

“You can capture the essence of Garr and his work in three words: beauty/logic/Asia. A true original, and a voice worth listening to.”

Seth Godin, author of *Linchpin*

# The naked presenter

Delivering Powerful Presentations With or Without Slides

Garr Reynolds

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**Garr Reynolds**

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# Engage with Passion, Proximity, and Play

Standing up to recite information while others passively listen and perhaps take notes is the common and traditional presentation mode. But it's an ineffective way to teach, inspire, or motivate an audience. If the lone goal is the transfer of information, you are better off distributing a handout and canceling the presentation. When we finish a presentation, remember, we want the audience to be *changed*, if even only a tiny bit. We want to influence a change in people's knowledge, awareness, behavior, and so on. But unless we *engage* with the audience, none of that is possible. When there is no engagement, there is no change. True engagement assumes some level of emotional involvement or commitment on the part of both the presenter and the audience—but the responsibility to light the fire of engagement lies primarily with us, the presenters. This chapter looks at three elements involved in creating the kind of naked engagement we are looking for in today's presentations: Passion, Proximity, and Play.

## Show Your Passion

In Japanese, the word passion—*jounetsu* (情熱)—is composed of two Kanji (Chinese) characters, feeling (情) and heat (熱). Although the etymological origins for the word may differ across languages and cultures, when you think of passion today, you immediately think of strong feelings and desires associated with love—love of another person, perhaps, but also a kind of love or deep feeling and intense emotion for a calling in your life like music, art, teaching, or whatever interests in your life evoke a strong and personal commitment. Passion is by definition a strong emotion with many associated feelings such as enthusiasm and vivacity. Emotions are a good thing, of course, but we have been taught to control our emotions in order to be successful in life. Much of this is good advice as there is a strong correlation between being able to self-regulate emotions and success in school, work, and life in general.

When it comes to presentation delivery, the problem generally is not the display of too much emotion but rather the utter lack of it. The emotions missing most from the dreariest of presentations today are passion and enthusiasm. Charlie Hawkins, public speaking consultant and author of *First Aid for Meetings* (Bookpartners, 1996), highlights the need for passion in a piece he wrote for sideroad.com:

*While coaching hundreds of MBA candidates at the University of Chicago over an 11-year period, I observed that the one element separating great presenters from merely good ones is passion. Those who dared to express their passionate feelings about their subjects were consistently the most effective. Why? By revealing their passion they made connections with people that simply did not happen in straightforward analytical presentations.*

—Charlie Hawkins

Sometimes a presenter may genuinely not have a passion for the topic or is greatly disinterested in sharing his ideas with the audience.

Often, however, the passion is lacking because the presenter is hesitant to project his or her emotion, true feelings, or true level of deep interest in the subject. Showing your passion—a true bit of yourself—is risky. It's much easier just to present information, but assuming people are still listening to you, what value do you add when you just give information?

## Why are we afraid to show passion?

Many say that a man or woman who speaks passionately—who is articulate and full of hope, enthusiasm, and positivity—is an empty suit. They will say emotions do not matter. All that matters, they say, is content and evidence, period. Ironically, the very people who demand that content is everything and that emotion—and certainly passion—does not belong in “serious presentations” rail against the importance of emotion and engaging delivery in a manner that is completely emotional and heated. I know this because I have spoken to such people many times. They say it is simply the quality and structure of the information that matters—and that delivery and personal qualities, as well as things like simplicity and clarity in the design of visuals, are just not necessary.

The point that such people miss is this: Nobody ever said delivery, emotion, and passionate engagement are the only things that matter, or that they are sufficient. We only said they are *necessary* (and all too often lacking). Solid content is necessary as well, of course, but it's almost never sufficient in terms of leadership, communication, and presentations that have impact. If you are talking about trying to lead a movement, change the world, or just get your message heard and remembered, then you sure as heck better be prepared to show your passion. You don't have to be slick or polished, and you don't have to be tall or good looking, but you do have to engage, inspire, and motivate. That's what leaders do. That's what naked presenters do.



