

Career Compass No. 34: Making Presentations Like a Pro

by Dr. Frank Benest

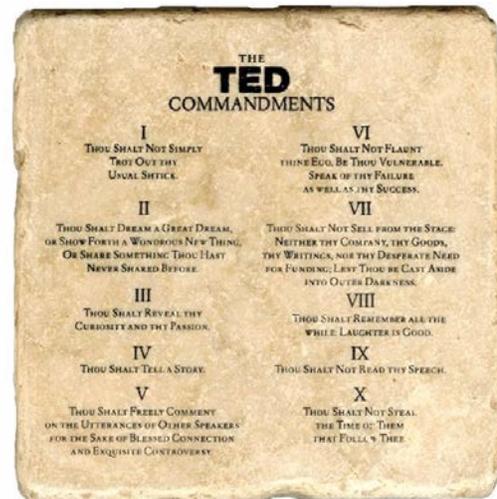
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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest gives us a blueprint to talk like TED.

I'm a newly promoted recreation manager in a city Community Services Department. As part of my new role, I am being called upon to make verbal reports and other kinds of presentations to the Recreation and Parks Commission, community associations, and user groups such as the Little League Board.

In my first two presentations, I thought that I prepared well and wrote out my remarks to make sure I covered everything. However, I did not feel comfortable and it was evident that I was not effective in making my case. In fact, in one situation, the commission heard my report, took testimony from a few people with some minor concerns, and then postponed its decision even though there was enough information to take action.

For me to be a success as a manager, I recognize that I must improve my presentation skills. Do you have any advice?



You are correct. As you move up in local government management, you will be required to make more and more public presentations, including those to the city council or other governing boards. Your effectiveness as a manager will be determined in part by your presentation skills.

To enhance your skills, I suggest the following preparation, delivery and post-delivery approaches.

1. Preparing the Presentation

Before you even begin to write the presentation, you need to determine:

YOUR PURPOSE IN MAKING THE PRESENTATION

First, you need to decide on the purpose of the talk. Is it to:

- Provide information and inform?
- Make a recommendation?
- Teach or train?
- Move people to action?

Understanding the purpose will help you shape the remarks. A presentation aimed at informing the audience is much different than a talk that is crafted to move the audience to action.

TARGET AUDIENCE

Second, you must identify the primary and any secondary audiences. Sometimes, this is easy if you are speaking to the Recreation and Parks Commission and there is little citizen participation in the meeting. However, in the more likely case that there are representatives from different groups attending the meeting (e.g., field users, neighborhood associations, environmental groups), all with their own views and interests, you must decide who is the primary audience and who are secondary audiences.

THE “WHY”

Before you draft an outline, you must consider the “why” of the issue that you are addressing. Why are people interested in the issue? Why is it important to the audience, the community, and/or the organization? Oftentimes, we focus on the “what” and “how” and ignore the “why.” The “why” motivates support and positive action.

NEEDS OF THE AUDIENCE(S)

If the commission is the primary audience, along with field user groups, and everyone wants to increase field usage, then you obviously want to build a case and provide options and recommendations to enhance usage. However, if members of the neighborhood where the park is located are concerned about parking and traffic congestion, you need to address those issues in your report and presentation.

2. Crafting the Presentation

Once you decide on the purpose, the target audience, the “why” and the needs of the audience, you are ready to craft your presentation.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

Depending on the primary audiences and their needs, you want to “frame” the issue in terms of their interests.

For example, a recommendation to install artificial turf on a youth soccer field can be framed in different ways:

- Increasing field usage by user groups
- Reducing maintenance costs for the city
- Freeing up department monies for other recreational purposes or programs
- Reducing injuries to users.

Just like a red frame brings out the red in a painting, the proper framing of an issue helps shape the issue in such a way that it resonates with the audience and thus generates support.

