells." Needless to say, her comments were demoralizing to the staff and created unhealthy tension in the office.

She was frustrated that she often had to go back and have follow-up conversations with employees who did not make corrections to her standards the first time, and she became exasperated when an employee cried during one of her reprimands. "I've got a ton on my plate, and I don't have time to be all 'nicey-nicey' with everyone," she complained. "If they screwed up, they just need to own their mistake, suck it up and fix it."

I said, "There's an expression: If you don't have time to do something right, when will you have time to do it over? Have you heard that one?"

She slumped a bit in her chair. "No," she said with resignation, "but I get it."

"It's not about having time to be nicey-nicey. When you start the conversation with an attack on their personal value, their energy is so wrapped up in feelings of embarrassment, defensiveness, fear, anger, and more, they can barely focus on the nature of the problem you're actually trying to address. *They can't hear—much less process—what you're trying to say.* Not to mention they're no longer motivated by wanting to be a valuable contributor to the team. Those negative emotions take over, and that never results in optimal performance, which is why you often have to go back and speak to them a second or even a third time about the same problem that had only partially been fixed."

She agreed to work on focusing on the problem or disagreeing objectively with the content of someone's message rather than verbally attacking the person. This included phrasing her requests more conversationally, removing any unnecessary negative opinion language, such as *stupid,* and avoiding passive-aggressive rhetorical questions like, "What, are you trying to get me fired with this?"

The next week she came back with an incredulous smile. "I can't believe it," she said. "There's a guy at the office I've been butting heads with for over a year, and this week we actually sat down and had a really peaceful and productive meeting. It was hard to keep myself in check the whole time, but I did it, and it's amazing the difference it made!"

This practice of keeping language neutral and objective during difficult or awkward exchanges is just as effective outside of the office as it is in the workplace.

My friend Caroline called me recently, frustrated that her teenage son was becoming demanding, grumbling orders like, "Pick me up at 7:00" or "You need to drive my friends home." Her reflex was to yell at him for his "attitude," which would immediately escalate into a shouting match between them. I advised her to keep the discussion message-based rather than taking the emotional "bait" and launching into a lecture about his personal lack of gratitude and respect. After all, she still had the power to say no to his request.

I said, "Try this: When he makes those demands, just stop and say, 'It sounded like there was a polite request for something in there, but I couldn't find it.' It focuses on the message, rather than the messenger, staying away from accusations or character judgments that could make him react defensively, and it implies that you're willing to say 'yes,' but only if he asks respectfully."

She called me back a few days later, very happy to say that she had tried it out, and although he initially rolled his eyes at the comment, he did acquiesce with, "Mom, could you please pick me up at seven?" The next day when it happened again, she shortened her response to, "Was there a polite request in there somewhere?" and by the third day further truncated her reply to a single word: "Rephrase," which she found worked just as efficiently and effectively for text message exchanges as well.

In the end, it was a win-win: her son got the support he wanted, and she got the respect she needed, and their relationship stayed healthy and open.

Keeping negative, corrective feedback objective and non-personal allows people to hear and accept both what you say *and* what you mean.

B. Avoiding Absolutes

The other rule of thumb in maintaining a more diplomatic approach without sacrificing clarity is to avoid speaking in terms of absolutes. Absolutes are words that reflect a black-and-white, all-or-none assessment of the situation, such as:

- *all, always, every, everyone, everything, everywhere*
- *none, no, never, nobody, no one, nothing,* and *nowhere.*

If you tend to use these words during disagreements, you may *feel* like they add weight to your argument, but in reality they will weaken it. Unless your claim is indeed true 100% of the time, they overgeneralize the facts, and serve as exaggerations, which undermine credibility.

If you have lobbed unsubstantiated complaints along the lines of, "Nobody wants to work with him," or "I always have to do everything," the listener knows that emotions are running the show, and immediately starts to question the validity of your claim. Those claims harken back to childhood rants of, "You never let me do anything!" and "You always take his side!" Needless to say, the impression they make is not one of inspirational leadership.