**Passion is the genesis of genius.**

**— Anthony Robbins**

## Inspired by performers

Not too long ago, I was reminded about the impact of passion on communication by an unlikely source—a live performance by the legendary band Earth Wind & Fire here in Japan. We had seats (although we never sat) front and center, which allowed the perfect vantage point for observing one of the most passionate performers I have ever seen without a microphone. You may not have heard of him. His name is Verdine White, the bassist for EWF and an original member of the group, which was founded by his older brother Maurice.

White is an incredible musician with more funk and soul in his little finger than I have in my entire body. He is absolutely crucial to the EWF sound. But what White taught me that night was how unbelievably powerful a sincere display of genuine passion could be. White does not just play bass, he communicates and connects with his “ax” as if it were an extension of himself. White never stops bouncing, running, and seeming to fly across the stage all the while displaying one of the brightest, most infectious smiles you will ever see on stage. Oh, and by the way, he was 55 years old at the time. What energy!

They are musicians. They are artists. But they are also storytellers, and in a way, presenters while they are on stage. And like any good presentation, their performance is a powerful mix of great content, powerful visuals, and an emotional human touch that makes a lasting connection with the audience. The personal qualities that White’s performance had—which our presentations must have—are: (1) passion, (2) energy, (3) sincerity, (4) a smile, and (5) total engagement with the present, front and center. How many times have you seen a presenter display all five of these qualities in a presentation?

We are deeply social animals, designed to be together. We create language and culture and come together to work, to dance, to play music, and so on. When you think about it, why is it we pay money to attend a live concert? We say it’s for the music, but you can get the same music—with better sound quality—by listening to the CD at home. We’re drawn to the live event in strong measure because

it's a much richer experience when we can see the musician's faces and body movements and feel what they are feeling. The experience is enriched and more memorable when we can see and feel the performers' displays of passion.

Yes, an R&B/soul performance is different from a business presentation, but in a very real sense, they are both sincere performances. Dale Carnegie says the same thing in *How to Develop Self-Confidence & Influence People by Public Speaking* (Pocket, 1991). "Put your heart and soul into your talking. Real emotional sincerity will help more than all the rules." Carnegie also stresses the importance of exuding energy in your talk. "It is magnetic. People cluster around an energetic speaker like geese around a field of autumn wheat." Carnegie goes on to talk about the importance of smiling sincerely and displaying interest in your audience. "Like begets like," he says. "If we are interested in our audience...our audience will be interested in us."



We are naturally drawn to energetic presenters just as we are attracted to passionate performers.

## Think interested not interesting

If presenters think about an audience at all, they usually worry about themselves not being perceived as interesting. However, the issue is not so much you showing how interesting you are—it's more about you showing how *interested* you are. We are attracted to people who are deeply interested in their work or topic and *also* interested in us. We like people who are interested in sharing their passion and interest in a way we can understand. People who are genuinely and deeply interested in what they are doing are demonstrating their passion. Interested people are the kind we want to listen to. Anyone can be more interesting superficially. But when someone is deeply interested, this brings us in and we want to know more. When they show they are interested in us, we are drawn closer.

Letting people know how and why you are deeply interested in the topic—and why they should be too—is very natural. People can see your passion and they can feel that it is real. This is very different from using performance techniques alone (such as speaking in a louder voice, emphasizing key words, using exaggerated body language) to demonstrate passion or to look more interesting than the typical presenter. You can't fake interest and the passion that accompanies it. So the question is not “How can I be more interesting to this audience,” but “How can I demonstrate why this topic or information is important and how can I show why it matters to them?”

