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Tom Peters'

## Presentation Excellence\*

The Goal Is NOT to Give a Great Presentation.

The Goal IS to Connect.

*“The problem with communication  
... is the ILLUSION that it has been  
accomplished.”* —George Bernard Shaw

19 March 2013

\*And a little bit more

## Presentation Excellence

***“The problem with communication ... is the ILLUSION that it has been accomplished.”—George Bernard Shaw***

I’ve given a tankload of speeches—about 3,000. I suppose I’ve learned a little bit along the way. But what follows is both limited and idiosyncratic. *The New York Times*’ great reporter-editorialist Johnny Apple wrote a book titled *Johnny Apple’s Europe*. It was a tour guide that wasn’t a tour guide. That is, it was simply and solely about places he loved in Europe; hence, unabashedly idiosyncratic and not comprehensive in any way, shape or form. This essay is of the same character. It’s about how *I* give a speech, period. And, moreover, how I give a public speech. Though I think a fair share of it’s universal, the discussion is a long way from “How to give a pitch to a Board of Directors,” or some such. So, then, the message is: Take it for what it’s worth, please, no more and perhaps no less.

I’ll begin by giving away my one-and-only “secret,” followed by my other one-and-only “secret,” then that idiosyncratic list of thoughts—139 to be exact.\*

### **The One Big Secret: Presentation As Intimate Conversation**

***An effective speech to 5,000 people is an intimate, 1-on-1 conversation!***

***Keep that in mind.***

***It’s the “BIG secret”—and I, at least, have never seen it revealed in a book giving advice on excellent presentations.***

So imagine ...

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\*What do we really do? Talk. Listen. This essay is about: Talk. (Presenting.) Listen. (Interviewing/Questioning.) While presenting is the principal subject, I have also included a rather extensive **APPENDIX** on Listening/Interviewing/Questioning.

My prep is done.

Including a more or less 36-hour final sprint in which I have probably put together at least 1,000 (literally!) combinations of PowerPoint slides—as I try to home in on the 90 in the right combination that will best work for the 90-minute speech I’ll soon give to 1,500 hardware store retailers in Atlanta. How do I get it “right”? Dumb question. I don’t. Never have. Not even close. (Maybe some day.) I’m simply pawing through my kit of 5,000 slides and trying out various combinations—and an approximation of the accompanying words—and imagining how they’ll add up to the two or three or five messages\* I’m hoping to imprint in a small share\*\* of the minds I’ll confront. I—and this is key—project myself into the room and feel what it’ll be like to work with (carefully chosen words—“work with”—which is what I do) this group of temporary colleagues—we’re in this together—tomorrow.

(\*As to the “messages,” I’ve obviously got my own shtick, 40 years in the making, for that matter—but when I talk a couple of months ahead of time to the customer organization’s big cheese, I always ask the same thing: *“In my perfect world, the day after my speech you’ll be patting yourselves on the back for inviting me because I delivered the exact right message/messages to your group at this moment. Please be as precise as you can: What will those appropriate messages have been that will have delighted you? That is, give me a retrospective perspective on what a terrific speech would have been.”* I add their dream speech outcome to the topics in my kit bag and fiddle around and around trying to come up with something appropriate.)

(\*\**“Small share.” Look, I’m not going to convince 1,000 middle-aged, pretty well off independent store owners—the rest are spouses, product vendors, etc.—to turn their lives upside down to deal with Home Depot, the Internet, Walmart, the latter intruding more on their collective turf every day. But I hope to give 20, or even 40, or, Wow, 75, a nudge. That best case, 75, by the way, were already convinced of the need for significant change before they went into the conference room. That is, I preach to the choir, not the heathens; I give the already “converted” a push at perhaps the right moment. As for the rest, I audaciously/arrogantly hope something might connect—and that they’ll try a thing or two new when they get home.*)

So, let’s jump into the room, following my introduction tomorrow morning. I thank the group for their invitation and the precious gift of 90 minutes of their life that they’re giving me by being there. I thank the introducer and make it clear that I can’t even recognize myself from the inflated words in his introduction. (I’m working like hell to diminish expectations—we’ll do some “stuff,” maybe useful “stuff,” but mountains will not be moved. Except—maybe—for that very “small share.”)

And now ...

So I'm looking directly and unmistakably at this **one\*** guy ...

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***\*An effective speech to 1,000 people is  
1,000 intimate, 1-on-1 conversations!***

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About 50, I'd guess. Call him a friendly "Mr. Median/mode." I've asked the sponsor about the "median/modal attendee"—I always do. (Not interested much in "the big boys"—but what, exactly as possible, is the profile of an average, middle-of-the-distribution, person/attendee?) So I've homed in. During my little intro, I've seen a smile on his face, maybe a nod or two. Big deal. (*It is the BIGGEST of deals. Believe me!*)

FYI 1: "Guy." As many readers know, I've spent much of the last 20 years championing women's issues. Yet throughout this paper I'll mostly use "guy." Why? I mostly talk about a conversation with "this guy." And, in the best sense, I often insult him—i.e., tease him about shortcomings we both share. Well, I'm willing to insult guys, but not so much women. "Whoa," say many women—"we can take it." Indeed you can! But, it's not clear (or, rather, it is clear) that many audience members don't like the old guy (me) to gratuitously pick fights with women. So, for better or for worse, I'll mostly use "guy." Sorry for the offense, if it's seen as such.

FYI 2: The intro always includes: "I promise you, ironclad promise, that in the next 90 minutes [speech duration] I won't tell you a single thing you don't know. Not only no 'rocket science,' but nothin' new. 'Secrets,' c'mon, let's grow up; we're all old enough to know there ain't no secrets. My best day came years ago. A two-day seminar for the Young Presidents Organization. At the end, getting feedback, one guy gets up, he happens to be Burger King's biggest, I think, franchisee—from South Florida. (*He's a retailer, though the YPO group was all over the map—I want the current audience to know I know they're retailers.*) He rattles me when he starts, "I didn't learn one damn thing new in two days." Whoops! Then, "However, it was, I think, the best seminar I've

attended in the last 20 years. I'd call it a ***'blinding flash of the obvious.'*** You reminded us of all the basics we damn well know work—but which get lost in the heat of the battle." (I subsequently used Manny's "blinding flash of

the obvious” as a book chapter title; and got to know him quite well.) Anyway, with that and a few suck-ups to the industry—I believe in sucking up!—I’m launched. Hey, I’m gonna raise hell for 90 minutes. *But I want them first to clearly and unmistakably understand my deep respect for them as individuals and my deep respect for the industry problems they face.* (Every industry does circa 2013.)

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So by now I’ve picked out my soulmates, two or three individuals—based 90% on their receptive body language. I made ’em smile a bit—it’s easy to judge openness, or the lack thereof. (And “openness” is imperative **!!**)

Time to walk off the stage and into the audience of, recall, 1,500. (*The show director has been fully informed of my planned pattern—and we’ve worked out the precise process, lighting, movement, camera angles.*) I walk up to the first soulmate (to be crude, “mark”) and start my serious (key points) riff. He, Modal Man, more or less, I figure, owns one or two or three hardware stores; has total revenue of a few million a year. Wouldn’t be here if he hadn’t had some success—the troubled ones are overwhelmingly no-shows. Probably has a couple of million bucks in the bank. And, oh, his wife (most likely—statistically) is sitting next to him—great. (Later I’m going to talk about some issues concerning marketing to women and having women on his exec team. I’ll use the spouse

as a foil to rough him up a bit—with a **HUGE SMILE** on my face. He can take it by then, because I will have been so personal—to him—during the speech. In the first 45 minutes, I’ll probably have come back to him two or three times—and by visit three, I’ll most likely put my hand on his shoulder—remember, I picked him for his perceived receptiveness/collegiality.) Got it: **ONE-on-ONE.**

Okay, I'm starting the substance with my "personal" conversation with him. (CRUCIAL POINT. As I've done my prep, weeks ago and during the last hyper-intense last 36 hours, I have psychologically put myself *inside a/de facto his* hardware store. As a customer or employee or back office person. So when I'm talking to the guy, we're effectively in his store, probably on the sales floor. **WE ARE IN THE/HIS STORE. THAT IS ALWAYS FRONT-OF-MIND FOR ME!** I am the picture of intimacy and empathy.)

*I'm a storyteller.  
Period.*

Speeches are more or less "just" a string of stories. And, in 8 of 10 cases, a certain kind of story—a vignette. Maybe about "recognition"—a high falutin' word for saying, as you walk the retail floor, "*Thanks [Mary or Jerome, clerks, say, or re-stockers] for the great attitude you brought to work today.*" (BOY OH BOY OH BOY IS THAT ATTITUDE POWERFUL—and, of course, "obvious.") So he and I—or some other "he" or "she" I've ID-d by now—will chat about the fact that our mothers both taught us this and we know it's VITAL, loyalty-inducing, profit-making (pragmatics!) importance, but with all the crap going down, as it does 9 of 10 days, we inadvertently carry a frown on the floor and don't "waste time" on those little "Thank yous." We know we're dumb-ass idiots for not doing so—the "mark" and I laugh at ourselves. (*I always make myself the butt of every criticism that I'll also direct to him/the audience. I'll recall a screw-up I made courtesy one of those "obvious" "little" things ... that cost me big time.*)

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***I'm a storyteller. Period.***

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(Critical aside ... **NO JOKES. EVER.** We each, each of the seven billion of us, has a unique sense of humor—and every joke in this individuated context misses the mark for some. *I do not want to alienate one single solitary person in an audience of 1,500, or 15. Alienation is contagious!! And disastrous.* Humor, absolutely, very carefully applied, but no jokes—and this holds **X1,000** outside, in my case, home/the USA. Humor absolutely positively unequivocally does not travel across national borders—and to a large degree regional borders.)

So I'm using this little vignette. But I'm doing something else—the PowerPoint bit. (Yeah, I know all about the "death by PowerPoint.") I avoid charts and graphs like the plague!!! So I'm talking, say, about acknowledgement. And my PP slide will invariably have a quote or two or three or four—all HUGE, colorful lettering. The quote will come from somebody well known to 99% of the audience—e.g., Walmart founder Sam Walton.

It'll reinforce my point. (*I assume I personally have ZERO credibility except as a mouthpiece—I “channel” the likes of Mr. Sam. He was a supercalifragilisticexpialidocious business success. Forget me, I don't count. SAM is telling you, not me!!!!*) Also, no small thing, my slides will never have conclusions on them—e.g., “RECOGNITION ROCKS.” The conclusions will naturally emerge! And I'll talk about 'em—but the heavy lifting will be done by Mr. Sam, et al. My view is de facto irrelevant—Sam Walton and Les Wexner/Limited and Stanley Marcus/Neiman Marcus are hittin' the audience—I'm, remember, just channeling them. Of, say, three quotes, at least one will come from somebody in the audience's industry. Larry Page (Google) is great, but he has jack shit to do with running my friend's hardware store. So we can use Larry, but Sam leads—or some other retailer. They've got to see me as “getting” retail. Remember, we've got to ... BE IN THAT STORE TOGETHER.

(FYI: FLATTERY certainly will get you everywhere. I call it the “flatter then batter” strategy. You gush about their/my soulmate's success against all odds. You look at the guy, and you don't lie, but you say, “I don't know your situation, but Home Depot and Lowe's are still alive and very well—AND SO ARE YOU! Just like me—a gazillion new “gurus” out there—and I'm still afloat. *Then* you go on to say, “But what if we went even farther ...” And: “What idiots *we* are to overlook ...”)

(When I push my new bosom buddy, my standard will be soooooo high (Mr. Sam), that, again, we'll laugh. I'll refer to the late George Whalin's *Retail Superstars: Inside the 25 Best Independent Stores in America*. Why: There's a local hardware store, Hartsville Hardware, a national magnet independent in the town of Hartsville, Ohio, population 2,500. And, helped by very simple slides, we'll look at a few of George's other unlikely independent winners: Jungle Jim's International Market, Fairfield, Ohio: “An adventure in ‘*shoppertainment*,’ [memorable, if jargony, term—in outrageously large, bang-in-the-face typeface] as Jungle Jim's calls itself, which begins in the parking lot and goes on to 1,600 cheeses and, yes, 1,400 varieties of hot sauce—not to mention 12,000 wines priced from \$8 to \$8,000 a bottle; all this is brought to you by 4,000 vendors. Customers come from every corner of the globe.” Bronner's Christmas Wonderland, Frankenmuth,

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## *Flatter, then batter.*

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Michigan, pop 5,000: 98,000-square-foot “shop” features the likes of “6,000 Christmas ornaments, 50,000 trims, and anything else you can name if it pertains to Christmas.” I'm going to shake my head and note that we don't all have the advantage of being in a town of 2,500 [laughter, usually], but we can feel free to let our imaginations rip. Once again, I'll have sidled up to somebody or two as I talk about the stores. There'll be a few details on the slide—that I'll barely refer to. Remember: **IT IS NOT ME TELLING**



**HIM/HER ABOUT WOW.** It's his/her de facto peers—the magicians of Frankenmuth. *The speaker/me, again, is channeling excellence/WOW ... not pontificating.*

(Another note on PowerPoint: I refer to Whalin's web site, where there are video tours of these hard-to-fathom-amazing-independent stores. You might say that, to "spice up" my presentation, I surely ought to use a 2-minute clip of Bronner's or Jungle Jim's. NO!!! Yes, it'd be supportive, but ... IT WOULD TOTALLY F#@\*-UP MY FLOW. REMEMBER, WE ARE HAVING AN INTIMATE 1-ON-1 CONVERSATION, AND I'VE CREATED A "FEELING OF INTIMACY" IN THE ROOM. Don't mess with it; they can look at the video on their own time, not mine. Again, I'll make one of my mega-points, but ... AGAIN ... I'll let some respected source do the heavy lifting, not me! To conclude this "main message," I'll have a bright, high-contrast slide with a Whalin quote: "*Be the best, it's the only market that's not crowded.*" I'll say, "You know, I've been around awhile, but there are things that are old-but-new that knock my socks off—like this quote. WOW!")

(More on "flatter then batter." I invariably dwell on MBWA, picked up in 1977 at Hewlett Packard. I want to make it stick—the "power of being in touch." I'll give background on how I learned about it, then featured it in *In Search of Excellence*, then use as many as 4 or 5 stories. WHOOPS, NOT "STORIES," BUT "VIGNETTES." None absorbs more than, say, 30-45 seconds. Now, and only now, I can ... BEAT THEM UP ... about not doing enough MBWA, but I damn well don't. Again, flatter then batter. Like this: "Okay you oughta do more MBWA—me too, I run a little company. So **we**'re stupid?! NO **WE** ARE NOT. **We**'re doin' exactly what we're s'pose to be doin'. You declare, 'This is MBWA week'—but as usual there's a problem on our [always "**OUR**," not "your"] desk by 8:02AM Monday. **We**'re supposed to deal with it—and **we** do. Takes half the morning. And on it goes 'til Friday at 6:42PM. Whoops, doin' what **we**'re supposed to be doin', and no MBWA ... again. So how do **we** break out? ..." I've beaten the heck out of 'em—you oughta hear me!—but told 'em they're good guys doing the right thing but it keeps us from doing the truly right thing—"the way Starbucks founder Howard Schultz religiously makes 25+ shop visits a ... WEEK.")

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***"We"/"Us" ... not "You"/"Your."***

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You get my point/structure, presumably:

1. *Pick a guy to, in effect, chat with.*
2. *Make a friend of him.*
3. *Shower him and his colleagues with little, punchy/clear-as-a-bell vignettes.*
4. *Let the BIG point ... emerge like magic.*
5. *The guy/they are buttered up, not made goats—we laugh together at our foibles.*
6. *Close soft, with a bit of doable “stuff you might consider fiddlin’ with.”*

(“Things you might consider fiddlin’ with.” NOT “TAKEAWAYS.” I hate terms like that. Makes ’em feel like they’re students at a seminar or back in 4<sup>th</sup> grade! No! I instead call it, “Here’s some ... STUFF.” “Stuff,” not “takeaways.” Remember, always remember ... not a “speech,” a “CONVERSATION” ... 1-on-1.)

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## ***“Stuff,” not “Takeaways.”***

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So on the time goes. A few trips back to the stage. But most of the time in the aisles—stopping and making eye contact—one at a time. And mini-conversations with the three or four people I’ve picked out for that special focus. Incidentally, minimum time with the front row. The “big dudes” *are* there—but I don’t really care much about them. And cruising the front row smacks of sucking-up-to-power. I want “eyes on that median/modal guy,” and I want to be seen as talking to one or two or three of the “real people.”

So, back to the BIG BIG point. 90 minutes. And, in effect, a one-on-one conversation—1,500 folks, one-at-a-time. *If I’m talking to one-guy-at-a-time with good body language on both of our parts, I’m talking to 1,500 people. If I’m talking to everyone, from behind a podium, I’m talking to no one.* This damn thing has got to feel like it’s been up close and personal—or it’s utterly useless. (Believe it or not, you can pull the same thing off in a 30-minute talk, though not, in my opinion, nearly as well.)