FOCUSING ON A FEW KEY MESSAGES

While you may have a lot of information and knowledge about the issue, you want to highlight just a few key messages crafted for the primary audience(s). Certainly you must provide the data that people expect but also focus the presentation on a few key messages related to the positive frame and the concerns of stakeholders.

In terms of messages, less is more.

AVOIDING JARGON

In all our disciplines (finance, HR, planning, police, recreation), we use technical jargon. If you want an effective presentation that accomplishes its purpose, you want to avoid jargon and abbreviations. Even if you are addressing a professional group in your own field, but especially in community settings or with governing or advisory groups, jargon and acronyms dull the senses of the audience.

WINNING HEARTS AS WELL AS MINDS

As a professional, you are required to provide essential data and present an analytical case in recommending a public decision or educating a professional audience. However, you must understand that data is necessary but insufficient to carry the day. Appropriate stories are the most powerful way to communicate because they resonate emotionally.

Therefore, you may wish to use a personal experience, a vignette from a user or customer, or a story about your daughter in order to help support the analytical case for your recommendation. Stories do not replace data but they make the data come to life and help you connect with the audience.

SIZING THE PRESENTATION

Before developing your presentation, you need to know how long it should be. The worst blunder is to go over the expected time. If the commission expects no more than 10 minutes, make sure you do not exceed the time assigned.

I time all my presentations, section by section, so I do not break the cardinal rule of sticking to the time allotted. Therefore, if I use up too much time in one section of my presentation, I can adjust during the talk and cut back on another section.

You may have a wealth of information and examples. Save some for the follow-up questions.

ADHERING TO THE TED RULE

World-class speakers are invited to present at TED conferences. (View these presentations at www.TED.com.) Since adults begin to lose attention after 18 minutes, TED speakers are not allowed to go beyond 18 minutes of talking. If you are presenting to the city's department head team, the city council or a professional association, you cannot lecture beyond 18-20 minutes maximum without engaging the audience in some interactive way (see next item).

ENGAGING THE AUDIENCE

You certainly want to present information or other content to the audience. However, effective presenters engage their audience in an interactive way.

Stories engage the audience. Here some other ways to create interaction with the audience:

- Ask a provocative question and record the responses
- Engage the audience in critiquing a mini-case study and identifying lessons learned
- Pair up audience members and ask them to share a personal experience in the pair related to the issue and then several participants can share their responses in the larger group
- Request the audience members to write ideas on sticky cards and then post them on an "Idea Wall."

OUTLINING THE TALK

Once you have figured out all the issues above, you can outline your remarks or verbal report. Do not write out your verbal presentation! An outline will help you keep the presentation more conversational or informal. Inexperienced speakers tend to develop full outlines. With more experience, you can move towards more basic outlines which just include the key data, messages, conclusions, and/or recommendations.

In terms of constructing your outline, remember the classic rule of structuring a talk: Tell the audience what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then remind them what you told them.

CRITIQUING THE PRESENTATION

If it is an especially important presentation, ask a manager, colleague, or informal coach who is a seasoned presenter to critique the outline.

For important presentations to the city council or commission, I always suggest that the staff team conduct a practice run-through in the council chambers or meeting location. The presenter gives the report and then the rest of the team makes suggestions on how to refine the powerpoint or other presentation. The team members can also pose some tough questions that may be asked by council, commission or community members attending the meeting.

3. Delivering the Presentation

After you have prepared your presentation, including any critique to refine it, you now must focus on delivery. These are some tips:

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Just like any activity, you will enhance your presentation skills if you rehearse and practice in advance of the actual delivery. I used to speak in front of a wall or full-length mirror. Others record their talks and then critique them; new technology makes this easier than ever.

In any case, by using an outline and rehearsing your remarks, you can rely less on what you wrote out, occasionally glance at the outline to make key points and keep on track, and thus provide a less formal and more effective presentation.

STAND UP

I never like to make a presentation sitting at a staff table or presenters table (for instance, if I'm on a panel at a professional meeting). I personally get more energy, deliver the report with more enthusiasm, better project my voice, and create more presence and connection if I stand up and get closer to the audience.