## Tapping Emotions

Like it or not, we are emotional beings. Logic is necessary, but rarely sufficient when presenting. We must appeal to “the right brains” as well. The need to appeal to people’s emotions is fundamental, yet often neglected. Here’s what the authors of *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots* (Free Press, 2005) say:

*In business, our natural instincts are always left-brained. We create tight arguments and knock the audience into submission with facts, figures, historical graphs, and logic.... The bad news is that the barrage of facts often works against you. My facts against your experiences, emotions, and perceptual filters. Not a fair fight—facts will lose every time.*

— Brian Fugere, Chelsea Hardaway, and Jon Warshawsky

As presenters, we truly have a difficult job in trying to convince people to change their thinking or take new action. People tend to over-interpret their own personal and vivid experiences, and may ignore or remain very skeptical of new information—no matter how scientific or objective—that is contrary to their current beliefs.

Professor Richard Brislin from the University of Hawaii touches on a very similar phenomenon in his book *Understanding Culture’s Influence on Behavior* (Wadsworth Publishing, 1999). Dr. Brislin discusses why people make dubious conclusions in spite of evidence to the contrary. For example, let’s say you read many reports in respectable periodicals that conclude Seattle is a very good place for young graphic designers to find high-paying jobs. Complete with this evidence, you begin sending off your resume, contacting companies, and looking into housing in the Seattle area. Later, when you tell a friend, Lisa, about your desire to relocate to Seattle, she becomes practically apoplectic. “What?” she says. “My brother has a design degree from Berkeley and has been up in Seattle for over a year without finding a full-time design gig!” Lisa tells her brother’s horror

story of Seattle. So now you have the word of one friend versus loads of factual, detailed, documented information that runs contrary to your friend's opinion. Who do you believe? Citing early work on social cognition, Brislin suggests that it is highly likely you will be more persuaded by your friend's testimony, which was personal and more colorful, emotional, and vivid compared to the reading of labor reports in periodicals. And the fact that Lisa is "telling her story" about her brother makes her information more memorable.

We really have our work cut out for us. Our audiences bring their own emotions, experiences, biases, and perceptual filters that are no match for data and facts alone. We must be careful not to make the mistake of thinking that data can speak for itself, no matter how convincing, obvious, or solid it may seem to us. We may indeed have the best product or solid research, but if we plan a dull, dispassionate, "death by PowerPoint" snooze-fest, we will lose. The best presenters target both the logical left and the emotional right brains—that is, "the whole mind."



Each audience is different, though some are more skeptical than others. Regardless, a good presentation must appeal both to the audience's need for logic and for emotion.

## Emotions and memory

If you can arouse the emotions of your audience with a relevant story, image, or piece of data that is unexpected or surprising—or sad or touching and so on—your material will be better remembered. When a member of your audience experiences an emotionally charged event in your presentation, the amygdala in the limbic system of the brain releases dopamine into that person's system. And dopamine, says, Dr. John Medina, “greatly helps with memory and information processing.”

You can see the appeal to emotion in TV advertisements. A fantastic example of a 60-second spot that makes an impact and gets its message across by tapping into many different emotions is the award-winning Apple commercial called “1984.” Regarded by many as the best and most memorable TV ad of all time, it ran during Super Bowl XVIII and introduced the Macintosh for the first time. Rather than trying to persuade the viewers with a logical argument that explains the benefits of the new type of computer, the commercial features an athletic heroine running to save the world from the scourge of conformity, which is represented by an Orwellian Big Brother talking head projected on a large screen in front of row after row of lifeless conforming subjects. While security guards close in on her, she is able to throw a sledgehammer over the heads of the seated conformists. The sledgehammer crashes into the screen, causing it to explode. The setting is industrial with dark blue and gray colors that contrast with the heroine's bright red running shorts and clean, white tank top featuring a subtle graphic of the Macintosh computer. The 60-second commercial exhibits solid conflict and contrasts and is filled with emotions ranging from sex appeal to threat to fear and surprise.

While your situation is not the same as making a 60-second advertisement, there is something to learn here. Ask yourself, for example, what it is that you're *really* selling. It is not the features or the thing itself. It's the *experience* of the thing and all the emotions related to it that you are really selling. Use stories and examples that are vivid and bring people's emotions into your narrative.