Oh, one more thing. And this takes a pretty good memory and tap-dancing skills. There are perhaps a half-dozen or 10 of those key (“teaching point”) vignettes. As you move through the entire 90 minutes, you need to keep reminding the audience of the earlier story/stories of particular note. You want to make three or four of those stories/vignettes stick like Velcro.

Remember: Conversation!  
(“The BIG secret”)

*If I'm talking to one-guy-at-a-time with good body language on both of our parts, I'm getting through to all 1,500 people. If I'm talking to "everyone," from behind a podium, I'm getting to no one!*

## **The (Other) One BIG Secret: It's *Not* About You. Speaker-as-Neutral-Medium**

Consider this rant I launch on the topic of truly “putting people first,” one of my pet topics:

“Look, I’m not gonna tell you how to run your business. You’re running it—and I’m not. Yours are relatively big, and a few are enormous, mine is pretty darn small. But I am going to push hard on this ‘people first’ stuff. Well, not true. I am not going to push you at all. But conqueror-of-many-worlds Richard Branson damn well is. Listen to him *‘Business has to give people enriching, rewarding lives ... or it's simply not worth doing.’* And Southwest’s miracle worker Herb Kelleher damn well also is gonna give us what for; here’s what he claimed was his ‘number one’ key to success: *‘You have to treat your employees like customers.’* Matthew Kelly dittos Kelleher, reporting on one of the most extraordinary companies in the sanitation industry; they applied the Southwest principals in the world of humble cleaning services and reap enormous profits: *‘When a company forgets that it exists to serve customers, it quickly goes out of business. Our employees are our first customers, and our most important customers.’* Salon/spa chain superstar John DiJulius adds another kick in the butt: *‘When I hire someone, that’s when I go to work for them.’* And another shove comes courtesy Ari Weinzweig, founder of the matchless deli, Zingerman’s, featured in the book *Small Giants: Companies that Choose to Be Great Instead of Big*: *‘If you want staff to give great service, give great service to staff.’* HCL (the stellar Indian software giant) CEO Vineet Nayar will hound you for 400 pages, an entire book, he titled: *Employees First, Customers Second: Turning Conventional Management Upside Down*. Another nonsense full book-length treatment on the topic arrives on the scene from my friend Hal Rosenbluth, who built his little family travel services firm into giant Rosenbluth International, which American Express paid billions to acquire: *The Customer Comes Second: Put Your*

***People First and Watch 'Em Kick Butt.*** Or ... one more ... director Robert Altman, upon receiving his lifetime achievement Oscar: ***'The role of the Director is to create a space where the actors and actresses can become more than they've ever been before, more than they've dreamed of being.'*** I could go on ... and on ... and on. I, personally, have got nothing to say to you. But these guys, successfully tested for decades in the toughest industries imaginable, are shouting at you/us, twisting our arms. [Twisting my arm, force-feeding words into my mouth—and twisting the arms of the participants.] I'm the Big Folks' [Rosenbluth, Nyar, Altman, et al.] humble stand in and servant here at the Community Bankers meeting [or whatever]. Don't listen to me. But ignore them at your peril!"

I am just the medium, the reader. I claim no expertise other than carrier of the archeological tools I used to unearth these folks and de facto bring them here, today, into this auditorium. And I will go through a core-dump like this in 90 seconds. I will flash through slide after slide after slide—5, maybe 10, or even more. Hammering in the holy names of Mssrs. Branson, Kelleher, et al. The same unequivocal message, delivered in staccato fashion. The print on the slides will be Big and Bold. Branson, et al. will be in the room with us, larger than life—it's my job, as medium, remember, to make it feel as if those guys are here among us.

After pounding the message in from these peerless practitioners, I'll probably step back for 2 or 3 minutes and develop one of the cases more fully—e.g., Kelleher and Southwest Airlines. Then, finally, I'll (I-the-medium!) usually try to ice the case by inviting a few academics to join us in the hall and deliver the coup de grace. A handful of slides will summarize the dramatic/hard-edged/unequivocal research conclusions of several high reputation scholars—a Nobel Prize winner or two doesn't hurt.

Sure, I add my own views and label them as such. I will not deny it. However, in the main, I will rely on others to carry the day.

This is huge.  
No way to overstate.

Speaker-as-medium, not trying to push her or his point of view, but push the Gospel of the Superstars the speaker has invited to join her or him on stage.

It's a trick.  
It's the truth.  
It works.

*I am just the compliant medium, the benign reader. I claim no expertise other than carrier of the archeological tools I used to unearth these superstars and de facto bring them here, today, into this auditorium, to raise hell with you and me as, almost parroting one another, they share their independently arrived at top success secret—some of them, like Kelleher, even say “singular success secret.”*

# Summary:

## Our BIG Two\*

**(1) A CONVERSATION ...  
not a “speech.”**

**(2) Speaker-as-MEDIUM,  
not trying to push her or  
his point of view but that of  
the superstars the speaker  
has de facto invited to join  
her or him on stage.**

\*For me, there's also a Big #3 ... which, of course, I never emphasize. Namely: *Choose your mother with great care*. My mom was a superb communicator—and an armwaver, which I also became. Her principal performance arena was a 5<sup>th</sup>-grade classroom. Oh, how she could make it come alive! Fifty years later, her former students remembered. I made this point at a Toastmasters event—greatly annoying their upper tier. But, hey, whatever; there's at least a bit of truth here—not that it'll do you a damn bit of good. (My mom, Evelyn Peters, was fondly known by my friends as “The Evelyn”—that should tell you all you need to know.)

## Presentation Excellence: 139 Considerations

*“The only reason to give a speech is to change the world.”—JFK*

*“In classical times when Cicero had finished speaking, the people said, ‘How well he spoke,’ but when Demosthenes had finished speaking, they said, ‘Let us march.’”  
—Adlai Stevenson*

The BIG Two are of the utmost importance. But obviously there’s more. And, to be sure, far more than what follows. And, once again, this is unabashedly idiosyncratic. I hardly imagine it works for one and all in any and all settings. It’s just some ... stuff. And I’d arrogantly imagine a couple of items among the 123 presented here may be of use.

1. **Total commitment to the Problem/Project/Outcome.** As JFK told us, above, keep your mouth shut unless you commit yourself 100% to moving a mountain—or at least a hillock. Reason #1: Why bother to go through this hell unless “it” matters to you—a lot! Reason #2: ***If you are not committed, somehow or other it will show through like a spotlight as you present. People can smell passion and commitment and energy and determination—or the absence thereof.*** (A big part of the importance of this, in, say, the context of a business presentation, is that followers or evaluators want to measure the degree you’ll persist in pursuit of this goal; in fact that may well be the #1 consideration on their minds—they know you’re clever as all get out, but are you up to “do or die”?)

2. **I don’t want to be here. I have to be here.** Well, that’s not true—except in a way it is. The peerless leadership guru Warren Bennis made an extraordinary assertion. *He said leaders have no particular desire to be leaders. Instead, there is something they must get done. And to get it done, they must put on the leader’s mantle.* You could say the same thing about speechgiving—or you ought to be able to. I haven’t traveled my 5,000,000 miles or so to give speeches. I’ve traveled those miles to have the opportunity to present a set of ideas I care deeply about; and, at 70, I’m still traveling. (I assure you the thrill of air travel has long faded.) Change the world? That’s a bit grandiose. But, try to make a wee difference? That’s my story—and, within reason, I judge that it will be the case for any long-term successful speechgiver.

3. **Know what the hell you’re doing unless you specifically make it clear that you are merely providing early conjectures.** JFK tells us not to open our mouths unless we aim to change the world. I’d add, perhaps unnecessarily, don’t open your mouth until you know what the hell you’re talking about. You’ve got to be clear, albeit indirect, that you’ve worked your ass off on this topic—and would not ask the audience to waste their



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*“In classical times when Cicero had finished speaking, the people said, ‘How well he spoke,’ but when Demosthenes had finished speaking, they said, ‘Let us march.’”* —Adlai Stevenson

time until (that is, now!) you had a rock-solid case to examine. (Sometimes, the introducer can carry your water. Try to advise the introducer, who is by definition your ally, to tailor the introduction to support your longtime association with and labors on the topic under consideration.)

4. **Work your ass off.** No brainer, right. No! I mean ... really really really work your ass off! *It's said that Churchill spent an hour on every minute of a speech.* That's chickenfeed compared to Steve Jobs. You want to be Steve Jobs? There are a thousand variables in the Story-of-Steve. But presentation excellence was right up there in the stratosphere when it came to making a difference ... and changing the world. Believe it! (Sorry for the crude language. I needed to catch your attention.)

5. **This is important!** What do bosses/leaders do? Talk. Listen. It's almost that simple. Except neither is in any way, shape or form "simple." How much formal training have you, a boss for 10 years, age 34, had specifically in talking and listening? Relative to the latter, listening, which I have elsewhere called "Sustainable Strategic Skill #1," the odds

are high that the answer is ... **ZERO.** As to talking/speaking/presenting, if you worked as I did for an organization like McKinsey & Co., you were subjected to more supervised presentation practice than in most places—but even there it didn't add up to genuine training of the sort required to develop a quarterback or violinist. As an engineer with a graduate degree in construction management (a full-blown "people business"), I

received ... **NOT ONE IOTA OF SUCH TRAINING IN SIX YEARS.**

As a civil engineer, I certainly didn't "wing it" when it came to structural stress and strain. But the amount of time one does that in one's career, if at all successful, is minimal—then, for the rest of my professional career, I'll live or die professionally courtesy of my skills at talking and listening. (The good news of a sort is that if you formally develop these skills you will have a monumental advantage over 95% of your peers—or elders, for that matter.) (One renowned guru of hospital patient safety said that Johns Hopkins doc Peter Pronovost had saved more lives than perhaps any of his peers; this courtesy the development of hospital checklists. However, to make the "simple" checklist work invariably calls for altering the hospital's "culture." Thus Pronovost's success depended on his skill as a psychologist far more than it depended on his medical training—i.e., his skill at listening and talking. Pronovost at one point reflected on this, "When I was in medical school, I spent hundreds of hours looking into a microscope—a skill I never needed to know or ever use. Yet I didn't have a single class that taught me communication or teamwork skills—something I need every day I walk into the hospital." Pronovost's story is the story of this piece, at least indirectly: the outrageous lack of training in the skills that underpin success at implementation of ... anything.)

6. **You must become a serious and formal student of talking and listening. Yes, the likes of talking and listening can be studied and practiced with the same thoroughness with which I studied the mathematics that was the bedrock of my engineering training.** There's no more need to be casual about developing these skills than there is concerning mastering the job of electrician or engineer. Of course, I'm not being honest to an enormous degree; that is there are a dearth of formal training centers or the like compared to the training opportunities available to that electrician or engineer. Yet it can be done—and as I said immediately above, the benefits of undertaking professional study in the arts of talking and listening is monumental.

7. **Give as many speeches as you can—of all shapes and sizes.** “Hey, Tom, how did you get where you are with your presentation skills?” “I’m a lot better after 3,000 speeches than I was after 3.” Among others, Toastmasters is superb at sharpening speaking skills, including practice at speeches of all flavors—from 3-minute spontaneous speeches to longish setpiece speeches. (I’m a fan and recommend them to you.) Fact is, you can learn skills of value by purposefully starting cocktail conversations, chatting with cab drivers, and the like. Meetings are a great training ground for both watching and performing; for example, observe how people react to this or that approach taken by a speaker.

8. **Feedback buddies are very useful, perhaps essential.** Getting unvarnished feedback can be painful, to put it mildly—but much less so from an old friend or close colleague. Such a “feedback buddy” can, for example, assess your contributions at a meeting (a critical form of/forum for presenting); and perhaps that of others—you can talk about what worked, what failed, and so on. You can go it alone—frankly, I mostly did. But mentors devoted exclusively to this topic/these topics—presenting, listening—are invaluable.

9. **A compelling “Story line”/“Plot.”** A speech, long or short, to an audience of 1 or 1,001, will only grab the recipient if there's a powerful/compelling story-with-a-plot unspooling. First, evidence from the neurosciences supports this—our brain reacts to stories. Second, please listen up, research by the likes of Steve Denning reveals that stories are as important as hooks to techies and economists as to an audience, presumably, of poets. A good speech has a good story at its core. A good speech is, in effect, a string of stories that takes us from here to there—and makes us, in effect, say, “Let us march.”

10. **Stories.**

11. **Stories.**

## 12. **More stories.**

13. Long stories.

14. Funny stories.

15. Sad stories.

16. Stories with heroes.

17. Stories with goats.

18. Stories about famous people.

19. Stories about the clerk or the housekeeper.

20. Stories which reveal the speaker's failings.

21. Stories within stories.

## 22. **Then more stories.**

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The perfect (word "perfect" warranted) vignette:

**Mayo Clinic is virtually without peers in delivering medical care artfully and imaginatively and safely. This is due to a significant degree to their unfailing practice of "team medicine," introduced by Dr. William Mayo in 1910. (Alas, still rare today.) One Mayo doc said she**

**was "one hundred (!) times better" after coming to Mayo as a direct result of working within a team-medicine context. (All this is reported in Leonard Berry and Kent Seltman's fine book, *Management Lessons From Mayo Clinic*.) Among many other practices which maintain the team-medicine culture, a telling "small" test occurs during the intake**

interview process. Namely, the Mayo interviewers literally keep track of the use of “I” or “We” when the candidate is asked to describe a successful project he or she led; the repeated use of “We,” the Mayo evaluators have found, is a priceless correlate of the cherished team orientation.

That story/vignette takes all of about *30 seconds* to relate—the text above is more or less precisely what I’d say. Mayo is well known, in the USA and beyond; so the story is automatically laden with credibility—a very big deal. And, most important, the “I” vs. “We” hook can be used—again and again—to illustrate a, or even *the*, key point of my entire 2-hour presentation on people-centric firms. That is, in the course of using other illustrations, I will remind the audience of the Mayo “We”/“I” vignette. And, yet another big plus, it can be readily operationalized—one can go on at length about the use of “simple” practices like this, “starting tomorrow morning,” to tackle the enormous issue of altering “corporate culture”! God, himself, could not have given me a better or more powerful hook. I practically weep when I come across material like this—and I am perpetually on the lookout for such insta-showstoppers. (Incidentally, I will often cross paths in an audience with someone who attended one of my sessions a decade ago. The odds are high that she or he will say, “*You know, that simple ‘I’/‘We’ story really got me motivated to tackle big issues—you wouldn’t believe the turnaround that ensued.*” Or some such—yes, time and time again.)

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23. **The bigger the point, the smaller the supporting vignette/s.** We are aiming for ... memorable. Your theme is a ... Big One. Most folks won’t even remember the damn theme! (Sorry.) But the potent vignette/s *will* stick—please please trust me on this. That is, if you want ’em to “get”—and retain—that Big Theme, surround it with wee vignettes that are perfect-short-compelling memory aids, and, indeed, stories *they* can readily retain *and* repeat themselves. I repeat:

**The theme per se will be forgotten. The compelling/illustrative vignette will (long) be remembered.**

## 24. I conclude ... NOTHING. **The conclusions**

**... EMERGE.** I'm not the one who reaches a conclusion.

You (audience member) reach the conclusion via the stories I've told and the data I'll present (re the latter, see below). I am shoving nothing down your throat. **You** are doing the work. **You** are figuring it out. (Though I'm admittedly trying my best to make the conclusion inevitable. This point is critical. I want you to walk out of the room thinking you did it all yourself. Only if that's the case will it stick. Big word: ONLY.)

25. **A Presentation is an Act. You are an actor.** FDR said it about the presidency: "The President must be the nation's number one actor." And you, my dear presenter, must be #2! You are here for a serious reason. (Like the president.) The content, your beloved content, is a life-and-death matter for you. (So, too, for the president.) The methods of the great actor are the methods of the great speech giver/presenter—standing before an audience of 6 or 60 or 600 or 6,000. In fact, the research evidence is clear: *The acting bit swamps the content bit.* That is the "win" or "lose" outcome is driven far more by acting skills than by the quality of the content. If that appalls you, well ... tough. Go with it. Revel in it. Study it. And never forget it!

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## ***A Presentation is an Act. You are an Actor.***

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26. **Relax! Be yourself! ARE YOU NUTS?** One of the most commonplace pieces of speaking advice is to "be yourself." What a crock. No, you should not be stiff. Or look as if you were on the way to the guillotine. But you are performing a professional act. And as I—and FDR—said, you are an actor when you're on stage. And you are putting on a performance. Can you imagine a coach telling one of his players before the Super Bowl, "Go out there and be yourself"? I want to look as though I'm comfortable, sure, but I am also controlling every move and every breath to achieve an end that is a matter of professional life or death to me—not in terms of "success" or "failure," but in terms of my determination to pass on a message I believe is of the utmost importance. Indeed, enjoy yourself—in the Green Room *after* the speech!