More importantly, absolute terms like these bring discussions to a screeching halt. Maggie, for example, described herself as a very black-and-white thinker, and was known for digging her heels in during problem-solving meetings with comments like, "I'll never agree to that," or "There's no way that will work." The implication was, "I'm right, you're wrong, and until you accept that basic fact there's no point in continuing this conversation."

Instead, we explored more collaborative approaches to expressing disagreement, such as,

- "I'm having a really hard time seeing how…"
- "Help me understand why…," or
- "If that's the case, then what would happen to…?"

All of these keep the lines of communication open, and show that you want to work with the other person, not just force them to accept your side (no matter how certain you are that your perspective is correct.) At that point, at least one of two things is going to happen: either they are going to provide information that *does* clarify their point and helps you understand what they mean, *or* they are going to reveal where there is a hole in their theory. If it's the former, be ready to graciously acknowledge the newfound clarity and thank them for filling in the necessary blanks. If the latter, *also* be ready to graciously—not haughtily—point out the problem and how it supports your argument.

To this latter point, inside, you might *want* to say, "Ha! See? I told you so!" However, if you are trying to maintain a productive relationship with the other person, this is unadvisable. Instead, try something more charitable and instructive, such as, "Ah, now I see what the problem was...." The ability to maintain this kind of diplomatic touch is invaluable in establishing a shared sense of trust, which is a universally-accepted requirement in building your executive presence.

IV. FEATURES VS. BENEFITS: WIIFM

In the art of persuasion, there's one factor that drives most human behavior: we are all self-centered, and directly or indirectly, we want the answer to one fundamental question for most decision-making. That simple five-word question is: "What's in it for me?" or WIIFM?

We are always looking for ways to persuade people, whether it's asking someone on the team to put in a few extra late nights to finish a project or asking your teenager to sacrifice time with his friends one evening to take care of a younger sibling when you have to be away at a business event. Often, they will do it (begrudgingly perhaps), but they will more willingly make a sacrifice if you frame your request in terms of how it will benefit them. It could be a financial reward, public recognition, enhanced social status, or just knowing that they will have your personal gratitude and respect as a result of their efforts and cooperation.

To ensure the WIIFM factor is addressed effectively, there's an important line to draw that many people don't recognize. That's the line between *features* and *benefits*.

Entrepreneurs and executives who need to pitch their product or service, particularly to investors, know this better than anyone. When entrepreneurs pitch effectively, they don't launch right into how many buttons and functions an app has, how the operating system works, or why the user interface is friendlier. Those are important features, but most people won't connect to them emotionally. Instead, their pitch starts right off the bat with the value the product brings to the user ultimately (i.e., its benefits).

That catches people's attention. People need to understand the "why" first, as Simon Sinek explains so well in his book, *Start With Why*. Once people understand why a product, service, or idea is of personal value, they're suddenly willing to listen to the other details, specifically *how* they can achieve that result. That's where the features come in.

On a broad level, think about any automobile commercial you've seen lately. Lincoln had an advertising campaign series featuring the actor Matthew McConaughey wearing an expensive suit, driving along Mulholland Drive or an equally iconic mountain road overlooking the romantic vista of the lights of Los Angeles at night. He doesn't talk about the amount of horse power in the car, the reliability of the mechanics, electricals, or the mileage. Nobody remembers what Matthew McConaughey said because Lincoln doesn't *want* you to focus on what he's talking about. For the most part he's rambling about nothing. His words are background noise, with the mellow ease of his voice setting a tone for the viewer's experience. Lincoln just wants you to focus on how you *feel* at that moment. They are advertising luxury, feeling relaxed, feeling sexy, powerful, and in control...and who doesn't want that? The idea is that if you can associate those benefits with that car, then that's incentive for you to buy the car. Advertisers know this.