## The power of emotional contagion

During a business trip to Denmark a couple of years ago, my friends and I spent a few hours in Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen. This famous amusement park, built in 1843, apparently inspired Walt Disney when he was dreaming up his own famous amusement park. While in Tivoli Gardens, I received a strong reminder of something we all know but too often forget: that emotions are contagious and our emotional displays can and do influence those around us, often in ways we're not even aware of. We spent several minutes in an area of the park under and next to white-knuckle rides complete with screams and shrills—mostly of joy and excitement, but mixed with a touch of, perhaps, terror. Everyone on the ground was having a great time just watching the fun the other people were having on the attractions.



One of the attractions at Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen.



It was a surprisingly enjoyable atmosphere; I could have spent much more time just sitting and watching the smiles, laughter, and displays of exhilaration of complete strangers. A grandmother sitting next to me got a real kick out of watching her teenage granddaughter and listening to her scream with excitement every time the ride whizzed by our heads. The grandmother was absolutely delighted. So was I. The remarkable thing was, even though I was not actually experiencing the excitement these strangers were having on the scary rides, I was feeling completely amused and happy by the displays of excitement and joy all around. The giddy emotion was utterly infectious and everyone in the crowd felt it. What we were experiencing that sunny afternoon in Copenhagen was a form of emotional contagion, which is the tendency to feel the emotions others are feeling and even mimic their facial expressions and moods.

## Mirror neurons

In the last decade, based on earlier work at the University of Parma, Italy, researchers have gained good insights into something called mirror neurons. A mirror neuron is a neuron in the brain that fires both when you do something and when you simply see someone else doing the same behavior—even though you have not moved. It's almost as if you, the observer, are actually engaging in the same behavior as the person you are watching. Perhaps this is why watching sports is so captivating and compelling for most people. In a sense, we feel what the athletes are feeling. Watching something and doing something are not the same, of course, but as far as our brains are concerned, they're pretty darn close. We learn from watching others; we even learn bad habits from watching others. Mirror neurons fire when we see a behavior and also when we perform that behavior. So before we imitate a new behavior, our mirror neurons have already re-created that behavior in our brain.

Our brains are good at imitating actions, but just as importantly, they are really good at feeling what others are feeling. Mirror neurons

may be involved in empathy as well. This is a crucial survival skill. Research has shown that the same area of the brain that lights up when a person experiences an emotion also activates when that person only sees someone else experiencing that emotion. When we see someone express passion, joy, concern, and so on, experts believe that the mirror neurons send messages to the limbic region of the brain, the area associated with emotion. In a sense, there is a place in the brain that seems to be responsible for living inside other people's brains—that is, to *feel* what they are feeling.

If our brains are activated by the movements and feelings of others, what does this suggest for the way we should present to a group of people? If we are wired to feel what others feel, is it any wonder that people get bored and disinterested when listening to someone who seems bored and disinterested themselves—even though the content may be useful? Is it any wonder why we feel stiff and uncomfortable while watching someone on stage barely move a muscle except for the muscles that make their mouth open and close?

We learn by watching and then by doing, but we also learn by feeling what others feel. Empathy and putting ourselves in another person's shoes allows a connection, and it is this connection that helps us to understand and learn. Yet much of presenting today in the overly formal, static, and didactic style removes the visual component, including the visual messages of our movements and the displays of our emotions. An animated, natural display of emotions surely enriches our narrative as it stimulates others to unconsciously feel what we feel. When you are passionate, for example, as long as it is perceived as genuine, most people to various degrees will mirror that emotion back.

The content of your message is crucial, of course, but others in the audience pick up on all sorts of other signals related to your emotional state. The best content in the world—with the best visuals in the world—can still be sabotaged by our emotions, that is, in how we influence others to feel. I have seen some technical presentations fail this year not because the content was irrelevant or disorganized,

but because the presenter, due to inexperience or nerves, looked and sounded more like he was giving a particularly depressing eulogy rather than the results of an interesting piece of research. After 10 to 15 minutes of monotone and dispassionate narration, it becomes very difficult to stay with any speaker, regardless of the topic. Your story and your evidence matter, but the genuine emotions you project have a direct and strong influence—for good and bad—on the message your audience ultimately receives and remembers.