27. **It'll take 20 tries/repetitions to get a vignette just right.** A funny thing happened early in my public speaking career. I'd tell some carefully developed story—and it'd fall flat. (I'd be devastated.) Then I'd try it again, and accidentally I'd pause somewhere or other—and a couple of minutes later the audience would respond by laughing or

applauding or otherwise expressing extreme approval. Eventually I figured out what the collegiate actor knows—or even the good high school actor. Namely, that tiny changes in delivery—timing, tone of voice, etc., etc.—can make an enormous difference. Key word:

**Enormous.** More or less the only way you’ll get it right is ... trial and many errors. I’d guess it’ll take a dozen renditions—maybe 20—for the story to reap its impact. (Or not, in which case you drop it, no matter how good *you* think it is.) All this is the garden-variety story of becoming a good actor which is synonymous with becoming a good presenter. (A good friend took on the task of teaching an introductory psych class to hundreds and hundreds of students at the University of California/Berkeley. Though he was an old pro, he’d never tackled anything like it. “So I started going to nightclubs, Tom. I wanted to see how a standup entertainer would retain the attention of some guy who’d had four stiff drinks—and was mainly interested in amusing his date. It was a real revelation—and paid off in spades.”)

28. **Enough data to sink a tanker—but keep 98% in reserve.** Having just touted stories, I’ll now tout data—or, more generally, hard research evidence. The story line is essential, but to make your case you normally (always, I’d say, but that may be idiosyncratic) need a data-driven underpinning. In my own speeches, as I said above, I assume I have no scientific credibility—I depend on the research work or wisdom of the “greats” to buttress my story line. However, overwhelming the audience with data is not the point either. *I believe your best strategy is providing enough bedrock-hard evidence to make it clear that you’ve got a “hard” case, while holding the bulk of that hard evidence in reserve to use when rejoinders come your way—as they always will.* One other (big!) point: Providing data does not mean parading a string of unreadable charts and graphs—simple is better, and doable 100% of the time if you work at it. Always add the proviso that you’ll delightedly provide more—and more—details if they wish.

29. **When it comes to presenting data: For God’s sake ... avoid “clever.”** No one topped McKinsey when it came to providing complex data in an easy-to-grasp, easy-to-read form. And there’s little that’s more difficult than so doing. But most of all, McKinsey’s data presentations were not “clever.” I am appalled by the clever presentation of data that the new graphic software offers—odd shapes and swirls and squiggles make the simplest data confusing. When it comes to the graphical presentation of data, let your imagination run wild—then stomp on it.

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***“The art of war does not require complicated maneuvers; the simplest are the best and common sense is fundamental. From which one might wonder how it is generals make blunders; it is because they try to be clever.”***—Napoleon

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**30. Make it clear that you've done a Staggering Amount of Homework, even though you are exhibiting but a tiny fraction.** Tell 'em how deep you dug; make it clear that you invested blood, sweat and tears to arrive at this position or that. Guide the participants to tons and tons of corroborating sources. Obviously, you can overdo this—but it is nonetheless imperative that you demonstrate that you've earned the right to be on this platform or in front of this group.

**31. Don't overdo it—but use your bio and make it clear that you “belong in the room.”** I often deal with highly analytic groups. I bet in the course of 90 minutes I somehow allude to my engineering training 2 or 3 or 4 times. Often in a self-deprecating fashion: “Look, I can't help it, I bathe nightly in data—it's my genetic upbringing as an engineer,” or some such. Analytic audiences are reassured by a few such references. Not overkill, God help you, but a reminder now and then that your bio matches their needs. This is subtle! But you must, beyond your bio in the program, make it clear that you belong here. (This holds for all of us mortals who have not been a president or prime minister—or won a Nobel Prize or have a place on the *Forbes* billionaires list.)

**32. Know the data from memory—manipulate it in your head as necessary.** Based primarily on your reading of body language (more later—also see above), it'll be clear, or ought to be clear (this ability comes with time), whether or not you're getting through. If it feels as if you're not, adjust and linger over a point—adding more data or a zinger of a story. I.e., you've got to have your stuff in your head and not religiously stick to your outline, so thoroughly constructed, come hell or high water. There is always hell *and* high water—and you must make adjustment after adjustment in the face of real-time body-language feedback! **Upon occasion, you have to throw the whole damn outline away nine minutes into an hour-long presentation!**

**33. Make it clear you're dealing in hypotheses, not certainties.** I always make it clear as can be that there are alternative hypotheses available—and that I'm simply asserting an important hypothesis. I add that my confidence in it is damned high—but contrary views are totally legit. (I always refer to the great philosopher of science, Sir Karl Popper. His landmark book was titled *Conjectures and Refutations*. The idea is that we are providing the best current evidence, but doubtless counter-evidence will at some point arrive—e.g., Newton yielded significant ground to Einstein.)

**34. Great data are imperative, but also—and, in fact, primarily—you must play to emotion. Emotion is the sticky stuff.** A good story can and invariably does overwhelm good data. Yes, overwhelm. Why? Because a good story connects—if it connects—emotionally. Even in a data-driven crowd. If fully 90% of what you are presenting amounts, in effect, to data, the idea of story primacy continues to hold. E.g., the way in which the data are revealed, the timing of the surprising results, the story of how the data were acquired and how you, yourself, were astonished, taken aback by what was

revealed—how you checked and double checked and then triple checked. **Yes, the story-telling attributes and the accompanying emotional hooks are as decisive for an audience of Ph.D. economists as for a hall filled with 1,000 fashion retailers.**

35. **Carefully construct the emotional hooks.** When I am in the midst of preparation, and come to a key point, my selection of material is driven by its potential emotional impact. How can I use this story—or that—for this audience to connect? How do I tell the story? Short and sweet? Or drag it out? As I run through the material again and again—and again—I try through word choice and timing and tone to create emotional hooks.

36. **Mix calm with loud—presentation melody.** I’m loud. PERIOD. But I learned the hard way—and thank God, early on—that modulation-is-king. At times I fill the hall with sound—as I plead with the audience to do, say, more MBWA/Managing By Wandering Around. And, then, 15 seconds later you can hear a pin drop—as I suggest, with intensity

but in a near whisper, some little idea that **we** can try this week. Again, emotional connection is the game—and that game requires a carefully constructed rhythm.

37. **Tone of voice!** I’ve only received a smidgen of voice training, and all of that’s been informal. The rest has been OJT. But I have certainly learned through experience the power of tone-of-voice. *Stanford Business* magazine offers this startling/staggering confirmation: “Research indicates the pitch, volume and pace of your voice affect what people think you said about five times as much as the actual words you used.” While I cannot offer a guide here, I can indeed shout to the heavens urging you to pay attention—and seek professional assistance or at least feedback from someone/s you trust.

38. **Make a supportable case, but don’t be a smartass. The goal is to appear persuasive—not “the smartest guy in the room.”** You’re normally dealing with a group of smart, accomplished people. Make your case as firmly as you can in the time allotted—but for God’s sake, don’t show off. You are merely a fellow-laborer in the field—but you think your work has led you to have an interesting and somewhat novel and useful case to make. I do it like this, “A lot of you have 10X more practical knowledge about this subject than I do—but I’ve had a chance to observe a heck of a lot of situations and have developed a point of view that pushes conventional wisdom in a way you might consider.”

*“Research indicates the pitch, volume and pace of your voice affect what people think you said about five times as much as the actual words you used.”*

*—Stanford Business magazine*

39. **Always make it clear (CLEAR = CLEAR) that you have the utmost respect for the audience.** This was perhaps the most essential message from the opening riff on achieving a conversational milieu in a huge auditorium. Immediately acknowledge the audience's expertise. Reinforce it again and again: "I pretty much know the forces that are hammering you—and I only know half the story, if that." "Look, I know you know this stuff—I'm simply the reminder-in-chief; we often let the basics atrophy in the heat of this morning's latest snafu." And so on. They must see you as on *their* side, in *their* corner—sharpening *their* skills. (De facto what you're saying may amount to an indictment of what many of them are doing—keep it to yourself; let them reach that conclusion on their own!)

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***Always make it clear (CLEAR = CLEAR) that you have the utmost respect for the audience.***

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40. **A bulging library of Stories/Illustrations/Vignettes.** You have a "story line"—hence you need great stories including boatloads full of those scintillating and startling and memorable "vignettes." This is obvious from the points made above but bears repeating and extending. You must—from any and every, formal and informal source imaginable—a chock-a-block-on-tap-ready-to-roll library of stories. Much of my prep is about putting together an appropriate and compelling collection of stories/vignettes that I hope works for this specific group at this specific time. You could actually say (*I will* so assert) that I am exactly as good as the heft of my story library.

41. **If you're going to have great stories, you must constantly be on the lookout for and, thence, collecting great stories.** In interviews and reading and conversations, always look for a story, ask for "a little illustration." *Everybody has stories—it's your more or less fulltime job to hunt 'em down and extract them from any damn source you can conjure up.*

42. **Walk the streets—looking for great, timely stories.** The day before the speech, take a wander. Look at shops. Buy a few things. I'll bet you can find some kind of great story/vignette. A clerk with a great attitude. A ridiculously helpful clerk. A ridiculously unhelpful clerk. Whatever. Among other things, it makes you appear to be tireless in data collection, and it makes you appear to be connected to the event: "I get a kick out of Las Vegas. [Always be positive about everything—a lot of these folks busted their bank account to be here.] I was mesmerized by the way the casino sucks people in—almost literally. For example ... [and I'm off to the races.]"

43. Use vignettes from life—even if you’re talking, say, to a techie audience. One thing we are guaranteed to all have in common is the day-to-day stuff. The kids’ school (ripe for teacher stories), buying a theater ticket online, trying to deal with a computer problem online, the expensive item with sucky quality, the trip with your spouse to the local ER for a broken ankle. Etc. Etc. *Virtually every “big” point you’ll cover, regardless of industry, will be illustrated by a little point—that, I repeat, we’ve all experienced.*

44. **“Death by PowerPoint” is (or can be) a load of crap.** Yes, there are a dozen dozen ways to misuse PowerPoint. But I, for one, would be dead without it. My slides are (very!) bright. They have (very!) limited stuff on them—in big, boldface type. They are and are meant to be ... in your face; they are carrying an enormous load. They give me mega-credibility. (I’m talking, say, about “putting people first.” Behind me in knock-your-socks-off color and readability and oomph is a quote from Richard Branson which is in radical support of what I’m saying. I have ZERO credibility. I’ve never run a gigantic company, I’m not a billionaire—but Branson has and is!) My slides are my notecards—I call them that; they are meant to assist my storytelling by offering up some nugget that captures the essence of the story. (I kinda design ’em like notecards—you/group are seeing my secret notes, here for the taking.) My slides ... NEVER ... have conclusions; remember, the conclusions are meant to emerge from the data and be something different for each attendee. (I’ll be talking about “a bias for action.” I’ll use a few examples. I’ll talk about the overall point—but I won’t put it on a slide.) **My slides are to be stolen, and I facilitate that by putting every slideset immediately up at [tompeters.com](http://tompeters.com); we try to time it perfectly—the slides are posted as I’m speaking so that they’ll be immediately available.** (Little things: Suppose there are 50 slides in my presentation. At one point, as I winnowed and winnowed, there were, say, 150. Well, I post that version, too—and let the audience know that if they want to dig a little deeper, they can also see the stuff I cut. Also, we have every presentation I’ve given in the last ten years available for PPT downloading; indexed in several ways; I also encourage the group to sniff around to their heart’s content.) Obviously, I could write a book on this topic—but here I’m simply pointing out that PowerPoint done effectively can be your best friend!

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***“Death by PowerPoint” is (or can be) a load of crap. PowerPoint can be, as it is for me, your best friend!***

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45. Repeat: **Give it away!** All the sages have de facto said, the more you give away, the more you get back. (I do understand that Apple’s lawyers disagree.) That is my belief as well. It’s the decent thing to do. But it’s also the long-term profitable thing to do. That is, it’s a great reputation builder. So I urge you to give more away than may seem wise. In my experience, the more material you give away, the more folks will want it when it appears later, more effectively packaged, in a for-profit format. (*In Search of Excellence* appeared in 1982. In 1979, my co-author and I made a fat, expensive booklet which encompassed our master slide library of the Excellence material, fully annotated. Over the next three years, we probably gave away 5,000 copies—which, incidentally, was the exact size of the book’s first printing. Our publisher was furious—until *In Search* began to sell like hotcakes. I am firmly convinced that our best book marketing “tool” was the thousands of presentation documents we gave away during the run-up years.)

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*Give it away!*

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46. **Slides with quotes provide 98% of my credibility—it’s not me yelling at you about an “obvious” point!** (This was the BIG Secret #2 above.) I may have a decent reputation—AS A SPEAKER—but I don’t run a big company. *And* I didn’t win a Nobel Prize. *And* my net worth is well south of Mark Zuckerberg’s. *And* I’m not an historic figure like Churchill or Gandhi or Mandela. *Hence I depend on the heroes and CEOs and super-scientists, all with impeccable credentials, to carry my water: “It ain’t me saying you guys should get your butts out and about more. [MBWA/Managing By Wandering Around.] It’s Howard Schultz, the Starbucks majordomo—despite the enormity of his enterprise, Schultz insists [a religion] on visiting at least 25 shops a week.”* Howard is in their (group’s) face, not me: “Hey gang, I’m just the innocent messenger.” (And then, after the tongue lashing from *Howard*, I pound ’em in staccato fashion, talking fast, with four other extreme examples.)

47. **Slides and credibility II: I can read a Churchill quote that’s to the point. That’s one thing. But when the Churchill quote is on the Big Screen—it’s a remarkably different story.** The power of the quote is magnified several times over by having it behind me in bold letters—hey, Churchill (or Branson or Welch) really *did* say that. I’m not sure why this is so—but I am sure it is so. When I read a Churchill, it’s just a recitation-by-Tom. When it’s on the big/bold/in-your-face slide behind me, you (audience member) cannot escape!

48. **The slide—every slide—must be exquisitely readable from the very back of the room!** I’m not here for the Big Dudes in the 1<sup>st</sup> row. I’m here for the folks in the middle—and in the back of the room. (Our “modal man”/“modal woman”—they’re at the center of the distribution; I covered this extensively in my opening riff.) You must insure that the slide can be easily read from the worst seat in the house. You want the last ten rows with you; not distracted or irritated—and it’s “little things” like this that irritate the hell out of people. *And ... it’s contagious!*

49. **By hook or by crook ... CONNECT.** Connect or bust. As emphasized above ... turn the speech into a 1-on-1 conversation. (Or else ...)

50. **CONNECT! CONNECT! CONNECT!**

51. **CONNECT! CONNECT! CONNECT!**

52. **CONNECT! CONNECT!  
CONNECT!**

53. **You have all the time in the world to**

**connect.** Of course you don’t! But you must spend the opening minutes creating trust and camaraderie—not silly camaraderie, but something more like empathy. You can’t appear to be wasting time, but you must sink your personalized hooks.

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*Only connect!*

*That was the whole of her sermon.*

*Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted.*

*And human love will be seen at its height.*

*Live in the fragments no longer.*

*Only connect ...*

—E.M. Forster, *Howards End*

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54. **Work the audience in the corridor, in their seats as they get settled—that’s the real “warm up.”** Try and search for/make connections in any way you can. One-minute conversations in the corridor outside the conference room can be worth their weight in gold **X10**. With people getting seated in the front few rows—better yet. You show off your affability (assuming you have it—if you don’t, well ...), your excitement at being here. It’s cocktail party conversation—not heavy, just establishing yourself as a good guy enjoying-the-heck-out-of-his-surroundings and raring to go.

55. **Podiums suck! Get out on the playing field!** *Podiums destroy intimacy and emotional connection and thence destroy the speech.* This was the heart and soul of my opening riff. You are initially 100% on a friend-making-mission. And thence you must be up close and personal. Some will disagree, which is fine with me. I told you at the outset that this is idiosyncratic—no more so than in this instance.

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## ***Podiums suck! Get out on the playing field!***

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56. **Get out on the playing field—at least for a moment or two—even in huge auditoriums.** Sometimes going off the stage is impossible. So I don’t. Much. But I want them to feel how utterly desperate I am to connect—so at a critical juncture I’ll run off the stage, down to some guy who looks supportive in, say, the third row, and beg him literally (!) on bended knee to be with me on this key point or that. Repeat: I want ’em all to see how desperate I am to connect.

57. **Podiums suck redux.** Sometimes you simply cannot get off the stage. *But please please please get the hell out from behind the podium.* In such circumstances my preferred location is on the front lip of the stage—no matter how precarious my perch. I want ’em to see I’ll risk life and limb to connect and get my message across. (I’ve fallen off a couple of times—but, fortunately, never into an orchestra pit.)