But benefits need not be so superficial. For example, I worked with a sales director for a medical device company who was trying to help train hospital directors and physicians on how to explain a new product option to stroke patients. This little device was inserted by trans-catheter through a blood vessel in the groin into the heart, and closed off a section where clots could form, since there is a risk of clots going to the brain and causing a hemorrhage. It was a new alternative to taking the blood-thinner Warfarin as the typical means of preventing this risk after having a stroke.

The problem was that that's where the story was ending. The product wasn't compelling enough for patients. People would think, "Okay, I wouldn't have to take that medicine every day, but I'd have to have heart surgery. That doesn't sound like a better option!"

We realized that the description of taking medicine versus inserting a device was feature-focused, and lacked emotional appeal. So, I asked, "Why would people want this? What would be the benefit of surgery over taking medicine?"

The sales director explained. "Well, first," she said, "if you take Warfarin, there is always a risk of side effects, how it could interact with your other medications, and problems if you forget to take it or refill the prescription. None of that matters if you have (our device.)" She continued, "But more importantly, on Warfarin you have to go to a clinic at least once a month so they can test your blood to check your INR [internationally normalized ratio] to make sure you won't bleed out. But if you have (our device), you don't have to do that anymore. Once you've had your preliminary checkup or two with your doctor, you don't need regular monitoring; you're good to go."

"Let me get this straight," I said. "You're saying that if I don't need the medication, I don't need a monthly doctor's visit? That visit might take just thirty minutes, but when I factor in time sitting in the waiting room, plus the round-trip commute to a clinic that could be several hours away from my home, it could eat up the better part of a day. And if I'm unable to drive myself for whatever reason, it would save all that time for the person who gets stuck driving me too?"

"Yes," she said.

"Wow," I said. "At that point, what's at stake is quality of life! Imagine someone said to you they were going to give you an extra day of free time every month. Would that be valuable to you? To get back a day of paid or unpaid time off every month? Especially considering the fact that stroke survivors could live for another ten, twenty years or more, and many do go back to work upon recovery...that could add up to a lot of time lost in routine clinic visits, couldn't it!"

"I never thought about it that way," she said.

"But *that* is the real benefit to the patient. There's an emotional connection you can make with that benefit. That's what's in it for them."

Now, this example pertained to a specific product, but it's just as relevant when pitching an idea to a partner or presenting your vision to the board. Maybe you're pitching your own promotion and advocating for why you should be in line for the next CEO or CFO position. In these situations, what would you focus on instinctively? If you're like most people, you'd probably dive right into listing your qualifications, what you have accomplished, how long you've been there, how many roles you've taken, how well you know the customers, or how well you know the system.

Usually, you'll have to dig down two or three levels of asking yourself, "So what?" to identify and be able to articulate what a truly motivating factor would be for the listener. That's what you need to do to help them find a personal interest in getting on board and saying "yes," i.e., *Closing the deal*.

How much more persuasive would it be if you could flip each of those personal strength features around and explain why each has a specific, tangible benefit to the company? Sure, increasing revenue and saving money helps. But beyond that, the feature of having a more thorough knowledge of the technological infrastructure *and* a finance background, for example, may empower you with the skills to "translate" between the IT, finance, and business development departments, for example. Effective cross-functional communication can save a lot of time and prevent misunderstandings, which makes everybody's life less stressful and avoids costly errors in terms of time, money, manpower, and other resources.

Should a listener be able to deduce those implications from your list of skills and experience on your resume? Perhaps, but it may not happen right away. Plus, it's *so* much more compelling if you can clearly and simply articulate the relationship between them. That takes the burden of processing off the listener, and demonstrates the "strong communication skills" that your resume claims you have!

V. MANAGING UP

Managing up is one of the hardest skill sets for many people to master, and it's one of the most crucial in projecting leadership, because of the specific relationship involved. "Managing up" refers to everything from synthesizing data for higher-ups and boards of directors, to pitching ideas to decision-makers, to having the courage and skill to manage expectations, give critical feedback, or present what may be unpleasant or unwelcome information to people who hold sway over you. These types of people have a lot of influence over your career success (and day-to-day happiness or stress level), so the idea of managing up can be intimidating.