DITCH THE PODIUM

Unless it is a very formal environment (such as a city council meeting), it is always best to get out in front of the audience. The podium just creates a physical barrier between you and the audience.

USE A WIRELESS, CLIP-ON MIKE

If you need a microphone for the presentation, I always request a clip-on wireless mike (as opposed to a hand-held mike). A clip-on mike allows you to walk around, hold your notes in one hand and gesture with the other, and generally better address the audience.

AVOID NON-WORDS

Even as a seasoned presenter, I sometimes fill in momentary gaps with non-words or unnecessary transitions such as “um,” “uh,” “ok,” “you know,” or “I mean.”

Listening to a recording of a practice speech or the actual presentation will help you identify and work to avoid distracting non-words or annoying transitions. Slowing your speech down also helps you avoid this pitfall.

DRESS APPROPRIATELY

Dress at least as formally as your audience. Even if your audience is dressed very casually, you need to project a professional image so always wear nice slacks, a shirt with a collar, and a blazer.

MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT

Effective speakers use eye contact to create a connection with their audience. Hold eye contact with a specific member of the board or audience for three to six seconds before moving to a new person. Using eye contact, move around and throughout the audience. You may wish to pick a few people in the audience to make eye contact and speak to.

PAUSE FOR EMPHASIS

After you make a key point, pause for a moment to emphasize its importance. Also consider pausing after you complete a section of your presentation so the audience can catch up.

PREPARE FOR TOUGH QUESTIONS

In your preparation, you certainly want to anticipate any concerns of different stakeholder groups. You can incorporate into your report any ways of minimizing or addressing significant concerns. In advance of the presentation, you (and other staff team members) should identify what tough questions may be asked at the end of your report and prepare some bullet-point responses so you are not caught off guard.

In preparing for different questions or even angry responses, you must do your best to acknowledge the concern and concisely present any data or response even if it does not fully mitigate the concern.

USE (NOT MISUSE) POWERPOINT

If you use decide to use PowerPoint or KeyNote, here are a few simple rules:

- Use photos or other visuals wherever possible depicting the point you are trying to make
- Minimize the verbiage per slide
- Use no more than 3 bullets per slide
- Minimize the number of slides to only those that best capture key messages and data
- Do not read off the slides.

For a more informal presentation, you may wish to simply write down up to three key messages or recommendations on an easel pad of paper or white board or provide a few talking points in a handout.

Again, less is more.

4. Debriefing the Presentation

With your manager, colleagues or an informal coach, debrief the presentation a day after your experience. Ask yourself and others:

- What went well?
- What did not go so well?
- How do I improve my presentation the next time?

To the extent you debrief with your staff team, they learn along with you.

5. Improving Your Skills Over Time

We can all enhance our presentation skills. Consider . . .

- Joining a Toastmasters group in your community (or form one at work involving other emerging leaders). This is my No. 1 recommendation.
- Trying out simple presentations in “safe” environments, such as a staff meeting.
- Experimenting with some interactive elements in your presentations.
- Getting an informal coach to assist you in developing and delivering presentations.
- Critiquing and borrowing techniques from pro’s. For instance, go to professional conferences and assess the approaches used by seasoned speakers or watch TED.com videos for tips.
- Reading a book or participating in a webinar focused on storytelling.

6. Presentation Skills are Leadership Skills

Remember that leaders cannot force people (other staff, professional colleagues, community members, governing board members) to follow. Followers can decide not to follow.

Therefore, your ability to present your ideas and thus influence others is a critical leadership skill, especially as you advance.

7. Becoming World-class

The more you give presentations in all kinds of settings, the better you will become. As Malcolm Gladwell suggests in *Outliers*, someone develops world-class expertise or skills as they approach 10,000 hours of experimenting, learning and practicing. As a long-time city manager and now in encore career as a consultant and trainer, I am well on my way. How about you?



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.