58. **Forget that crap about starting out by “telling ’em what you’re going to tell them”—first, they’ve got to get to know you, and you ... MUST ... befriend them.**

**PERIOD.** *Even in a 30-minute speech, you must spend non-trivial time establishing yourself as a person.* I’ve spent days preparing for this speech. I’ve got a full load of content. And I want to get through it and make my six big points. I chastise myself as I head for the stage—“Cut the crap, just get going, cut to the chase, not a second to waste.” And then I get out there and I look at this group of human beings and I realize that once again, I’m all wet. So despite the short speech and load of content, I spend 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 (yes, 5 out of 30) minutes making friends, establishing myself, making connections. The damn points will simply not hit their mark until *we* have established ourselves—all 100

or 1,000 of us—as a short-duration project team of sorts. (This is damned hard work—and must be worked at.)

59. **Make your points inductively, not deductively.** I’m sure there are great speakers who’d vigorously disagree with me—fair enough. But this is my strong preference. I’m not going to say, “The power of appreciation is staggering.” **No!** I’m going to (1) tell a story or two, (2) provide supporting research evidence/data, (3) reveal where we’ve been heading (THE BIG POINT), and then wrap up with a real zinger of a story. And, maybe, (4) a “getting started” suggestion or two. I don’t want to shove the point down their throat, especially if it’s a bit controversial. I want the point to emerge—I want my Big Point to become obvious given the stories and data *we* have just reviewed. They, after all, have got to leave the room “owning” the issue. They, then, must travel a bumpy road and, I hope, arrive at the place I hope they’ll arrive—and with enough passion to do something when they return home.

60. **I repeat: You are merely the medium—not the message.** Let your points emerge and appear to be inevitable. Hence the data and the stories make the case—not you. You are just the medium. “Tell ’em what you’re gonna tell ’em” is downright lunacy. (Nobody cares what you think—unless you’re a former Prime Minister or a billionaire or the equivalent.)

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*Forget that crap about starting out by “telling ’em what you’re going to tell them”—first, they’ve got to get to know you, and you ... MUST ... befriend them. PERIOD.*

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61. **It’s not about you—especially if you are a renowned figure. It’s all about ... THEM.** The point is not that they remember the speaker—the point is that they remember the point. No: “Boy, it was cool to hear Prime Minister Blair speak.” Yes: “That little story Blair told about the tetchy meeting with President Chirac really resonated with me; it’s got me thinking about ...”

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Hence our Second BIG Secret, covered above:

***You are merely the medium—not the message.***

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62. **There must be more than a handful of “surprises” ... some key facts that are not commonly known/are counterintuitive (no reason to do the presentation in the first place if there are no surprises).** I have urged you to gradually work your way into the psyches of audience members, and to stay positive at all costs. That, however, is not an argument against zingers! *In fact, any speech of value is loaded with zingers and surprises and WOW-worthy stories or stats. After all, you’re there to provide a novel perspective—thus, among other things, some of the cases you present should include mind-blowing material.* Suppose I was talking about so-called “experience marketing.” By chance, as I was writing this essay, I was reading a marvelous book, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*. Consider one vignette: Typically an approach to a facility requires turning left or right to the tune of 90 degrees. One experiment used a gently curved entrance way rather than the standard all-at-once-90-degree version. Ho-hum. NOT! That little alteration doubled the number of people who turned into the casino. Yes ... DOUBLED! Well, imagine I’m talking to an airline industry audience or retailers of any sort or hospital CEOs. A little vignette like that is an unadulterated

**“Wow!”**

from an unusual place that is a demo, not of what those hospital CEOs should do—but of the power of such variables in turning an experience upside down.

63. **Numbering scheme—the patina and cognitive comfort of order.** I just lied to you. Sort of. I touted inductive (emergent) logic, rather than linear deductive (dictatorial) logic. Nonetheless, I’ve learned the importance of providing a patina of linearity. The world is unquestionably non-linear, but non-linearity tends to drive people, especially techies and numbers guys, to distraction, not a helpful state of affairs. To counter this, I typically and simply number the sections of my presentation; the PowerPoint slide bearing the number has nothing else on it; nonetheless it almost unfailingly does the trick of adding to the comfort level and my credibility among a subset of the audience. (Long ago a colleague taught me this—or, rather, force-fed me. I thrived on circular reasoning, but he ran an engineering organization. “I love your presentations,” Tom, “but they’re making my engineers crazy. Just number your paragraphs and they’ll be happy.” I did. They were.)

64. **Be aware of differing cognitive styles—particularly M-F.** Remember those engineers/financial types and their need for order? Well, I talked to a woman who published high-circulation magazines in the UK for companies to send to their customers—i.e., glorified marketing pieces. We were musing on, one of my favorite topics, M-F differences. “*If I’m doing a piece mainly aimed at men,*” she said, “*it’ll typically be front-loaded with product specs and comparative numbers and tables and charts and the like; it’ll be in-your-face analytical. For products aimed at women, I’ll mostly offer up stories about how the product might be used in this context or that.*” I have accumulated a truckload of similar cases. (My wife, a home-furnishings entrepreneur, chuckled at this—confirming it “in spades” in her world: “*The men talk about the lathes that were used to make the furniture; the women talk about how it will look in their living rooms.*”) To be sure, there are many women who cotton to the analytic stuff, and men who like a good story. But the case as a generalization is pretty air tight—and supported by many studies and well-researched books. Obviously, this translates into the world of speech-giving 1-for-1; I act accordingly. I also am aware that my natural tendency toward loud-and-over-the-top-animated is more of a male thing—no doubt an unfortunate demonstration of aggressive male genes; I do try to tone it down in part because of a high share of women in a given audience. The word used in the title here was “aware.” I’m not urging radical shifts—but I would urge you to become a bit familiar with the extensive literature on topics like this. “Marketing to women” is a white hot topic these days; the lessons should be transported to giving effective presentations. (Obviously there are a dozen dozen other sets of cognitive differences in processing data that are also worthy of note—and, far more important, worthy of intense study.)


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## ***Be aware of differing cognitive styles— particularly M-F.***

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65. **Be aware of differing communication styles—in general.** Years ago I read a fascinating book, *The Nine Nations of America*, by Joel Garreau. It struck a chord because of a significant business negotiation error I’d just made. The idea is that there are, not a novel observation, huge regional differences in the USA—which can, among other things, lead to huge communication disconnects. The one that struck home referred to the start of business meetings. Garreau said that if you’re having a business meeting in Atlanta, and you open by talking about the financial benefits of some project under discussion—you’ll quickly end up way behind the eight ball. The Southern tradition more or less requires you to begin with an exchange of pleasantries. But if the topic is the same in LA and you don’t begin by laying out the financial Big Bang ... you’ll probably be escorted from the room. Sure, that’s extreme and stereotypical—but in my experience, it’s spot-on correct. (And I have both the South and California in my background.) For

sure this applies to some degree in most all small-setting business meetings. But variables like this are also at play in an address to a cast of 1,000—e.g., hedge fund managers versus Mary Kay distributors. Be-very-ware: You needn't turn the world upside down, but don't go out of your way to irritate a big share of your audience either; gentle accommodation will make a huge difference.

**66. And then there are international borders**  The USA is not Canada—not by a long shot. And it ain't Saudi Arabia by a longer (1,000X?) shot. I am known for being blunt and hyper-direct. When I'm far from home—Riyadh or Toronto—I bend-over-backwards-and-then-bend-over-some-more rounding off my rough edges. The effort is conscious. The effort is continuous. I even talk slower—mainly aiming to translate myself and take whatever I'm about to say down a couple of notches. (FYI: By the end of an all-day seminar, when I've established trust and performed numerous acts of self-deprecation, I can pretty much notch it back up—now I'm among friends.)

**67. And then there are international borders II.** The USA *is* Canada. And it's Saudi Arabia, too. That is, in my experience people are people—and we have a helluva lot in common when it comes to the essentials of what it means to be human. By and large: Trust is trust. A smile is a smile. Energy is energy. Passion is passion. Giving-a-shit is giving-a-shit. We can all smell people who care about us—and those who don't. This is a boon and a bane to the speaker. I'm inclined to say, “So, which one are you?” (But that would be rude.)

**68. And then there are international borders III.** If you really have problems with a given society—more than fair—then don't go.

**69. Know your audience demographics cold—to the penny!** I'm sure this is gratuitous—but, then, most of this stuff is. What's the age distribution? What's the M-F split? What's the average rank and distribution of ranks? (Business owner, “C-level,” middle managers, etc.) And another 10 sets of distinctions like these. I push pretty damned hard to get pretty precise answers to these questions. No, not quite down to the penny as stated above—but no wobbly generalizations, either. It's about impossible to overstate the importance of this.

**70. Framework last.** I use a clear and simple framework as a review—at the end of my remarks. “Here's where we've been.” Again, the tactic is ... emergence. The story tells itself: I'm not laying a trip on you (audience members). We've been *building* a structure of (numbered!) ideas—and here's what it has turned out to be: Behold, a revised way of looking at your organization, tested by compelling cases and supporting data. (As I said, I am an inductive thinking nut. And as I also said, I hate: “Tell 'em what you want to tell 'em and then tell 'em again.” It's insulting. My way, if I execute effectively, they'll eventually have my “it” rammed down their throats—but they won't be aware it's happening.

71. **But summarize from time to time—make it clear that we’re on an adventure together.** I’ve told you in no uncertain terms what I think of “Tell ’em what you’re gonna tell ’em.” Nonetheless, as the story emerges, pause now and again, and remind the audience where we are on the road to discovery we are traveling. The pause can be brief, but it’s important. Sometimes I’ll have a slide that says, all by its lonesome: **PAUSE.** We take a collective deep breath, my speed and volume drop noticeably/dramatically. And we briefly review.

72. **“Stuff” ... not “takeaways.”** A lot of “I hates” in this paper. Sorry. But there’s a word that, yes, I hate: Takeaways. As in, “Here are the takeaways.” Aargh! (Also covered under Secret #1.) Again ... I want *them* to figure out what the hell they’ll take away and try. Of course, I’m going to be making operational suggestions as we go through the material. But my approach, “From talking to so-and-so, who made a go of this, here’s some stuff you might consider ...” Again (I say that a lot, too), I’m not insulting them by treating them like 8-year-olds. I am offering up what I just labeled it: **“Stuff.”** You can stuff those takeaways as far as I’m concerned. “Takeaway” is the sort of trainer-speak that makes me want to ... (you finish the sentence, please).

73. **Character of “stuff”: Little BIG Things.** I wrote the book *The Little BIG Things: 163 Ways to Pursue Excellence* in 2010—it summarized a lifetime’s observations and emergent philosophy. Our aims may be gargantuan—but life moves forward a minute at a time. (My mantra: ***Excellence is not an “aspiration.” Excellence is the next five minutes. Or not.***) Thus the “stuff” I emphasize is not the uber-strategy or the planning document. It’s more often than not the wee behavioral activities that are in fact the molecules of transformation: A colleague said, “The four most important words in any organization are, ‘What do you think?’” “What do you think?” is a classic Little BIG Thing, the true bedrock of a people-first, high-engagement culture that underpins any flavor of effective implementation. It doesn’t take you 100 yards down the field, to be sure, but the 4-word question is a marvelous starting point—and characteristic of the sort of stuff that will take you 100 yards. So I try to leave behind such “stuff” that can readily be acted upon ASAP—and almost always without a penny of capital expenditure. So, for me at least, “Stuff” means those immediately actionable little BIG things that do indeed undergird excellence. (Look, I started my book of 163 ideas by talking about restrooms, or, rather a single restroom. A restroom at a little restaurant in Gill, MA. This superb—yes, SUPERB—restroom, I said, shouted

**“We care.”** And if that ain’t a BIG thing, I don’t know what would be.)

74. **Make it clear that you are a Man/Woman of Action ... and that Execution Excellence is your First, Middle, and Last Name!** “Big ideas” are a bunch of B.S. until they are implemented. Focus less on the difficulty of the overall change you wish to make—and more on creating a portfolio of Little BIG Things to work on immediately. In



an important way, first steps are the only ones that matter—think AA; one day at a time. (In my early-'70s White House assignment, I was guided by my boss's belief that: "Execution *is* strategy." Amen.)

**75. Be "in command" but don't "show off." (If you're brilliant they'll figure it out for themselves.)** I more or less said this before, but it's worth repeating. *There's nothing I "hate" more than someone who makes it clear how fabulous his/her credentials are.* The material should demo your brilliance—or not. I occasionally "inadvertently," and way into the speech, find a way to offhandedly mention McKinsey or my Navy years in Vietnam. "Street cred" is important. But, again, the key is ... emergence. I'll casually toss in a reference to my McKinsey years, because of the towering "business analysis" reputation. But I am purposely very careful to do it as a throwaway line—and immediately make it clear that I didn't swallow all the Kool-Aid.

**76. Pay attention to the Senior Person present, but not too much. (Don't look like/act like/be a "suck-up.")** You are not there to help the mega-successful senior person! You should behave with gratitude and impeccable manners toward her, but the

speech ain't for her! So many many speakers screw this up. **You are**

**here 100%** (or at least 90%) **for the modal/**

**median person!** Make it clear, in fact, that you know the Big dudes have been damn successful—and that you don't expect to "motivate" them—they're already motivated. (In fact, the rich do get richer—and it is those hyper-successful folks, always on the prowl for improvements, who may get the most out of your presentation. As many say about leadership training, it's most helpful to those who are already at the top of their game.)

**77. Repeat: You are here for ... Modal Woman/Modal Man. But first you must find Modal Woman/Modal Man.** You have to go waaaaaaaay beyond hanging out with the Big Dudes. In the hall, at the bar, by the swimming pool, in the Starbucks line, in the elevator, as you walk into the presentation room—find the "real" people you are to address. Eavesdrop on their conversations, initiate brief chats—not optional! And then in the auditorium, home in on them from moment #1—sidle up to the ones who are receptive. (See my opening riff on speech-as-a-conversation.)

**78. The power of the walk into the room.** I always come early to a presentation room to get my AV perfectly set up. (More later.) But even if I'm going to be formally introduced and come on stage with fanfare from behind a curtain, I hang out in the auditorium as the early birds arrive. I chat them up, pick up on vibes, maybe harvest some last minute data. But mostly I'm there to be seen—to be seen as a guy who enjoys chitchat, who's not too big for his britches, who maybe even spills a little coffee on those britches—and furtively steals a donut. You are the speaker and you are being sized up; and you can get a big

head start if you do it right—you chat up those early birds, but the next 200 folks coming into the room are collecting impressions of you.

**79. FYI: You will not win 'em all. In fact you'll most certainly have a low batting average.** Any speaker who thinks he's going to “convert” the entire audience—or even 20% of the audience ought to be locked up. I figure that maybe I can be of a little use to 15% and give a big boost to, say, 10 out of 500; and offer a little something to perhaps 100 of the 500. Or some such. I am overwhelmingly delighted if I hear from 2 or 3 people that they had a breakthrough perhaps attributable to my talk. Sure you want to bat 1.000. But it ain't gonna happen. (*But, then, think about it—being of great help to a dozen people is in fact a great privilege.*)

**80. Revel in lousy feedback. If everybody liked your speech, you're in trouble.** If 98% of the audience liked your speech, it indisputably means you didn't push hard enough. I'm not for 40% bad grades, but if 15% aren't irritated then I didn't earn my pay. I want that one-on-one conversation, but I'm being paid to push the boundaries—in fact, why go through the agony of travel and logistics unless you, as JFK told us, aim to make the world wobble a bit on its axis. (My generic “law” is: **If nobody's pissed off at you, then you are not making a difference. PERIOD.**)

**81. Self-deprecation. HUGE.** You're making a point about the value of recognition. You should make it clear that, *“Hey, I mean well, but I'm not here to shove this down your throat. I talk about this stuff all the time—but in the heat of the day's affairs, I blow it more often than not. So I assure you, I'm giving myself hell on this one as much as I'm giving you a bit of a kick in the butt. Ain't one of us who is without sin.”* Or, better yet, *“There's not one of us without sin—of course, there is a singular exception—Marion Jones. She's the one who signs my check.”* You'll get a lot of mileage out of that. The point: We need to work on this ... big time. “Lecture at”/holier-than-thou in any way, shape or form is the kiss of death, no matter what the topic is!

**82. If you don't know something ... ADMIT IT!** For one thing, nobody likes a know-it-all. For another, it's a sign of humility—helpful in building credibility and connection. Also, of course, bullshitters get caught in big or biggish audiences. And if the “I don't know” concerns a cool issue, here's the best response imaginable: “You know, that's a super-interesting twist. I'm going to look into it—it'll help me. Check out [tompeters.com](http://tompeters.com). I'll try to put up a blog post on that topic when I get home.” Magic!