You know what you're good at, and you know where you're confident. You may be fine talking with peers or people you supervise, but when it comes to delivering an analysis or projection, or presenting to small, senior leadership teams or larger stakeholders, panic ensues. You know that your analyses, projections, and recommendations—while factually accurate—are dry and uninspiring. And if your presentation is dry and uninspiring, *you* can be perceived as dry and uninspiring. You might come across as nervous, lacking in confidence, or even arrogant or pushy, and none of these qualities convey effective (or even readiness for) leadership.

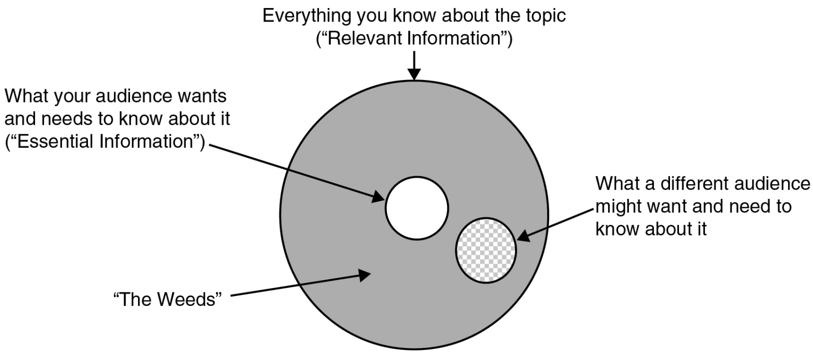
One mistake I hear all too often is that when presenting to more senior audiences, your focus becomes trying to avoid push-back, challenges, and questions for fear that you might look foolish as a result. To prevent that from happening, you give detail upon detail to justify and preemptively defend your findings, hoping there will be nothing left for your participants to question. Unfortunately, this isn't persuasive, it's *dissuasive*—not just because it's distracting and boring, but more importantly because it shows you don't truly know your audience or understand their needs. You think you're being thorough; they think you got lost in "the weeds." You *will* have an impact on the outcome of the meeting…but it might not be the impact you want, and it's all because your word choice, both quantitatively and qualitatively, has missed the mark.

A. Relevant vs. Essential Information

Think of it this way. In the diagram below, the large outer circle represents everything you know about a particular topic. This is what makes you the expert on it. It is all important, and influences your perspective, understanding, and the conclusions you draw, so we'll call it "relevant knowledge."

The small white circle at the center represents what your current audience *needs* and *wants* to know. This is what we'll call "essential information." But if you're speaking to your board of directors one day and a group of investors the next, the information essential for each group may change, which is what the other small gray circle reflects. It is critical to anticipate a given audience's needs and adapt your message accordingly. Why? Because everything else that is relevant to you but *not* essential to the current audience (the rest of the big circle) is simply more than they need or want to know, and possibly more than they can process. That's what they consider being in "the weeds," and nobody wants to get stuck there.

Figure 4: Relevant Information vs. Essential Information



When I share this perspective with groups, I often hear protests that some bosses are detail people and *like* "the weeds." I recommend that you consider senior leaders—whether your boss, client, or a board member, among other relationships—as having the following priorities:

1. Getting through as much as possible and getting out of this meeting as soon as possible.
2. Understanding the content as quickly as possible.
3. Understanding no more and no less detail than is absolutely necessary to answer *their* most pressing "so what?" bearing in mind priorities 1 and 2.

To ensure that everyone is on the same page from the beginning:

- Explicitly state your objectives and end-goals up front. That's your hook. That establishes credibility and importance, and commands the room.
- Then, tell them that you want to respect everyone's time, so you're going to skip over some details, but invite them to interrupt you at any time if they *do* want more, and *be ready* with whatever information you opted to omit. ("Be prepared" is more than just the Scouts BSA's motto.) Most of your audience will appreciate

you being mindful of their crazy schedules and priorities. You connect with your audience by showing forethought, emotional intelligence, empathy, and attention to detail (in addition to simply doing good work). And *that* will have positive influence.

