

Presentation and communication skills

Lecture 5 - Talk tools

Matej Lorko

matej.lorko@euba.sk

www.lorko.sk/lectures

Office hours (Room 5C.30)

Monday 15:15 – 16:00

Wednesday 12:30 – 13:15

Literature:

- Gallo, C. (2014). Talk like TED: the 9 public-speaking secrets of the world's top minds. St. Martin's Press.
- Anderson, C. (2016). TED talks: The official TED guide to public speaking. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Connection - Get personal

- Knowledge can't be pushed into a brain. It has to be pulled in.
- Before you can build an idea in someone else's mind, you need their permission. People are naturally cautious about opening up their minds—the most precious thing they own—to complete strangers.
- You need to find a way to overcome that caution. And the way you do that is to make visible the human being cowering inside you.
- Hearing a talk is a completely different thing from reading an essay. It's not just the words. It's the person delivering the words. To make an impact, there has to be a human connection.
- You can give the most brilliant talk, with crystal-clear explanations and laser-sharp logic, but if you don't first connect with the audience, it just won't land. Even if the content is, at some level, understood, it won't be activated but simply filed away in some soon-to-be-forgotten mental archive.
- Your very first job as a speaker is to find a way to build a trusting human bond with the audience so that they're willing—delighted, even—to offer you full access to their minds for a few minutes.

Make eye contact, right from the start

- Humans are good at forming instant judgments about other humans. Friend or foe. Likable or unlikable. Wise or dull. Confident or tentative. The clues we use to make these sweeping judgments are often shockingly light. The way someone dresses. How they walk, or stand. Their facial expression. Their body language. Their attentiveness.
- Great speakers find a way of making an early connection with their audience. It can be as simple as walking confidently on stage, looking around, making eye contact with two or three people, and smiling.
- Scientists have shown that just the act of two people staring at each other will trigger mirror neuron activity that literally adopts the emotional state of the other person.
- If I'm beaming, I will make you smile inside. Just a bit. But a meaningful bit. If I'm nervous, you'll feel a little anxious too. We look at each other, and our minds sync.

Show vulnerability

- One of the best ways to disarm an audience is to first reveal your own vulnerability. It's the equivalent of the tough cowboy walking into a saloon and holding his coat wide open to reveal no weapons. Everyone relaxes.
- By the same logic, if you're feeling nervous, it can actually work in your favor. Audiences sense it instantly and—far from despising you as you may fear, the opposite happens—they begin rooting for you.
- Willing to be vulnerable is one of the most powerful tools a speaker can wield. But as with anything powerful, it should be handled with care. You should not share parts of yourself that you haven't yet worked through. “Authentic vulnerability is powerful. Oversharing is not.

Make them laugh

- Concentrating on a talk can be hard work, and humor is a wonderful way to bring the audience with you. Evolutionary purpose of laughter is to create social bonding. When you laugh with someone, you both feel you're on the same side. It's a fantastic tool for building a connection.
- Audiences who laugh with you quickly come to like you. And if people like you, they're much readier to take seriously what you have to say. Laughter blows open someone's defenses, and suddenly you have a chance to truly communicate with them.
- However, be cautious. Humor is a skilled art, and not everyone can do it. Ineffective humor is worse than no humor at all.
- If you plan to do a lot of public speaking, it's really worth trying to find your own brand of humor that works. And if not, don't panic. It's not for everyone. There are plenty of other ways to connect.”

Park your ego

- Would you want to trust your mind to someone who was completely full of himself? Nothing damages the prospects of a talk more than the sense that the speaker is a blowhard.
- Even if you truly are a genius, a drop-dead-gorgeous athlete, and a fearless leader, it's best to let your audience figure that out for themselves.
- Be yourself. The worst talks are the ones where someone is trying to be someone they aren't. If you are generally goofy, then be goofy. If you are emotional, then be emotional. The one exception to that is if you are arrogant and self-centered. Then you should definitely pretend to be someone else.
- Ego emerges in lots of ways that may be truly invisible to a speaker who's used to being the center of attention:
 - Name-dropping
 - Stories that seem designed only to show off
 - Boasting about your or your company's achievements
 - Making the talk all about you rather than an idea others can use.

Tell a story

- We're born to love stories. They are instant generators of interest, empathy, emotion, and intrigue. They can brilliantly establish the context of a talk and make people care about a topic.
- The stories that can generate the best connection are stories about you personally or about people close to you. Tales of failure, awkwardness, misfortune, danger, or disaster, told authentically, are often the moment when listeners shift from plain vanilla interest to deep engagement. They have started to share some of your emotions. They have started to care about you. They have started to like you
- But be careful. Some stories can come over as boastful or emotionally manipulative. The guideline here is just to be authentic. Is that the real you telling this story?
- A good test is to imagine whether you would tell this story to a group of old friends. And if so, how. Friends are good detectors of the inauthentic. And so are audiences. Be real, and you won't go too far wrong.