**83. Refer to the client's industry again and again.** You likely are not expert on the industry—I rarely am. But I talk constantly about it to remind them that I'm doing my damndest to pay attention to their world. Oddly, I usually do this by pointing out what a dummy I am relative to their world. “I'm not on intimate terms with your industry. So



what I'm saying will doubtless need to be tailored. It's possible that I'm way off base." You know you're damn well on base, but, again, you are not shoving anything down their [expert-on-their-world] throats—and you're making it clear you've been thinking about them. Frankly, it takes damn little to "tailor" a speech to the audience. Studying your ass off is important, don't get me wrong—but it's those little things like the one above that make all the difference.

**84. Don't ever ever ever give off a single negative vibe about the participants and their industry or yourself—if, for instance, you think they're all greedy pigs or war-mongers, you shouldn't be there.** Bend over backwards to be courteous—to a fault. You may be pissed off about this or that. (My son may have just blown his SAT. But I am a happy and courteous camper around every single person I meet this morning here in Orlando—and especially anyone I meet that I just don't click with; the latter is where uber-effort is called for.) Bend over backwards and then more backwards to keep it positive—no matter how hardline your message may be; wrap that tough-minded message in swaddling clothes. The tougher the message, the softer the packaging. Any bad humor or deprecation of the audience or any one in it will ("will," not "might") lead to guaranteed failure, even if everyone thinks your content was majestic.

**85. Negative doesn't sell.** Period.

**86. Negativism can kill a speech in ... 30 seconds.** Believe it! (I know from bitter experience.)

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***Negativism can kill a  
speech in ... 30  
seconds.***

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87. **“The other” screwed up—not them; they must figure out they’re the bad guys on their own.** We’re telling stories, one after another, right? And, just like the movies, these stories have a bad guy in them. But that “bad guy” is always “the other.” Not us. Of course the bad guy is us or we wouldn’t be here in the audience—we’re here to deal with some issue/problem or another that we have. But you, the speaker, want them to figure that out on their own—laugh at themselves in fact for having missed the boat. One wag said,

**“If you want someone to change, first you must make them laugh.”** And they won’t laugh if you look ’em in the eye and tell them they’re losers. “The other” must be the loser—and they must figure out for themselves, with a smile, that they’re in the same boat as that “other.”

88. **LISTENING ... is the most important skill that any leader or non-leader (or speaker) can have.**

89. **Effective listening can be learned and practiced.** Believe it.

90. **You have to work as hard at becoming a good listener as you do at becoming a great piano player or a great golfer or neurosurgeon.**

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***You have to work as hard at becoming a good listener as you do at becoming a great piano player or a great golfer or neurosurgeon.***

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91. Speaking is all about ... **LISTENING.**

92. Speaking is all about ... LISTENING. **In the course of a 1-hour speech, you will literally make 100 adjustments, or more—and some of them will be enormous.** You've nailed it—in your extensive practice sessions. Great story line. Great stories. Fits the audience to a tee. But you're 15 minutes into the speech—and the audience body language stinks, or at least isn't all that positive. Eyes are wandering. A couple of side conversations are visible. A fair number of folks are slumping in their seats. You're not connecting; or if even if you are, there's no electricity. *The good news is that you know—because you have been “listening” to that body language as if your life depends on it.* (It does.) So you leave out the next point. Or you slow down. Or you make an earlier point again with a new story. You alter your own body language—you've been too aggressive. And on and on and on. (Incidentally, this goes 10X—or more—when you are out of your own country.) It'll take you a long time to master this—I'm still not there after 3,000 speeches. But learn it you can! And learn it you must! (Which of course takes us back to an early point. If you care so much about your topic that you can taste it, you'll be far more likely to be attuned to whether or not you're getting through to the participants.)

93. Speak in “Plain English” ... keep the jargon to a minimum. **Simple declarative sentences. PERIOD.** Don't show off your Harvard degree if you happen to have one; no cute “sophisticated” words—save 'em for reunions. And as for jargon, don't even think about it ...

94. **Swearing offends. So don't.** I was in the Navy. Swore like a sailor. Alas, still do to some extent, though I've come a long way. Fact is, swearing will offend some people. If that number is 3 out of 1,000, it's still too high. (Okay, I occasionally make exceptions. But I typically explain myself in advance. “Look, I'm about to use language that will offend some of you—for which I sincerely apologize. I'm going to call some absurd bullshit exactly what it is—namely, absurd bullshit. As I said, truly sorry, but there are some things which must be shouted out.”) (Swearing that's at all religious—e.g., “Goddamnit ...”—is out. PERIOD.) (FYI: As with so many things, this goes 10X or 50X when you're in another country; and 1,000X in some, not-to-be-named, countries.)

**95. Life away from home: Make love to your interpreters—and help them. You are completely at the mercy of your interpreters when dealing in a foreign language. NEVER FORGET THAT.** They're professionals—I doubt that they'd screw you in any circumstances. But if the relationship is great, they will, like all of us, probably

stretch for you. I religiously meet with them and not in rushed fashion, especially if I'm rushed. I take substantial time to talk about the presentation, offer up technical words I might have to use; then some personal chitchat—remember, always connect. Moreover, I always begin my speech by thanking the interpreters in front of the audience: *"I have the easy job today; the tough job is interpreting a slang-using, fast-talking English speaker. Please give the interpreters a round of applause at the start."* (Oh, and never forget that they are "interpreters," not "translators." "Translation" is mechanical, "interpretation" is an art.)

**96. Get the language ratio right! Pay attention to it! Keep paying attention!** Oh Lord, how I've screwed this up! There is never a 1-to-1 language length equivalency. E.g.,

Italian and German, as I recall, take about 30% (Wow! ) more words than English—hence the interpreters have to use 30% more words than you do. Which means you ... **MUST SLOW DOWN SIGNIFICANTLY** ... if you want good interpretation! (If you're at all like me, you need to constantly remind yourself of this as you go along; in the heat of the battle, it's easy to forget. Hey, you care about this stuff and you've got a lot to say about it. So, at some point, as you realize you're falling behind, you speed up. Well ... don't.)

**97. Consider/cater to the spouses. They more or less become as much a part of the conversation as their other halves.** In a lot of my big audiences, spouses are attending. This makes a big difference. Yes, I'm there for the electronics distributors; and my content largely will be directed to them. But I'll also fiddle with my illustrations/stories, using a few that are a bit more universal and a bit less narrow-gauge. I'll also use the spouse upon occasion as a foil: When, say, declaiming on the importance of listening, I might look at the spouse (F) and say, "Of course he *thinks* he's a great listener, and I'm sure you'd never dispute that, right?" Typically guys stink as listeners, and I'm playing a little game—it invariably works. Oh, yes, be sure to refer from the outset to the spouses or other guests of the principals—welcome them and talk to them directly about where you're coming from, etc. Inclusion is always a fast-acting miracle drug! (*The overlooked spouse may be antsy—or, after the fact, make negative comments purely attributable to inattention on the speaker's part.*)

98. **A Q & A session can make you—or break you—even if it’s only 10 minutes long.** I love Q & A. But, then, when I was a debater I loved rebuttal more than the opening presentation. It’s my/your/speaker’s only chance to find out, at least a little bit, whether or not you have connected. I hope you were loose and informal all the way through—but in Q & A sessions it’s particularly important; you really are having a genuine 1-on-1 conversation. And you are also undergoing a final exam in terms of the way you respond. If you’ve failed to leave the podium so far (for shame), for God’s sake do so now. Up-close-and-personal is the full name of the Q & A game.

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## ***A Q & A session can make you—or break you.***

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99. **Q & A: Mind your manners.** Be polite—bend over backwards to do so. *And make your politeness palpable.* Everyone in the audience needs to clearly observe the respect with which you respond to a question—especially if (1) it seems to challenge an important assertion you made; or (2) is silly.

100. **Q & A: It’s ALWAYS a “great question.”** This is one more plea to be 100% positive—especially if you disagree with the questioner. You’ll indeed state what you believe—but acknowledge that there are multiple ways to look at things, that the questioner brings up a good point, that his example (countering your assertion) is excellent, etc. “That’s brilliant—a great way of looking at the issue. I’m coming a bit more from over here [explanation, maybe a vignette, pretty thorough]. Maybe you’ll go along with that a wee bit, eh? [Give her a chance to respond] ...”

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## ***Q & A: It’s ALWAYS a “great question.”***

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101. **Q & A: “Keep your answers short.” BULLSHIT.** I’m constantly teased about responding to questions with long answers—minispeeches, if you will. Well, it’s not by accident. There are no easy answers. The questioner makes a thoughtful assertion about an essential point. I’m going to respond with a thoughtful answer. It’ll include reference to one or more vignettes I used—and add one or two new vignettes. I will laugh at myself for my wordiness; I’ll likely say, “Okay I spent a lot of time on that—don’t blame me; it was a damn good question and it demands more than a 1-word answer.” True, I don’t end up answering as many questions as I might have. So what’s it to you? The handful I will

have answered gave me a golden opportunity to enhance my main points—and show respect for the questioner. (So be my guest with the short answers—they’re not for me.)

**102. Q & A: The debater’s Big Secret/To some extent, regardless of the question, make the point you want to make.** Ever watch a presidential debate? Often the candidate’s answer has virtually nothing to do with the question. I’m not suggesting you do that—but I am suggesting that you need not take every question as it was literally presented. Remember, you are trying in this speech to make two or three key points—repeatedly bring those points into every answer. It means a little twisting and turning and shoehorning—so work at it.

**103. Q & A: Humor here really helps. But ... handle with care.** Humor used well is as good as it gets. Humor used poorly with strangers is as bad as it gets. But it can be an essential part of answering questions. Especially, to reiterate an earlier point, self-deprecating humor. “*Now look, the answer I’m going to give you may be wrong. Actually, I’m pretty sure it’ll be wrong—but I’ll go with it anyway.*” Hey, we’re havin’ fun here—this is damned serious stuff, and we can only safely address it in a comfortable way by examining our foibles and good intentions gone awry. (One big reason you can have fun is that the end is nigh. You will have long ago embedded the final image of yourself. Now we’re relaxing—and moving into the implementation stage. The ball is turned over to the audience.)

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***Humor: Great stuff! Handle with (great) care!***

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**104. Q & A: No: “Yes, but ...” Yes: “Yes, and ...”** I love this! Someone recently clued me in and I’ve become an advocate. You get a question which makes quite a bit of sense—but which doesn’t go far enough. The answer, “Yes, but ....” implies that in fact you disagree significantly (“but”) and want to sort the questioner out. On the other hand, “Yes, and ...” says: “What a terrific idea; it really gets me thinking. Maybe we can even take it a bit farther.” (Yes, things like this really matter—really make, collectively, an enormous difference.)

**105. Q & A: Don’t cut off a long-winded speaker until the audience gets fidgety—and de facto does the dirty work themselves.** *Premature cutoff is seen as rude!* Long-winded questions can be painful—to all 1,000 attendees. But I let ’em go on quite a while, longer than most “experts” would suggest. Not to do so, and this is paramount to me, is to be rude. Rude to one of my audience members! So I am patient in a way that lets others see that I am respecting the questioner (he is, after all, one of their tribe), but eventually I must step in. The way to step in is, in fact, easy: I don’t cut him off. I’ll say, “Whoa, that amounts to a three-part question—way beyond the limits of my old memory.

Give me a chance to try part one.” I effectively begin to talk over him and start to answer his question—which de facto is indeed cutting him off, appeasing the audience and showing respect.

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## ***Respect! Paramount! Visible!***

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**106. Q & A: Though the Q & A session is at the end, save 90 seconds to three minutes for a summary of the entire speech.** The Q & A session is probably at the end of your talk. But for heaven’s sake don’t end with the answer to the last question. Work it out ahead of time with the chief client representative and the AV folks. As you wind up your last answer, you will—for once—head for the podium. And from the podium provide a 90-second to 3-minute close. You’ll briefly reiterate the two or three principal themes—it doesn’t hurt to have a last PowerPoint slide which confirms these three points.

**107. Ending: Thank the audience for “giving me the gift of your precious time.”** They have done you a great service. (It’s a fact!)

**108. You must care.** Perhaps my favorite piece of advice of all comes from an Army general—Melvin Zais. He was speaking about command to an audience of senior military officers. (I’ve literally given away about 10,000 copies of his speech—pre-Internet days—at my own expense; I once gave every one of 4,000 USNA midshipmen a copy.) Zais’ topic was, “*You must care.*” You must care and you must be seen to care. Zais tells us about an Army lieutenant whose guys’ barracks will be inspected tomorrow morning. He advises, “*Go down to that barracks sometime this evening. Just sit on a bunk for a few minutes, and then take off. You don’t even have to open your mouth. They’ll know that you know they’re working their asses off to make you look good.*” They’ll know you care. Care is not the same thing as passion for the topic—not at all. The audience must see clearly—body language, intensity, etc.—that you want to work with them, you’re dying to work with them on a topic you think is important—that you obviously care about. You must love that audience for the 90 minutes you’re with them. Or else ... (Football coach and tough-guy Vince Lombardi once said, “You don’t have to like your players—but you must love them.” Amen!) Tell a little story about how you became engaged with the topic. For example: Your Mom’s hospital treatment was screwed up by a “simple” error. Hence your passion for patient safety that you want/*must* for the sake of your sanity imbue the audience with the intensity and character of your concern. Or: Your daughter had this amazing teacher—and you could see what it means when the teacher cares about the kids, your kid, in a truly personal way; and this great 5<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher seems to come from a different planet than Barbara’s 4<sup>th</sup>-grade teacher; both were competent as the dickens. But only one really connected with Barbara—she’ll remember Nancy Jones 35 years from now. And you work Nancy Jones and Barbara into your



leadership or people development remarks. (My granddad ran a little country store. I kid you not: about 1,000 people showed up for his memorial service—he'd helped every one of them in a personal way. Actually, more than 1,000 showed up, but I figured you wouldn't believe me if I used a bigger number. Bottom line: He cared.)

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## *You must care.*

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109. **You must care! You must ooze care from every pore. You don't need to like your audience—but you must *love* them.** (Think about it.)

110. **A speech is a 1-on-1 conversation, not a monologue.** In the essay that launched this piece, I claimed that this is the #1 secret of speaking success—hence the standalone section. But as we move forward with the numbered list, I want to reiterate briefly. If you want people to emotionally absorb your message (a good precursor of action and change), you must take your message to them as intimately as possible. You must turn a speech to 10 or 10,000 into personal, effectively 1-on-1, dialogues. The good news is that by using a handful of people in the audience as de facto foils, you can achieve the effect of a thousand independent 1-on-1s. The process is complex, as indicated—but can be learned. (That is, you may not become Bill Clinton—love him or hate him, he did “feel your pain”—but you can get a damn sight better than you may be right now.)

111. **Body language: Theirs.** In football, the great quarterback differentiates himself from his peers less by a strong arm than from the ability to instantly “read” the defense. (“Read” is the word used in this context.) Well you, the speaker, must in effect multi-task. You must deliver your material ... and you must constantly “read” the audience. Head nods. Squirming in seats. Laughing at the right stuff—or remaining stonefaced. Eyes on you—or wandering. (Remember in the intro/Secret #1 that I said I won't play even a 1 minute, 30 second dazzling film clip, because I don't want to break the rhythm that's been established.) And, of course, walking out—it happens in a crowd of 1,000—aargh. Whole books have written on the topic of body language—you damn well ought to read a couple. I wish I could give some hard-nosed tips, but I can't. Relative to the 1-on-1 point above, you'll read body language 1-by-1. That is, you're not “reading” “the audience.” You are looking at *one* face and then another *one* and another *one* ... Bottom line: 100% of your time must be spent looking at one and only one person at a time—and “reading” them, absorbing every smile and scowl or that frightful “not engaged” look.



112. **Body language: Yours.** One prominent Stanford researcher, Deborah Gruenfeld, went so far to say that your “content” is more or less irrelevant unless you get the body language right. (She’s hardly alone—a bushel or ten of hard-edged research supports her.) For me, I think I’d call effective body language: friendly and open but passionate and determined at the same time. You sweat, and show total frustration as you tell a little story about bosses wandering the office floor as they think they must, but never making personal contact. Your frustration shows, your deep desire to get the message across—you slam the protagonist in the story, as you say, “Of course, I know all you guys get this”—and you exhibit a smile to top all smiles. They and you are furious at the guy in the abstract story—and we sweat together as they more or less take aboard that they, too, are that bad guy. To me, the worst word in the language on this topic is ... stiff. Remember we’re having a 1-on-1 conversation, about your favorite baseball team, the San Francisco Giants. You are animated, engaged, leaning forward, smiling, frowning—but never, ever, ever ... stiff. This is one arena where practice and watching videos of yourself can be very helpful—especially if you are working with a coach. Keep in mind the bottom line: *Bad body language more or less completely wipes out the best content in the world.*

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***Bad body language  
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out the best content  
in the world.***

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113. **So—one more time—become an avid student of the art and science of body language.** (And, recall, tone-of-voice.)