- Then, instead of spending your time talking about all the tactical details, be sure to share information that shows you are thinking strategically. For example:
    - If you are reorganizing your human resources department, don't just focus on what each move will be; explain the rationale for the change and what the return on investment will be that will make the temporary hassle worth it.
    - If you're a tax accountant in a major financial advisory firm, don't just explain to your clients all the details of how you're going to implement changes based on the new tax law; focus instead on the business implications, and how the overall changes will save them money and have a positive impact on the bottom line.

Some of the challenge might be that your ideas may not be embraced immediately, such as, for example, if you determine that the boss's preferred option is not the most cost-effective, or if you have uncovered problems that will require significant changes to be made or that will have political ramifications. This is where it will be crucial to use objective, diplomatic language, as discussed above in Section III.

When in doubt, preface that conversation by establishing shared primary interests, such as ensuring the company is investing its resources with maximum potential return, and avoiding any pitfalls along the route to that goal. This preface will help to manage expectations by framing why you need to share some red flags with your audience, for example. Own your responsibility and your decision, and calmly but confidently make it clear that the biggest failure on your part would be to *not* share your findings. This identifies a clear "why," which paves the way for the audience to be open to receiving the rest of the content you need to present.

B. Culture

It's important to acknowledge the role of culture at this point, as it is a major factor in how different people approach the relationships involved in managing up. I've worked with thousands of clients and students, both American and international, many of whom were from more hierarchical cultures, countries, and family backgrounds. For them, the whole idea of proactively asserting your recommendations or contradicting senior leadership—especially in public—is more than simply counter-intuitive.

Individuals from these cultural groups express deeply ingrained values that prioritize showing respect for one's elders and superiors, with strict rules for what that kind of respect should look like. This leads to the conscious and unconscious feeling that it is not their role, as a junior staff member, to tell the boss what to think or do. It would seem overtly insubordinate and disrespectful in a way that would cause great embarrassment to everyone involved, and would be career-ending in their home culture. This leads to an internal struggle of trying to reconcile the cultural values in which they were raised with the professional responsibilities of their current role, as well as with their future aspirations.

My international clients and students often share that although they know, intellectually, that American business leaders expect them to manage up, they have difficulty figuring out how to express themselves in a way that reflects both value sets at once: demonstrating personal authority and leadership skills while showing respect for others in more senior positions.

So, how can you balance these needs, in order to leave a meeting feeling like everyone's needs were met and you came out looking poised, ready, and in control? More importantly, how can you do this without having to abandon or betray a part of who you are, regardless of where you were born or how you were raised?

The first step to reconciling this internal struggle is to remember why you are there. You were given that role because someone believed you were the best person to do the job. You were invited to the meeting because the common understanding is that you *belong* there. People want your insights, not just your agreement. The best contribution you can make is to share information or ask questions that will help your organization succeed.

The worst professional mistake you can make is to *not* share critical insights that could increase the organization's success, or help it avoid disaster. The second-worst mistake you can make is to contribute nothing at all, which simply leaves the impression that you bring no value to the table. A good question is as valuable as a good answer.

Remember that your leadership wants you to be more than a human calculator with a mouth or a “yes-man;” they want you to take on an advisory role. This is not just to make their lives easier in the moment. Carefully crafting your message with the right content, timing, and delivery shows them that you have the analytical skill and the foresight to be able to handle more of these projects. You are demonstrating your own proactive—but still respectful—leadership skills. It’s your chance to show them not just that you can lead, but that they can trust you to lead *them.*

VI. STORYTELLING

Sometimes the most compelling way to convey your point is to illustrate it rather than explain it. This is where the art of storytelling comes into play.

The beauty of it all is that everyone likes to listen to a good, well-told story. A few years ago, I was running a training for a large urban school district. To demonstrate a particular technique, I was reading a short children’s book out loud to the attendees, when I suddenly realized Mr. Jones, the burly, fifty-something, head custodian, was leaning against the doorway.