Narration

- Many of the best talks are anchored in storytelling. Unlike challenging explanations or complex arguments, everyone can relate to stories. They typically have a simple linear structure that makes them easy to follow. You just let the speaker take you on a journey, one step at a time.
- A natural part of listening to stories is that you empathize with the experiences of the characters. You find yourself immersed in their thoughts and emotions. In fact, you physically feel what they feel; if they're stressed or excited or exhilarated, so are you.
- What are the elements of a great story? The classic formula is: A protagonist with goals meets an unexpected obstacle and a crisis results. The protagonist attempts to overcome the obstacle, leading to a climax, and finally a denouement.
- When it comes to sharing a story from the stage, remember to emphasize four key things:
 - Base it on a character your audience can empathize with.
 - Build tension, whether through curiosity, social intrigue, or actual danger.
 - Offer the right level of detail. Too little and the story is not vivid. Too much and it gets bogged down.
 - End with a satisfying resolution, whether funny, moving, or revealing.

Narration

- There's one other nonnegotiable essential if you're to tell your own story. It has to be true. This may seem obvious, but, alas, speakers are sometimes tempted to exaggerate or even fabricate.
- When you combine a truthful story with a desire to use it for others' benefit, you can give your listeners an extraordinary gift.
- Stories resonate deeply in every human. By giving your talk as a story or a series of related stories, you can greatly increase your connection with your listeners. But, please: let it mean something.

Explanation

- If the core of your talk is explaining a powerful new idea, it is helpful to ask: What do you assume your audience already knows? What will be your connecting theme? What are the concepts necessary to build your explanation? And what metaphors and examples will you use to reveal those concepts?
- Unfortunately, this isn't that easy. We all suffer from a cognitive bias for which economist Robin Hogarth coined the term "the curse of knowledge." In a nutshell, we find it hard to remember what it feels like not to know something that we ourselves know well.
- Overcoming the curse of knowledge may be the single most important requirement in becoming a clear writer. If it's true about writing, when readers have a chance to pause and reread a sentence several times before continuing, then it's even more true about speaking.
- You have to expose your drafts to friends or colleagues and beg for ruthless feedback on anything they don't understand. The same is true for talks, and especially those talks that seek to explain something complex. First share a draft script with colleagues and friends. Then try it out in front of a private audience. And specifically ask the questions, Did that make sense? Was anything confusing?

Making things clear

- A speaker has to be sure that listeners know how each sentence relates logically to the preceding one, whether the relationship is similarity, contrast, elaboration, exemplification, generalization, before-and-after, cause, effect, or violated expectation.
- What this means is that some of the most important elements in a talk are the little phrases that give clues to the talk's overall structure: "Although . . ." "One recent example . . ." "On the other hand . . ." "Let's build on that . . ." "Playing devil's advocate for a moment . . ." "I must just tell you two stories that amplify this finding." "As an aside . . ." "At this point you may object that . . ." "So, in summary . . ."
- Equally important is the precise sequencing of sentences and concepts so that understanding can build naturally.
- It's especially important to do a jargon check. Any technical terms or acronyms that may be unfamiliar to your listeners should be eliminated or explained.

Persuasion

- If explanation is building a brand-new idea inside someone's mind, persuasion is a little more radical. Before construction, it first requires some demolition.
- Persuasion means convincing an audience that the way they currently see the world isn't quite right. And that means taking down the parts that aren't working, as well as rebuilding something better.
- The key to prompting that worldview shift is to take the journey one step at a time, priming our minds in several different ways before getting to the main argument.
- For the process to work, it must be broken down into small steps, each of which must be totally convincing. The starting point of each step is something the audience can clearly see to be true, or it's something that was shown to be true earlier in the talk. So the core mechanism here is if-then: if X is true, dear friends, then, clearly, Y follows (because every X implies a Y).

Cool stuff to watch

- Ron Gutman - The hidden power of smiling: https://www.ted.com/talks/ron_gutman_the_hidden_power_of_smiling
- Rory Sutherland - Life lessons from an ad man: https://www.ted.com/talks/rory_sutherland_life_lessons_from_an_ad_man
- Will Stephen - How to sound smart in your TEDx Talk: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8S0FDjFBj8o>

Questions?

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