114. **Much of the point of this entire exercise: You can study “all this stuff.” You can practice “all this stuff.”** There are “naturals” at everything—and most of us ain’t them. We may not reach the level of Winston Churchill or Martin Luther King, Jr., but you/we can get better. A lot better! (This is a repeat—so what?)

115. **Smile!** Smiles really do make the world go ’round. And make connection occur. And, thence, make the speech go well. Or not. Remember: You are happy—pleased out of your mind!—to be there.

116. **Smile! Practice it!** (No kidding.)

117. **Smile—especially when you’re not in a smiling mood.**

118. **Smile! If it kills you.** (It’ll kill you if you don’t.) (*Nelson Mandela’s smile had pragmatic value beyond measure—it more or less stopped a bloody civil war from occurring.*)

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***Smile!***

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119. **Dress: Do overdress.** I’m not big on formality—understatement. (God invented sweatpants for me, personally—that’s not sacrilege, but truth.) I don’t care much about clothes—understatement. But: Dress matters. My contracts specify dress. Often for a meeting at a resort, the guidance will be “business casual.” Not a suit in the room of 750. Except for me. I always wear a suit. For one and only one reason. *It is a purposeful mark of respect.*

120. **Dress: Don’t overdress.** I want my message to stand out. And my speaking style to stand out. And I don’t want to over-overdo it any more than under-do it. I really don’t want anyone to comment on my clothes—one way or the other. (For what it’s worth: I have a uniform. Dark suit. Good quality, *not* over the top. Bright tie—reinforces my content message of energy.) For those to whom it may apply—skip the Rolex. I wear a \$50 Timex—I like ’em—and I like to appear a bit frugal. (All part of the message.)

121. **Dress: Women.** *If hell froze over, I would not open my mouth relative to this topic. And that’s that.*

122. **Sweat: I want it to show.** I am a hard worker. And I want it to show physically as well as via my content and the prep associated therewith. I want to make it clear I'm earning my keep the same way a symphony conductor does. (Leonard Bernstein is my role model. Talk about visible energy! Talk about sweat!). Personally, I want to have no/ZERO/zip energy left at the end of the speech. I want to have given of myself physically and emotionally as well as mentally—down to the last drop.

123. **Energy is as easy to see as the color of the room.** Your energy must stand out. Or you shouldn't be there. It's just that simple. (If you're not in "an energetic place"—conjure it up or fake it.)

124. **When it comes to presenting/speaking ... you're always having a great day.** If you do this a lot, as I have, you've done it when you were having truly terrible days—physically ill, problems at home, whatever. Well, find the damned smile and wear it. This sounds like gratuitous advice, "Sure, Tom, you betcha. Who do you think you are, Tony Robbins?" Well it is gratuitous—and it isn't. A big part of your speech is the you who arrives—beyond a shadow of doubt, that tops the content as a potential success factor. And, yes, your energy will vary. But you do have to do whatever you can figure out to do—standing before the mirror practicing your smile, or getting in a stimulating 45 minutes on the hotel treadmill, or watching a slapstick comedy ... or *something*. I find that my best trick is going down to the event early and hanging out with some of the attendees or the production crew. Fifteen minutes of ordinary chitchat almost always helps me.

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***When it comes to presenting/speaking ...  
you're always having a great day.***

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125. **Be early.** "Early early." "Showy early." (Obvious, but worth saying.) Yes (YES!) (YES!) ... first impressions matter. This is also probably a gratuitous suggestion ... sorry. Actually, I'm not in the least bit sorry. I am a fanatic's fanatic on this. I give new meaning to the word early. I, in fact, like to be "*showy early*"—i.e., making a statement by my earliness. And, obviously, this ups the odds of timeliness when (not "if") things go wrong. I could by now write an entire book on "screw-ups I've made or been party to."

126. **Get the A/V and other production details dead right.** I often joke to my principal client: "*Sorry, don't have time to be nice to you. I've got to make friends with the most important people in my life this morning—the show's production staff.*" FYI: I'm not

kidding. You need these folks on your side. They're professionals; they're going to do their best. On the other hand, when you go the extra mile to be pleasant to them, they'll (duh) go out of their way to go the extra mile for you. Spend as much time with the crew as you can—going over every little (no such thing as “little”) detail of the production. There is no better investment. (Funny, the night after I wrote this I had a nightmare—it was about screwed up AV at a metaphorical big event. Not surprising in the least—to me.)

127. **Treat the event staff as if your life depended on them. It does.** E.g., no temper tantrums. I have seen some idiots (a/k/a speakers) blow their top over some out-of-kilter production detail. I blow mine—but keep it waaaaaaaay inside my head. For better or for worse, the production staff is the only one you're going to have today. I am very very firm about my needs—but in a bend-over-backwards-polite way. (*Also, regardless of the provocation, a temper tantrum—large or small—is a great way to make the organizer wonder why the hell she hired you.*)

128. **Keep the room lights (way) up!** No temper tantrums, I said. Well, the closest I come is often over room lighting. I cannot have my one thousand 1-on-1 “conversations” with the audience with the lights low. I gotta see the whites of their eyes, as it were. I want bright—not “up a little bit,” but bright bright. This does, in fact, sometimes drive the show producer crazy, but, though polite, I make it clear that it must be so. (One huge reason I use bright, high contrast slides is to be sure that they're readable with the lights way up.)

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***It's a conversation:  
Keep the room lights (way) up!***

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129. **It shouldn't “look like a speech.”** I've seen speakers who “look like they're giving a speech.” (I make the unfair assumption that they've had too much “how to give a speech” training.) Their gestures are “perfect,” their posture is perfect, there is neither a crease in their suit nor a hair out of place. Again, the idea is that the speech should look and feel like a conversation in the hall, over dinner, at cocktail hour. You should look and act like a professional—no issue there. But at the same time there's an air that suggests you're comfortable with yourself, that you're comfortable being in their house. (It is their house.) It's a bit like being a party guest at a somewhat formal party with mainly strangers in attendance. You want to look “right”—but you also want to look like you're having a good time and are pleased to be in their house, club, whatever. (Not 100% sure why—but I think this is very important.)

130. **For an after-dinner speech: Not one drop of alcohol. PERIOD.** One drop = One drop. Speaking is as hard a job as there is. Believe it. (At least as hard as neurosurgery.) You must be at the top of your game—not 99%, but 100%. I’m hardly counseling you not to drink “too much.” I’m suggesting that the evidence is clear that even a single glass of wine or a single beer can “take the edge off”—and it’s an edge you will dearly need. After all, dinner speeches are the hardest of all, precisely because the audience is frequently a little lubricated themselves, as ’tis said. (FYI: I’ve made this mistake—at the “only a drop” level—and regretted it.) (FYI II: Borderline ostentatious “no booze” is also a perceived plus if you’re sitting—as you likely will be—with the Big Cheese.) (I once saw a video of a California Highway Patrol demo for kids. The kids would drive a little slalom course—ethanol free. Then they’d drink a single beer. Their youthful digestive systems notwithstanding, they’d invariably knock over two or three cones. Repeat: 99% ain’t 100%. And speaking publicly does make neurosurgery look like a lark—I don’t care how loud your neurosurgeon cousin yelps.)

131. Repeat: **Positive >>>>>>> Negative.** I remember a speech I completely blew. I connected, all right. I probably set back the cause I was there to champion. I went over it and over it and came to a clear conclusion. I was mad as hell about patient safety—and it was clear from my posture and tone of voice that I was pissed off at *them*, oh yes, one at a time. I exuded personal animosity. Fact is, I *was* pissed off ... at them, personally. But that’s no way to make converts. (I returned my fee—which was very substantial.) It was absolutely positively fine for me to be furious—but I had to display empathy for them, one at a time. *“I know why these things happen. We’ve got so much going on—there’s a line a mile long in the ER, mostly of damn sick people. So, reasonably, we end up cutting some corners, skipping steps in a safety process, to get to the serious cases first. And, oh by the way, I know many of you have suffered recent staff cuts.”* Yes, I’m mad as hell, and I’m going to offer some tough-minded advice to get at the issue—but first I’ve got to oh-so-visibly feel their pain, sympathize with the conditions that block progress, cite places where stuff worked, not cases where there were screw-ups. Never ever ever ever go negative. Sure, 100% of the time you’re on stage to deal with a problem, but you must go at the situation with empathy and caring that oozes from every pore in you body! You are in that room to make friends (a precursor, the only precursor, to action), not to make enemies.

132. **After 3,000 tries, I’ve never gotten a presentation right. (Maybe someday—but not yet.)** Occasionally I feel good about a speech immediately after it’s over—and the feedback confirms that the audience was pleased. But within a few hours, I’m beating the crap out of myself, focusing on the bits I could have done better, the miscue with a particular story. And, a few times, see immediately above, I’ve totally blown a speech. In short, it happens. This is an insanely tough business, and like anything else, most of your learning comes from your screw-ups, big and small. So keep improving—but don’t beat yourself up too badly.

133. **All sales all the time.** Speaking is a pure sales activity. You are trying to persuade strangers to buy into some ideas you think are of the utmost importance. You are, pure

and simple, selling ideas. I admit it to audiences—compare myself to a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman, with pride rather than shame: “I’m here peddlin’ stuff. This is my 3,001<sup>th</sup> cold call. Done ’em in 67 countries. [I think that’s accurate.] Yup, there are three or four things I care so damned much about that I can’t find it in me to quit. So, then, prepare for the encyclopedia salesman’s pitch.” (Along the way, I often remind them of those remarks, “How’m I doin’? Am I makin’ my case? Or do I really have to get down and dirty here?”)

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## *All sales all the time!*

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134. **ASK FOR/“CLOSE” THE SALE!** Consistent with the point immediately above, you must ask for the sale—be a closer. Remind them in a few places of the key point you’re covering. Ask them rhetorically if you are making progress. Of course you won’t know for sure—though body language is a great cue. But you will be pressing the point, and begging on bended knee that they buy in to your product’s attributes.

135. **Assume that your speech length may be cut, with 15-minutes notice, from 50 minutes to 30 minutes—be prepared, and give the speech of your life.** At times I’ve been placed on an agenda after, say, three speeches and an awards ceremony. Sure, they are paying me a tidy sum—but for some important reason they can’t extend this part of the event. Hence, on zero to 15 minutes notice, I’m told that this speech I’ve been prepping for days will be cut from 50 minutes to 30 minutes. Wow! But there it is—and at the moment you’re just the hired hand. Deal with it. I actually prep for it. Even though I’m using a carefully constructed PowerPoint presentation, I carry a stack of, say, 25 or 30 notecards. I can furiously sort these and create on the spot a new speech. It rarely happens—but “rarely” and “never” are very different words; I’d guess I’ve had to deal with this on 25 occasions. Sometimes it’s much worse. You are making a presentation to an executive team, say. At the last minute, something comes up (not that unusual), and your hyper-meticulously-prepared-over-the-last-three-weeks 23-minute time slot is reduced to, yes, nine minutes. You must have a carefully crafted fallback version of your remarks which will take nine minutes and zero seconds to present—this only comes off brilliantly if you’ve prepared brilliantly for such a contingency.

136. Remember JFK's immortal words: *“The only reason to give a speech is to change the world.”*

137. And those of Adlai Stevenson: *“In classical times when Cicero had finished speaking, the people said, ‘How well he spoke,’ but when Demosthenes had finished speaking, they said, ‘Let us march.’”*

138. And G.B. Shaw's: *“The problem with communication ... is the ILLUSION that it has been accomplished.”*

139. Enjoy it! Practice it! **It's a Hoot!** And it can become, as it has for

me: **THE ULTIMATE TURN-ON!** I love to study the topics I care about. I love to write—or at least to have written. But I really truly absolutely love the challenge of speaking/presenting. The challenge of getting into people's heads as a trusted colleague in the space of 45 minutes—of having a true dialogue rather than producing a monologue. The thrill, upon occasion, of closing the sale. I understand why so many hate public speaking—it's a vocation, not an avocation, and thence should be worked at. But, in fact, almost every job or non-job activity depends upon presenting or de facto presenting. So, since it's what we do, why not try to make it into a pleasurable act after which at least some of the recipient-colleagues will indeed say: "*Let us march.*"

Golden Bay  
New Zealand  
19 March 2013



## **Presentation Excellence: 139 Considerations**

1. Total commitment to the Problem/Project/Outcome.
2. I don't want to be here. I have to be here.
3. Know what the hell you're doing unless you specifically make it clear that you are merely providing early conjectures.
4. Work your ass off.
5. This is important!
6. You must become a serious and formal student of talking and listening.
7. Give as many speeches as you can—of all shapes and sizes.
8. Feedback buddies are very useful, perhaps essential.
9. A compelling “Story line”/“Plot.”
10. Stories.
11. Stories.
12. More stories.
13. Long stories.
14. Funny stories.
15. Sad stories.
16. Stories with heroes.
17. Stories with goats.
18. Stories about famous people.
19. Stories about the clerk or the housekeeper.
20. Stories which reveal the speaker's failings.
21. Stories within stories.
22. Then more stories.
23. The bigger the point, the smaller the supporting vignette/s. The theme per se will be forgotten. The compelling/illustrative vignette will [long] be remembered.
24. *I conclude ... NOTHING. The conclusions ... EMERGE.*
25. A Presentation is an Act. You are an actor.
26. Relax! Be yourself! ARE YOU NUTS?
27. It'll take 20 tries/repetitions to get a vignette just right.
28. Enough data to sink a tanker—but keep 98% in reserve.
29. When it comes to presenting data: For God's sake ... avoid “clever.”
30. Make it clear that you've done a Staggering Amount of Homework, even though you are exhibiting but a tiny fraction.
31. Don't overdo it—but use your bio and make it clear that you “belong in the room.”
32. Know the data from memory—manipulate it in your head as necessary. Upon occasion, you have to throw the whole damn outline away nine minutes into an hour-long presentation!
33. Make it clear you're dealing in hypotheses, not certainties.
34. Great data are imperative, but also—and, in fact, primarily—you must play to emotion. Emotion is the sticky stuff.
35. Carefully construct the emotional hooks.
36. Mix calm with loud—presentation melody.

37. Tone of voice overwhelms content!
38. Make a supportable case, but don't be a smartass. The goal is to appear persuasive—not to be “the smartest guy in the room.”
39. Always make it clear (CLEAR = CLEAR) that you have the utmost respect for the audience.
40. A bulging library of Stories/Illustrations/Vignettes.
41. If you're going to have great stories, you must constantly be on the lookout for and, thence, collecting great stories.
42. Walk the streets—looking for great, timely stories.
43. Use vignettes from life—even if you're talking, say, to a techie audience.
44. “Death by PowerPoint” is (or can be) a load of crap.
45. Give it away!
46. Slides with quotes provide 98% of my credibility—it's not *me* yelling at you about an “obvious” point!
47. Slides and credibility II: I can read a Churchill quote that's to the point. That's one thing. But when the Churchill quote is on the Big Screen—it's a remarkably different situation.
48. The slide—every slide—must be exquisitely readable from the very back of the room!
49. By hook or by crook ... CONNECT. Connect or bust.
50. CONNECT! CONNECT! CONNECT!
51. CONNECT! CONNECT! CONNECT!
52. CONNECT! CONNECT! CONNECT!
53. You have all the time in the world to connect.
54. Work the audience in the corridor, in their seats as they get settled—that's the real “warm up.”
55. Podiums suck! Get out on the playing field!
56. Get out on the playing field—at least for a moment or two—even in huge auditoriums.
57. Podiums suck redux.
58. Forget that crap about starting out by “telling 'em what you're going to tell them”—first, they've got to get to know you, and you ... MUST ... befriend them. PERIOD.
59. Make your points inductively, not deductively.
60. You are merely the medium—not the message.
61. It's not about you—especially if you are a renowned figure. It's all about ... THEM.
62. There must be more than a handful of “surprises” ... some key facts that are not commonly known/are counter-intuitive (no reason to do the presentation in the first place if there are no surprises/“Wow”s).
63. Numbering scheme—the patina and cognitive comfort of order.
64. Be aware of differing cognitive styles—particularly M-F.
65. Be aware of differing communication styles—in general.
66. And then there are international borders!
67. And then there are international borders II.