Thinking he might need to take care of something in the room, I stopped reading and said, “Hi, Mr. Jones, did you need something?”

He shook his head with a little smile and said, “No. It’s just been a long time since anyone read me a story.”

This is the power of a captivating story: It makes you forget what you were thinking about or doing, and allows you to get lost in it, if only for a moment. Persuasive, captivating stories have several key elements to them.

A. Stories Need to be Relatable and Inspiring

First and foremost, stories need to be relatable in some way. Even if the specific context or problem is far-removed from the listener’s experience, something in the thoughts, emotions, fears, or conversations shared in the story must resonate with the audience. Remember the second C: Connect.

This connection can be made easily through a simple plot structure:

- Start by describing the original state of affairs.
- Next, identify a key problem, and show where things were at their worst.
- Describe the struggle to overcome this challenge, such as competing priorities and risks, obstacles, and ethical dilemmas.
- Then, share the resolution, whether a victory or the hope of a victory, or a failure that your participants want to avoid, ideally combined with a positive lesson, and an explicit call to action.

For people to appreciate where you are, they have to understand how you got there and where you came from. The problems make you relatable, the victories make you inspirational, and the instructional call to action makes you indispensable.

A client of mine, Malik, was invited to speak at a TED Global conference and asked for my help. His story was incredible: An educated, professionally successful man and a loving husband and father, at twenty-eight years old, he was framed for the murder of his wife, convicted due to a corrupt justice system, and sentenced to the death penalty. He was Kenyan, and in Kenya the death penalty was the only possible sentence for a murder conviction.

Talk about a story that's even hard to believe, much less to relate to! But we made it relatable by sharing his thoughts and feelings along the way: Disbelief, despair, seeing no light at the end of the tunnel…and then opportunity, hope, perseverance, frustration, and ultimately, joy and relief upon finally receiving exoneration, a whopping eighteen years later. These are all feelings everyone has felt at many points along life's journey. As a result, while the specific facts of his story would naturally be impossible for most people to relate to, HE was completely relatable as a person, and ultimately, a role model.

> *And Malik's call to action? No matter how dark things seem, every day, take just one step forward. The connection with his audience was unbreakable, and everyone who hears his story leaves with one thought: If he can do it under those circumstances, I can persevere and overcome my own challenges too!*

B. Stories Show Contrast

Second, good stories show contrast. It could be a before-and-after example, a promise that something will get better, or a look at two different cases, one that was successful and one that was not. This helps the listener envision both what they want to have happen, and what they do *not* want to have occur.

Albert Einstein once said, "The only rational way of educating is to be an example. If one can not help it, a warning example." Fortunately, both types of examples make for great stories.

Persuasive stories can be real or hypothetical. I'm not suggesting that you make up imaginary clients and situations and pretend that you actually worked with them to turn their business around; that's just lying. But stories can be a way to help your audience envision a possible future or outcome. Imagination is powerful. "Imagine X" is one of the most compelling marketing phrases you can use. Inviting people to imagine or speculate what the future could look like within a particular time frame can help them internalize the possibilities by helping them feel the pain, the pleasure—and the payout.

Fictitious stories can also be a fun way to teach a lesson without sounding like you're preaching. I've run lots of trainings on intercultural communication, and often I'll open with the following anecdote. (cf: *The Big Book of Presentation Games*. Apologies to any insect-lovers out there, but stay with me!)

> *There was a graduate student studying animal behavior who decided to do an experiment. He took a grasshopper and put it on the edge of a table, and said, "Jump!" The grasshopper jumped across the table.*

> *Then he picked the grasshopper up, pulled off two legs and put it back on the edge of the table. "Jump!" he said, and the grasshopper jumped halfway across the table.*
>
> *He picked it up again and pulled off two more legs. He put it back down, said, "Jump!" and this time the grasshopper just inched forward.*
>
> *Finally, he picked up the grasshopper, pulled off the last two legs, placed it back on the table and said, "Jump!" But the grasshopper didn't move. So naturally, the graduate student concluded that a grasshopper with no legs…is deaf.*

On cue, this inevitably elicits a full round of groans and a few laughs. But most importantly, once things settle down, I transition with, "Okay, why did I tell you that joke? Because based on the limited data and understanding he had, the graduate student interpreted the grasshopper's behavior in a way that seemed logical to him. Unfortunately, the conclusion he drew regarding the *reason* for the behavior was wrong.