68. And then there are international borders III.
69. Know your audience demographics cold—to the penny!
70. Framework last.
71. But summarize from time to time—make it clear that we’re on an adventure together.
72. “Stuff” ... not “takeaways.”
73. Character of “stuff”: Little BIG Things.
74. Make it clear that you are a Man/Woman of Action ... and that Execution Excellence is your First, Middle, and Last Name!
75. Be “in command” but don’t “show off.” (If you’re brilliant they’ll figure it out for themselves.)
76. Pay attention to the Senior Person present, but not too much. (Don’t look like/act like/be a “suck-up.”)
77. You are here for ... Modal Woman/Modal Man. But first you must *find* Modal Woman/Modal Man.
78. The power of the walk into the room.
79. FYI: You will not win ’em all. In fact you’ll most certainly have a low batting average.
80. Revel in lousy feedback. If everybody liked your speech, you’re in trouble.
81. Self-deprecation. HUGE.
82. If you don’t know something ... ADMIT IT!
83. Refer to the client’s industry again and again.
84. Don’t ever ever ever give off a single negative vibe about the participants and their industry or yourself—if, for instance, you think they’re all greedy pigs or warmongers, you shouldn’t be there.
85. Negative doesn’t sell. Period.
86. Negativism can kill a speech in ... 30 seconds. Believe it!
87. “The other” screwed up—not them; they must figure out they’re the bad guys on their own.
88. LISTENING ... is the most important skill that any leader or non-leader (or speaker) can have.
89. Effective listening can be learned and practiced.
90. You have to work as hard at becoming a great listener as you do at becoming a great piano player or a great golfer or neurosurgeon.
91. Speaking is all about ... LISTENING.
92. Speaking is all about ... LISTENING. In the course of a 1-hour speech, you will literally make 100 adjustments, or more—and some of them will be enormous.
93. Speak in “Plain English” ... keep the jargon to a minimum. Simple declarative sentences. PERIOD.
94. Swearing offends. So don’t.
95. Life away from home: Make love to your interpreters—and help them. You are completely at the mercy of your interpreters when dealing in a foreign language. NEVER FORGET THAT.
96. Get the language ratio right! Pay attention to it! Keep paying attention!
97. Consider/cater to the spouses. They more or less become as much a part of the conversation as their other halves.

98. A Q & A session can make you—or break you—even if it’s only 10 minutes long.
99. Q & A: Mind your manners.
100. Q & A: It’s ALWAYS a “great question.”
101. Q & A: “Keep your answers short.” BULLSHIT.
102. Q & A: The debater’s Big Secret/To some extent, regardless of the question, make the point *you* want to make
103. Q & A: Humor here really helps. But ... handle with care.
104. Q & A: No: “Yes, but ...” Yes: “Yes, and ...”
105. Q & A: Don’t cut off a long-winded speaker until the audience gets fidgety—and de facto does the dirty work themselves.
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135. Assume that your speech length may be cut, with 15-minutes notice, from 50 minutes to 30 minutes—be prepared, and give the speech of your life.

136. Remember JFK's immortal words: *"The only reason to give a speech is to change the world."*
137. And those of Adlai Stevenson: *"In classical times when Cicero had finished speaking, the people said, 'How well he spoke,' but when Demosthenes had finished speaking, they said, 'Let us march.'"*
138. And G.B. Shaw's: *"The problem with communication ... is the ILLUSION that it has been accomplished."*
139. Enjoy it! Practice it! It's a Hoot! And it can become, as it has for me: THE ULTIMATE TURN-ON!

## APPENDIX

### **The Interviewing 59: Toward Questioning/Listening\* Excellence**

*Interviewing/asking questions is a critical—and under-studied and under-practiced—skill. Few have treated it as a skill to be mastered akin to learning to play the piano. In my remarks about speaking/presenting, I brought a pretty decent track record (or at least a long one) to the dance. Here, I claim to be seasoned—but not an expert. I learned interviewing—albeit received not an iota of formal training—as a consultant at McKinsey & Co. I had a couple of excellent mentors, one in particular, Allen Puckett. With deference to the McKinsey experience, the essay here is tilted in the direction of the way consultants extract information from clients. Subsequently, I have been engaged continuously in research for my speeches and books. While I have had enormous support, I have done some heavy lifting myself along the way. (I’ve also ended up doing a fair amount of on air TV interviewing over the years.) Hence, this relatively short exposition comes from a “seasoned” interviewer—but not one of noticeably outstanding skill. Still, I hope it at least provides a nudge in the direction of getting you to consider the abiding importance of this skill, and the degree to which it can be studied and practiced.*

Herewith ...

**1. INTERVIEWING/INFORMATION EXTRACTION IS AN “ART” WELL WORTH MASTERING!** This essay is primarily about presenting—a skill of matchless importance. But to have something worthy to present, you’ve gotta have data. Personally, reading is my favorite tool. But I also believe in the DEM/Direct Extraction Method. Which is to say that interviewing/asking questions is an enormously important skill—the subject of a library full of books—which is near the top of the “[critically important stuff] they don’t teach you at business school” list. I never learned a thing about this until I went to work at McKinsey & Co., where Interviewing Excellence is pretty much Skill #1. But even McKinsey failed to provide any formal training—a monstrous oversight! Interviewing/asking questions can be learned and practiced. I urge you to do so. Really really really urge you to do so. Can you call yourself an expert interviewer? If not, why not? After all, as noted earlier, what do we—leaders/analysts—do? Talk. (Present.) Listen. (Question/Interview.)

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\*At my website [excellencenow.com](http://excellencenow.com), you will find my ultimate presentation. (We call it MOAP/Mother Of All Presentations.) It’s in excess of 4,000 slides long, and amounts to more or less “everything I know.” One of the most prominent items is: LISTENING. I go so far as to say that “Strategic Listening” is arguably Core Competence/Competitive Advantage #1 for organizations of all flavors and sizes. I am deadly serious.

*What do we—  
leaders/analysts—  
do? Talk. (Present.)  
Listen. (Question/  
Interview.)*

2. **Don't overschedule—2 or 3 in-depth interviews are a solid day's work.** (More than that is lunacy and will lead to shallow results.) In my past days at McKinsey, there were some productivity nuts among the partners who pushed their troops to bag a half-dozen, or even more, interviews a day. I just didn't get it. At the end of any interview I would be exhausted—from trying to gain the trust of and get inside the head of the interviewee; and from digging deeper, and then deeper, way beyond the interviewee's comfort zone. I could upon rare occasion get through three a day—but I considered two in which I'd found some gold to be a monumental achievement. Rushing an interview is sheer madness—in my opinion.

3. **If you're not exhausted at the end of an interview you weren't digging in and interacting sufficiently.** If all your senses are attuned, a single interview will leave you in tatters. Or ... it should.

4. **Save, if possible, the "Big Guy/Gal" until last—that is, until you know what the hell you're doing!** Again, in my McKinsey days, there was often a pell-mell rush to schedule an interview with Ms. Big. And a couple of her colleagues on Mount Olympus. I'd call it another of the most grave errors. Why? First, you don't want to go near Ms. Big until your ducks are in order—that is, you've done your homework 10X over. Which in turn means she should more or less be last on the list if at all possible. Second, such interviews usually mostly amount to formalities—important to establish a bit of a bond and demonstrate that you are reasonably competent, but of marginal (at best) value in approaching the problem. The data that matters, frankly, and something approaching the truth, will mostly come from folks 2 or 3 or even 4 levels "down" in the organization. ("Up" to me—it's where the work's done.)

5. **Go "down there" ... waaaaaaay "down" there.** "Digging" for information? So ... dig! If you're determined to get the real picture—I presume you are—then, indeed, the "big guys/women" are the last, and often least revealing, place to look. Consider this case: Middle-ranking CIA operative Gust Avrakotos was the key player in the extraordinary story covered in George Crile's book *Charlie Wilson's War*, about the successful undercover U.S.-led effort to dislodge the Russian Army from Afghanistan in 1988, a crucial step in bringing the Cold War to an end. Gust batted "well above his weight"—that is, he accomplished miracles amidst one of the world's most intransigent bureaucracies—said Central Intelligence Agency. And Gust had, more or less, a single secret: Namely, the "invisible 95%" of the agency's people were in effect working for him. As Crile put it, "He had become something of a legend with these people who manned the underbelly of the Agency [CIA]." That is, Avrakotos apparently knew every "top floor" CIA executive secretary by name—and had helped many of them sort out



personal or professional problems; the folks in the mailroom and in the bowels of the computer operations affairs were also the subject of Gust's intense and affectionate attentions. In effect, you could say that Gust was "Commander-in-Chief of the Invisible 95%"—which allowed him to make extraordinary things happen despite furious resistance from his bosses and bosses' bosses sitting atop a very rigid organization. Well, this story translates directly into the saga of great interviewing—and problem solving in general. The real data on "how things are done around here" lies below the surface—where the real work itself is done. So by hook or by crook, gain access two or three—or four—levels "down," and the world, after a lot of hard work, will be your oyster. As in Gust's case, it will probably be easier than you think; these denizens-of-the-deep-and-keeper-of-all-secrets are rarely recognized for their invaluable contributions; the fact of paying attention to them per se is of profound importance and will most likely lead to discovery of many a vein of gold.

**6. REPEAT: The truly "good stuff" lies waiting in the "underbelly" of the organization.** Got it?

**7. "Underbelly" residents are the ones who are most likely to shoot straight with you—and they have the best raw data.** A lot of underbelly denizens have been waiting years for you/someone like you to knock on their door. (No "stratosphere types" have bothered.) They are delighted to be acknowledged per se, and they've often got a lot to get off their collective chests. Moreover, of course, they're simply better informed about the likes of process details.

**8. BUT: In order to tap in to the mother lode "down there"—you must achieve trust and guarantee anonymity.** This is obviously far easier said than done. The assumption, in consulting, is that you're in the pocket of the top dudes; and, perhaps that your real aim is to achieve efficiencies that endanger the "underbelly's" jobs. (Often, there's a lot of truth in both observations.) The point is not that you will succeed in overcoming suspicion, but that you must be aware and acknowledge those fears when you sit down for a discussion. Moreover, the trust building part of the interview ain't going to happen in a flash. It'll take time.

**9. Find a comfy/"safe"/neutral setting for all interviews. THIS IS ALL IMPORTANT! (Worst case: You on the other side of his/her desk.)** The "big secret" of interviewing success is achieving, in short order, trust and comfort. Let's start with comfort. Rule #1: Never conduct an interview, if at all possible, on the opposite side of the desk from an interviewee. A couch or a chair in the office is better. A couch or comfy chairs in a small, private space, a bit away from the fray, perhaps out of the building is ... nirvana. Comfortable locations go a long way in turning an "interview" into a "conversation"—which is the key to the mint. I cannot put too much stress on this variable. Work your backside off to achieve such a physical context. (This is true for *all* forms of questioning—comfy and isolated is safety to induce honesty.)

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***Find a comfy/“safe”/neutral setting for all interviews. THIS IS ALL IMPORTANT!***

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10. **Phones may be very “comfortable”—apparently safe—places to chat.** This seems contrary to the last suggestion—and indeed it is for the average lengthy fact-finding or assessment interview. On the other hand, if you’re looking for a particular piece of information that’s a bit sensitive, several of my top-interviewer-factfinder colleagues have observed that face-to-face (and email-to-email as well) is scarier than phone-to-phone. Face-to-face makes the interviewee put a direct I.D. to the questioner, and, of course, email-to-email leaves a trail.

11. **DO YOUR DAMNED HOME WORK! (On the interviewee, the subject matter.)** “Do your damned homework” is true 100% of the time regardless of the subject—and interviewing is as good a case in point as any. Find out anything you can from anywhere about the person you’re about to talk to. Use the Web, obviously. But I’ve also found that six-degrees-of-separation works with many interviewees—or, most likely, three degrees. That is, there’s a friend of a friend or colleague of a colleague who worked with her or went to school with her—whatever. Such connections are precious. More impersonally, if you have any sort of trusting style, you can ask a stranger in the organization, “Hey I’m about to have a chat with Ms. X. Any obvious land mines I need to tiptoe around?” In 9 of 10 cases you’ll get a straight—and invaluable—answer. At any rate, find some sort of connection if at all possible. (Hint: It *is* possible.) As to the other half of this point, obviously go in with your subject matter homework complete—**maybe a ratio of 10:1 is about right; i.e., 10 hours of homework for an hour-long interview.**

12. **Start with a little bit (LITTLE) of local small talk. But get some tips on the interviewee ahead of time; he may be one of the “brusque ones” who considers any small talk a catastrophic waste of his Imperial Time.** On the one hand, you want to come off as a serious professional. On the other, there is a 100% necessity of establishing a personal bond—among other things, that’s the word from my superstar hostage negotiator pal George Kohlreiser! With luck (i.e., hard work!), you’ve found out something about her college athletic prowess, such as the fact that she was an NCAA 100-meter butterfly champion. Or the like. On the other hand ... there is an “other hand.” Near the top, you’ll often find the Kings and Queens of Brusque. For real, or as part of the act, she or he has not a second to waste—so don’t waste a second. As you are sitting down, succinctly state what you want to get out of the interview and ask your first question before settling your butt in your seat. Which is to say, duh, conversational styles are all over the map—with work, you’ll have figured out ahead of time what sort of buzzsaw or soft pillow you’re walking in on. Message: Pillow or sawblade, you really really need to get this right!!

13. **Concoct a ... LONG LIST ... of questions. (You'll likely only use 10% of it, but that's okay.)** All the superb interviewers I've crossed paths with have been uber-prepared, and for the best results, not least of which is enhancing your own self confidence, a detailed and long list of questions is a necessity. Fact is, you'll only get through 10%. Or maybe not even that—the interview may end up going in a direction you never imagined. (Often the best of all possible worlds!) But you must be ready. Suppose the interviewee can't be budged from 10-word answers; in that case, you damn well have a list of 100 questions! Needless (I hope) to say, prepping questions is a painstaking/time-consuming task—as usual.

14. **Prepare a ... SHORT LIST ... of questions you *must* get answered.** You also need to have your “Top 5” questions nailed down. Oh how many times I've walked out of an interview and when writing my first summary realized that I completely missed one/two of my most important “must answer” questions.

15. **Note-taking is more sensitive than you may think.** Even though the interviewee knows you're there to scrounge, upon not so infrequent occasion, sensitive data, hyperactive note-taking, let alone taping, may well kill trust. (No note-taking is a sign of not caring—it's a delicate balance.) You don't want to appear sneaky, but you want to look a bit nonchalant. Practice! (Senior folks get off on busy, ostentatious note-taking—confirms the worth of their every utterance.)

16. **Begin by briefly reviewing your assignment—why you're here.** This doesn't have to go on for more than 90 seconds; in fact, it's best to limit it to about that amount of time. But it is imperative—makes you appear organized and professional. Within limits, it's best if it's matter-of-fact. If there's an 800# gorilla in the room, best to avoid raising his ire at first—his presence will be made known soon enough.

17. **Don't be a total wimp!** Sometimes, in fact rather frequently, there are controversial topics that must be dealt with. Some interviewees know what's coming—and welcome it with a smile, though it may be a rueful smile. Others will tap dance around the controversial stuff. You need not—and ought not be—a bull in a China shop, but don't wimp out either; you must get through the tough stuff somehow, even if it leaves a somewhat sour taste in the interviewee's mouth. (Not all that sour—you'll quite likely want to make a subsequent visit.)

18. **Do not confuse an interview with an Inquisition.** Again, it's paramount that trust be established, and that you achieve the feel of a conversation between colleagues. **Be civil if it kills you. Be respectful if it kills you. Be kind if it kills you.** She or he may be a rude bastard—but there's no value in your getting down in the mud.

19. **Gaining trust is paramount.** For example, I often say in the beginning, “Look, I worked for McKinsey for eight years; we were often wrong, but we know how to keep secrets.” (Not as much a winner now that a former MD bagged a federal felony conviction for insider trading. Damn his eyes.) You don’t want to bore the interviewee with your bio, but somehow you need to cite an ironclad reason why he/she should trust you to be probing—but a paragon of discretion! Me, again: “In my last government assignment, in the ‘70s, I had a Top Secret++ security clearance—I’m somewhat familiar with not spilling pots of beans.” Figure this out in advance—and somehow bring it more or less up directly at the start. *That’s the technical part of establishing trust—much of the non-technical 90% percent of gaining trust depends on ... BODY LANGUAGE.* In most situations, body language overwhelms all else; in a short-ish interview this is 10X true.

## 20. **DAMN IT! IT’S (almost) ALL ABOUT BODY LANGUAGE.**

21. **Body language. Professional but relaxed.** Relaxed as in giving off vibes that say “another day at the office.” That is, not tense, not the look of the Grand Inquisitor. Not slouched ... but not stiff. “Affable” ... but not a “lightweight.” (D.D. Eisenhower was tough as nails and a roaring inferno inside—but his external affability and self-effacement, so many said, was his greatest strength.)

22. **Adroitness, as in so many situations, is a cherished interviewer’s skill; rigidity is death; if the interview goes “according to plan,” and there are no “ah-has,” you’re not doing your job.** This is just a boring reminder that nothing ever goes according to plan—and if it does, then it’s not very interesting. So be on your toes. The reason I say this at all is that I’ve interacted with more than a few (inflexible/more or less worthless) interviewers who stick to their script—and bypass opening after opening that the interviewee offers up. You are not participating in a race to see how quickly you can get through a daunting list of questions. I’d bet a pretty penny that the average interviewee offers up a half-dozen openings in a typical 30-minute interview.

23. **Short can be sweet.** I’ve had 5-minute media interviews in the hands (mouth) of an expert that yielded more paydirt than a standard 1-hour interviewer. It’s a real art—and I ain’t no practitioner. But it can be within your purview if you’re as serious about this as I urge you to be.

24. **ALWAYS ASK FOR EXAMPLES!** When *she* says, “Customer Service is in good shape,” *you* ask for specifics—hard data, recent Customer Service successes (and failures). There are a lot of capital letters in this point’s summary. For a damn good reason. Interviewee editorial comments may be of some value—but not much. You want to walk away with a data trove. And that data trove consists—90% plus—of hardnosed down and dirty examples. Am I clear? No examples—a (total) waste of time. (FYI: You want damned examples even if it’s a 10-minute interview.) Are there any exceptions to this rule? NO!

*Always ask  
for examples!*

25. **Dig and dig—and then dig.** An example should almost always yield another, more fine-grained example. Dig and dig. Then dig some more.

26. **Pursue processes: “And what happens next?” “And then?”** A good or bad example concerning, say, customer service, invariably involves a complicated process. Chase it! “So, the customer information next goes to whom? And what do they do with it, who do they pass it to?” And so on. You should come away with, de facto or de jure, a rock-solid process chart extracted from almost any example. (Though, doubtless, with holes to fill and assertions to check.)

27. **Repeat what you heard.** Time may be of the essence, but you must check to make sure you’re getting it right—and to give the interviewee an opportunity to amend what she’s said. “Okay, I think I get that. Sorry, but let me show you the diagram I sketched, and you can correct it.” (FYI: Some of the best stuff emerges from an exercise like this.)

28. **“And how long does that step usually take?”** The example, as discussed above, invariably involves a process. A large part of any problem is doubtless time lags. Chase ’em! “So when it gets to the guys in finance, how long do they usually sit on it? Best case? Worst case?”

29. **Look for—and put under a microscope—the Great Walls of China.** Cross-functional stickiness is frequently the #1 cause of delays and snafus in general. Chase ’em! Get details on how stuff crosses—or fail to cross—borders. As always (excuse the reminder), the devil lives in the details.

30. **No matter how much you feel like an idiot, don’t quit until you understand. THE INTERVIEWEE ALWAYS TALKS IN SHORTHAND—using the jargon of the Corporate Culture. You’ve got to crack the code.** We all talk in shorthand, and in the process de facto assume away 85% of the problem/process because it’s “obvious” to us. Keep pushing until you figure out what’s being said. Often, X will actually mean not-X. (No kidding.)

31. **Nothing is “obvious.”** Ask. Ask. And then ask again. Like icebergs and then some, 90-plus% of the interviewee’s reality is submerged.

32. **Dumb questions are the smartest questions.** You are not here to show off your Harvard MBA. You are a supplicant. You will not understand most of what you are hearing—to sort it out, the dumber the questions the better.

33. **IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU.** We all have a tendency to show off—in this instance, how well we have prepared for the interview. So we end up, to an

extent, answering the questions we ask. Well ... IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU. Dear

interviewer: **SILENCE IS GOLDEN**. (No, I understand that's not original.) You are in the room to listen—if the talk-to-listen ratio is more than, say, 1:20, you just don't get it.

34. **S-i-l-e-n-c-e is golden redux.** I'm not kidding, I got this tip from a former spy. Yup, CIA. *If you'll just keep your damn mouth shut, and keep keeping it shut, there's a good chance—after the awkward pause has become unbearable and you want to nudge things along—that something profound will come your way.* Problem, one more time: You're clever and fill the void with a clever (a/k/a useless) observation of your own. Resist the temptation!

35. **History? Politics?** In complex decisions, there is *always* a lot of organizational and personal politics involved. This can be delicate, and should be treated as such, but the more you can flesh out the political issues the better. And a lot of those political issues have long histories. *“Well, a couple of years ago we lost a lawsuit over X; ever since then the lawyers have moved at the speed of molasses—it boggles the mind. What used to take a week can easily take a month.”*

36. **Do your levelheaded best, especially with senior folks, to figure out the hidden agenda.** You won't solve this puzzle, but a bit of discreet questioning of those a few levels down, always in good humor, may help—a lot.

37. **Organizational “culture.”** As you go along, you'll develop a sense of *“How we do things around here.”* Explicit values. Implicit values. You should be able eventually to get a pretty good picture of the habit (culture) structure of the organization—and how it's changing. (Often a problem arises when a virtue is untended, and some sort of quality issues or the like begin to arise.)

38. **If you don't figure out the “culture,” your subsequent proposals are likely to be more or less useless—or even counterproductive.** The culture alone enables—or disables—effective implementation. To deny its importance is *de facto malpractice*.

39. **Where does the buck stop? Is it fuzzy? Is it clear? Does it cause endless confusion?** In a complex example, various people are the “deciders.” Who are they? When do they pass the buck upward? How long do the deciders typically sit on the case?

40. **Ignore (by and large) generalizations.** You are here 93.21% to gather hard (as possible) data. Generalizations rarely match the data and can lead you badly astray. The problem: They're seductive. “Ah, that explains it.”—**I DOUBT IT.**



41. It's [ALWAYS] more complicated than it looks. "Simplify" is almost always a good thing. But in interviewing, it's the kiss of death. **"Complexify" should be the interviewer's mantra.** To get at the roots of a significant problem, you must wander in a thousand directions, ceaselessly circle—and most of the time feel that you're actually losing ground. If you're *not* frustrated, well, you don't get it [yet].

42. **The interview is the beginning of the story.** If you walk out of an interview without the names of a half-dozen people to follow up with, you've blown it. One of the primary goals of any interview is to get some more names of folks who can help with your archeological digging. Likewise, you should greedily pursue stuff to read—reports from a year ago on this topic that arose or that one. In short, you will never get to the end of the road!

43. **Come hell and high water, write your notes immediately after the interview.**

**PERIOD.** I'd even go so far as to tolerate your being late for the next interview (assuming it's not a bigwig) in order to have time to insure your notes are in order—including a summary of overall impressions. The next interview will be as engaging as its predecessor. Most of your memories of the one before will be erased. Get the important stuff from #1 down before launching into #2.

44. **It's all about triangulation.** I began by asserting that two interviews, maybe three, are a full load. I do not retract a word. Yet you only get to something near the truth and flesh out a complex situation by doing, in the end, a truckload full of interviews. The truth, to a large degree, emerges from discrepancies. You hear something from the top that appears hilariously misguided two levels "down." **("Down" always in quotes—because "down" is really "up" when it comes to ferreting out a complete and largely accurate picture of anything.)** And you hear something in Finance that is hilarious to the folks in Procurement. And so on. Answer: Quantity. Triangulation. NO SHORTCUTS.

45. **STORIES! STORIES! STORIES! (MORE STORIES!)** In my remarks on speeches/presentations I said ... it's all about stories. Here, I've emphasized "examples." A good example must be shaped into a coherent, revealing story. Speech. Interview. Whatever. Always think ... STORY! The interviewer is, simply ... A COLLECTOR OF STORIES.



- 46. **STORIES!**
- 47. **STORIES!**
- 48. **STORIES!**
- 49. (**MORE** **STORIES!**)

50. **Beware** of ... **STORIES**. Having just gone on and on about examples and stories, I'll issue a belated warning. Frequently, stories don't match up with data. After all, a story is anecdotal evidence. By digging and digging and clarifying and clarifying you can get the story and the data to match. I don't retract a word I said about stories, but I do want a shadow of doubt to loom over your examples.

51. **"If you're comfortable, let's go over your Calendar for the last month, so I can understand the flow of things." Remember TP's Rule #1: YOU = YOUR CALENDAR.** *The interviewee's calendar is the hardest evidence of all concerning what matters and what her or his true priorities are.* A lot of interviewees will be shy about this—and for good reason. (Their calendars do not mirror their espoused priorities—or even come close.) Obviously, don't push to the point of irritation, but at least try. (The importance of the calendar increases with seniority; the impact of a senior's real time allocation is very important—and the espoused-real discrepancy increases with rank. "We're really pushing quality"—but it's AWOL on her calendar; common as dirt.) (Boasting time: One of my few contributions to McKinsey's interviewing coda was to introduce hard-nosed "calendar analysis.")

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*The interviewee's calendar is the hardest evidence of all concerning what matters and what her or his true priorities are.*

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52. **Dress well. DON'T OVERDRESS. (DON'T UNERDRESS.)** Look like they look, more or less; perhaps a touch more formal—this is a Serious Affair you are engaging in. Dress should always be, first and foremost, respectful to the interviewee. (Or anyone else, for that matter.) That means, for me, a bit more dressy than is the norm in the setting—but absolutely positively not off-putting. *And not showy!* (Please leave the \$20,000 Rolex in your hotel room!! Especially if you're gonna wander the shop floor or back office.) FYI: This item is a de facto part of my body language obsession—yes, obsession, and, yes, merited.

53. **NEVER ... let anything (no matter how little) distract you! You are here to give the interviewee 100.000000% of your attention.** And make that clear as a bell. E.g., no matter how tight your schedule ... NEVER LOOK AT YOUR WATCH. (Such a glance, during a presidential debate, badly wounded G.H.W. Bush's chances for a 2<sup>nd</sup> term in the White House in 1992.) Repeat: **NEVER.**

54. **Keep the door wide open for follow-up—but assume you'll never get another chance to talk to this person.** Specifically ask if you may follow up by email or phone or in person, gently, but do it nonetheless—do it for substantive reasons and do it as a mark of respect. “This was great, and that point you made about \_\_\_\_\_ is something I might want to follow up on, if that's okay.” BUT ... don't leave essential questions unasked or unanswered—assume this is your last chance with Ms. Jones, the assistant controller.

55. **REMINDER: Interviewing—asking questions in general—is the hardest work you will do in your professional career.**

*Interviewing—asking questions in general—is the hardest work you will do in your professional career.*

56. **LEARNING! Tag along with “great interviewers” in your organization.** I made three PBS films (actually, others made the films using my work—so drop the “I made”) with a director who had previously been Mike Wallace’s director at *60 Minutes*—oh my God, how much I learned—or, rather, and alas, how little I learned. Paul L. could drag stuff out of people that you couldn’t believe. (His secret #1: *“I’m just a dumb old fart trying to figure out what goes on here. HELP ME. PLEASE.”* And his body language projected the innocence of a newborn. It was beyond me—I couldn’t help showing off my self-certain cleverness.)

57. **No, you’re not FBI—but you are here to ferret out the non-obvious and occasionally unpleasant.** So: Keep Digging! (Think Woodward & Bernstein.) You have to be kind and gain trust and avoid negatives—and the like. But you also are usually dealing with a problem, so you’ll be dealing with some tetchy stuff. To be sure, to get it requires—beyond a doubt—building trust. But you also need to drill to the point that, not all that infrequently, there’s a bit of pain. If you don’t come out of the interview with some surprises that do not reflect glory on the organization you’re analyzing, or the interviewee, you may not have drilled down enough. (The dentistry imagery is purposeful.) But, to repeat an earlier point, the tough stuff is most likely to emerge from the “underbelly,” which is often laden with folks who know what the damn problem is—and how to fix it—if only their “betters” had bothered to visit and ask.

58. **Hey ... this ought to be fun.** Mastery of interviewing/questioning is painful. Very painful—i.e., it requires an enormous investment in study and practice and observation. But the payoff is enormous as you get better at it. And, fact is, even in difficult situations, you develop—or should develop—significant bonds with the person you’re gabbing with.

59. **Talking. (Presenting.) Listening. (Interviewing/questioning.) It’s how we spend the great majority of our waking hours—as a professional and, for that matter, at home and on social occasions.** Wouldn’t it be good—and useful—to be good, or better than good, at these two rarely studied practices? Think about it. Please.

## **The Interviewing 59: Toward Questioning/Listening Excellence**

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2. Don’t overschedule—2 or 3 in-depth interviews are a solid day’s work. (More than that is lunacy and will lead to shallow results.)
3. If you’re not exhausted at the end of an interview you weren’t digging in and interacting sufficiently.
4. Save, if possible, the “Big Guy/Gal” until last—that is, until you know what the hell you’re doing!
5. Go “down there” ... waaaaaaaay “down” there
6. REPEAT: The truly “good stuff” lies waiting in the “underbelly” of the organization. Got it?
7. “Underbelly” residents are the ones who are most likely to shoot straight with you—and they have the best raw data.
8. BUT: In order to tap in to the mother lode “down there”—you must achieve trust and guarantee anonymity.
9. Find a comfy/“safe”/neutral setting for all interviews. THIS IS ALL IMPORTANT!
10. Phones may be very “comfortable”—apparently safe—places to chat.
11. DO YOUR DAMNED HOME WORK! (On the interviewee, the subject matter.)
12. Start with a little bit (LITTLE) of local small talk. But get some tips on the interviewee ahead of time; he may be one of the “brusque ones” who considers any small talk a catastrophic waste of his Imperial Time.
13. Concoct a ... LONG LIST ... of questions. (You’ll likely only use 10% of it, but that’s okay.)
14. Prepare a ... SHORT LIST ... of questions you must get answered.
15. Note-taking is more sensitive than you may think.
16. Begin by briefly reviewing your assignment—why you’re here.
17. Don’t be a total wimp! Sometimes, in fact rather frequently, there are controversial topics that must be dealt with.
18. Do not confuse an interview with an Inquisition.
19. Gaining trust is paramount.
20. DAMN IT! IT’S (almost) ALL ABOUT BODY LANGUAGE.
21. Body language. Professional but relaxed.
22. Adroitness, as in so many situations, is a cherished interviewer’s skill; rigidity is death; if the interview goes “according to plan,” and there are no “ah has,” you’re not doing your job.
23. Short can be sweet.
24. ALWAYS ASK FOR EXAMPLES!
25. Dig and dig—and then dig. An example should almost always yield another, more fine-grained example. Dig and dig. Then dig some more.

26. Pursue processes: “And what happens next?” “And then?”
27. Repeat what you heard.
28. “And how long does that step usually take?”
29. Look for—and put under a microscope—the Great Walls of China. Cross-functional stickiness is frequently the #1 cause of delays and snafus in general. Chase ’em
30. No matter how much you feel like an idiot, don’t quit until you understand. **THE INTERVIEWEE ALWAYS TALKS IN SHORTHAND**—using the jargon of the Corporate Culture
31. Nothing is “obvious.”
32. Dumb questions are the smartest questions.
33. **IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU.** Dear interviewer: **SILENCE IS GOLDEN.**
34. **S-i-l-e-n-c-e** is golden redux. If you’ll just keep your damn mouth shut, and keep keeping it shut, there’s a good chance—after the awkward pause has become unbearable and you want to nudge things along—that something profound will come your way.
35. History? Politics? In complex decisions, there is always a lot of organizational and personal politics involved.
36. Do your levelheaded best, especially with senior folks, to figure out the hidden agenda.
37. Organizational “culture.”
38. If you don’t figure out the “culture,” your subsequent proposals are likely to be more or less useless—or even counterproductive.
39. Where does the buck stop? Is it fuzzy? Is it clear? Does it cause endless confusion?
40. Ignore (by and large) generalizations. They’re seductive. “Ah, that explains it.”—**I DOUBT IT.**
41. It’s [**ALWAYS**] more complicated than it looks.
42. The interview is the beginning of the story.
43. Come hell and high water, write your notes immediately after the interview. **PERIOD.**
44. It’s all about triangulation.
45. **STORIES! STORIES! STORIES! (MORE STORIES!)**
46. **STORIES!**
47. **STORIES!**
48. **STORIES!**
49. **(MORE STORIES!)**
50. Beware of ... **STORIES.**
51. “If you’re comfortable, let’s go over your Calendar for the last month, so I can understand the flow of things.” Remember TP’s Rule #1: **YOU = YOUR CALENDAR.**
52. Dress well. **DON’T OVERDRESS. (DON’T UNERDRESS.)**
53. **NEVER ...** let anything (no matter how little) distract you!
54. Keep the door wide open for follow-up—but assume you’ll never get another chance to talk to this person.
55. **REMINDER:** Interviewing—asking questions in general—is the hardest work you will do in your professional career.

56. LEARNING! Tag along with “great interviewers” in your organization.
57. No, you’re not FBI—but you are here to ferret out the non-obvious and occasionally unpleasant. So: Keep Digging!
58. Hey ... this ought to be fun.
59. Talking. (Presenting.) Listening. (Interviewing/questioning.) It’s how we spend the great majority of our waking hours—as a professional and, for that matter, at home and on social occasions. Wouldn’t it be good—and useful—to be good, or better than good, at these two rarely studied practices? Think about it. Please.