"In the same way," I tell the participants, "when you have employees, students, clients, or vendors of different cultures, they will occasionally say or do something that surprises or upsets you because it seems disrespectful or inappropriate. But what's critical in that moment is to realize that their motivations or intentions may not be what they appear to be on first glance. It's the *lack* of information you have about their language and culture—and their lack of knowledge about yours—that triggers the miscommunication and leads to wrong conclusions. That's what I want to explore with you today."

Of course, I could launch bluntly into my content with, "I'm here today because you are all interculturally ignorant and biased and I'm going to show you why and how you have to change," but then the listeners would feel insulted, attacked, and defensive. Saying that would create a virtual brick wall I'd have to break through to get them to open up again and be willing to hear anything else I had to say. Instead, the grasshopper story serves as a disarming allegory to gently reveal a primary cause of the audience's challenges in working and communicating with people from different cultures, allowing them to laugh at themselves indirectly and be open to hearing more and changing their thoughts and behaviors.

C. Stories Establish Credibility

Stories can have a variety of placements and purposes. One of the most important can be as a means to establish your own credibility at the start of a meeting or program.

As I mentioned before, I have led many training programs for school districts all over the country. When I do, there is always one initial obstacle I need to overcome from the start: my title.

Public school teachers can be one of the most cynical audiences to win over. They're under tons of pressure, overworked and underpaid, and most would rather be grading papers or lesson planning (or going home) than having to sit through a professional development workshop run by some academic or corporate type. Whereas in the corporate world my PhD is a marker of credibility and expertise, in the K-12 public school setting, it is often viewed as a marker of distance between my audience and me. If I wanted to have a truly captivated, engaged audience, and make the experience maximally beneficial for everyone, I would have to do some "damage control" as soon as the principal or superintendent introduced me as "Dr. Sicola," in order to redirect their focus and get the energy of the room to flow with me rather than against me.

At that point, as soon as the microphone was handed to me, I began with an invitation and disclaimer: "First, please call me Laura, and allow me to *apologize* for the 'Doctor' in front of my name. After college, when I first started teaching, I was working in a bilingual program in south-central Los Angeles...." At this point people's eyebrows went up a bit, as that's generally recognized as one of the toughest neighborhoods in urban America, and bilingual programs have unique challenges and require unique skill sets in their teachers. That earned some quick credibility and respect points. I had their attention, and command of the room.

I continued, "It was a twenty-four-seven, all-consuming job, and anytime I had to sit in a professional development session run by 'Dr. So-and-So,' my brain automatically went **click** and shut off. All I could think of was, 'Listen, Dr. Smarty-Pants, take your fancy-schmancy research and theory somewhere else. If you aren't going to give me something that's going to make my life easier at eight o'clock tomorrow morning, I don't have time for you." I saw some more heads nodding in agreement. They knew that I understood their challenges and feelings, because I had been there myself. I was connecting with my audience.

Then I drove it home: "So the irony is not lost on me that I'm standing here today with one of those fancy-schmancy titles of my own. That's why all I'm asking is that you give me *ten minutes*, and if I haven't clearly demonstrated by then that the rest of the program is going to give you valuable information and real, concrete, applicable strategies to make your life easier when school starts tomorrow morning, I give you permission to leave, and I won't be offended. Is it a deal?" Framed as a no-lose proposition for them, the rest of the heads nodded in agreement, and a few yesses could be heard. I earned their collective buy-in, and closed the deal.

In all the years I have run those programs, not one person has ever walked out.

D. The Effect of Stories

Let's be clear about something else that's equally important: Not all storytelling pertains to heart-felt personal anecdotes or jokes like the previous examples. Maybe you are a pharmaceutical researcher, CFO, or SVP of marketing. Often your product is a spreadsheet or something equally un-sexy. Where does storytelling come in?

Arguably, it's when the data are so nuts-and-bolts-dry (like you'd find in your average Excel spreadsheet), that storytelling becomes even *more* crucial to making an impact. Project what the future might look like if you make Choice A over Choice B. Walk the audience through a day in the life of a real or hypothetical client or employee. You could even talk the audience through what was going through your head leading up to the moment when the big idea came to you.

This is a good opportunity not only to share but to *interpret* the data for the audience. Describe it using some *subjective* language. For example:

- Is it promising, or is it a cause for concern?
- Was the up-tick nominal or critical?
- What *doesn't* the data show and why is that important to you?

Reveal or speculate as to what influential factors might have contributed to this situation, ways it can be mitigated or amplified, and possible outcomes and subsequent effects to be pursued or avoided as desired. Whatever you do, find some way to make it relatable and inspirational.

To be persuasive, at its foundation, any good story needs to be well-written. Whether it's a two-minute story to illustrate a specific point, or an extended story to contextualize and integrate a variety of points, it needs good structure and descriptive language, as is evidenced by any good book, play, or movie script, or even television advertisement. Through that structure, you need to convey two things, whether explicitly or implicitly: *what the listener should think, and how they should feel about it*.

Remember, no matter how long or short your story is, your goal is to use it to *bring your data to life*. Stories not only help the audience focus their attention and connect with your content, they influence the way the audience thinks and feels about it. Stories create inspiration and motivation that allow the content to penetrate and stick, all of which is at the root of influence.

Use stories to bring your data to life.

VII. POINTS OF IMPACT

1. Careful word choice—both quantitative and qualitative—is at the core of clear and effective messaging.
2. Fillers make you sound hesitant or uncertain, which undermines credibility.
3. The right balance of objective and subjective speech reflects the right balance of logic and emotions for each context.
4. Focus on the benefits for the listener up front so they understand the "why." Then explain how to achieve those results through the features.
5. When managing up, don't get lost in the weeds of technical detail. Keep it to strategic, high-level points, but be ready with the details if someone requests them. Be able to separate essential from relevant but non-essential information and adjust accordingly from audience to audience.

6. Consider how culture—including home culture, upbringing, industry, and where you live now— might be influencing what information you or others choose to share and how.
7. When possible, tell a story rather than giving a generic explanation. Use a clear plot with a problem to make it relatable, and a solution to make it inspirational.
8. Stories can bring data to life, provide a non-threatening lens through which listeners can do some introspection, establish credibility, or help the audience visualize future outcomes to seek or even avoid.
9. Persuasive content needs to help the audience clarify both what to think and how to feel about it.

VIII. BLIND-SPOT CHALLENGE: VERBAL

LISTEN to your recording again, but *don't watch it*, so as not to get distracted by your movements, hair, etc. Don't worry about how your voice sounds at this point. Focus exclusively on *what* you said. Listen and ask yourself:

- Did I use any fillers, excessive jargon, or inappropriate language?
- Were my words appropriately diplomatic, direct, confident, respectful, humorous, specific, accurate, supportive, etc.?
- Did I establish my purpose right away, in a way that was meaningful to my target audience? Were clear benefits established, or did I get lost in features or other technical details?
- Was my organization and logic easy to follow?
- Did I add my own interpretation of the facts in a way that contributed value?
- Did I tell a story? If so, was it effective, and why or why not? If I didn't, is there a story I could have used, and even *should* have used?
- Do my cultural values differ from my audience's values? If so, did I take them into consideration and speak in a way that respects both sides?
- Were my words persuasive? Why or why not?

Write down your answers to each question, then consider your blind spot: how many of these answers reflected something you correctly anticipated hearing vs. something you heard (or didn't hear) that surprised you? And does each of those answers contribute to or detract from the leadership image you want to establish?