## Power of the smile

For most presentation topics, a sincere smile can go a long way in helping to engage an audience. During a recent night in Osaka, Japan, I realized again the power a genuine smile has for connecting emotionally with an audience. I was inspired, in fact, by the person's smile, as were others in the audience—whether they were conscious of it or not. I was inspired not by a presenter but by a performer, Yoshida Miwa, half of the legendary Japanese duo Dreams Come True. Yoshida Miwa is the 46-year-old diva who fronts the group, a pop star with a great voice and a wide range with clear soul, funk, and jazz influences. Music aside, though, what I remember most about the three-hour concert was the infectious smiles of both Miwa Yoshida and her partner Masa Nakamura, the other half of the duo.

Smiles are indeed infectious. But the smile cannot be faked or forced. You can try to fake a smile, but people can tell when you don't mean it. In fact, some studies show that if you give an insincere smile, audiences may perceive you as untrustworthy or hypocritical.

Martin Seligman, author of *Authentic Happiness* (Free Press, 2004) says there are essentially two types of smiles: the “Duchenne smile” and the “Pan American.” The Duchenne smile is the genuine smile, characterized by movement of the muscles around the mouth and also the eyes. You can tell a real smile by how the skin around the eyes wrinkles up a bit. The Pan American smile is the “fake” smile and involves voluntary movement around the mouth only. This is the

polite smile you may see from someone in the service industry who is doing their best but not having a great day. We all can recognize an insincere smile. But a presenter or entertainer who actually looks like she is happy to be there—because she really is—is well on her way to engaging her audience naturally. A genuine smile shows that we are happy to be there. And since people in our audience can feel what we feel, why wouldn't we want them to feel at ease?



Whether it's a presentation or a performance, a genuine smile can go a long way toward making a genuine connection.

Some scientists, medical doctors, engineers, and others presenting on technical matters at a conference may dismiss the importance of the natural smile. They might say that smiling, rapport, and engagement are fine for marketers and general presenters, but serious people must be serious. Well, there is nothing unserious about smiling. Whether or not you use slides in your live presentation, your talk is still visual. And while you may think it's only your words that people should remember, the audience in fact will recall much of what they saw (including your facial expressions) and what they felt.

## Interact Using Proximity

My experience teaching and presenting in different parts of the world for the past 20 years has taught me that the physical distance between a speaker and the audience—and between the individual members of the audience—has a great influence on one's ability to engage and be effective. The spatial context has a great impact on nonverbal communication and the quality of interaction, although this is often overlooked. The second “P” of engagement, then, is Proximity, a term inspired by Edward T. Hall's work in the field of proxemics, the study of how nonverbal communication among and between people is influenced by distance. What research in proxemics has shown is that variations in personal space and distance has an effect on interpersonal communication, and these effects may vary by individuals and by culture.



Most classrooms come with barriers. This student from Finland places the computer out front and moves away from the lectern to be closer to the audience and the screen.

Ideas concerning personal space may depend on culture, but as much as possible, presenting naked means you want to be close to your audience and you want members of your audience to be close to each other. There are physical limitations and each case is

different, but as a general principle you should (1) shorten the distance between yourself and the audience, (2) bring individual audience members closer to each other while still being sensitive to local perceptions of personal space, and (3) remove any barriers between you and the audience that create distance, whether that distance is physical or merely a perception of the audience. Audience members might perceive distance, for example, if you use language that is too formal, inappropriate, or industry specific for a particular audience. Technology, too, if not used well can create a feeling of distance that diminishes engagement regardless of how close you may physically be to the audience.

## **Come out from behind the barriers**

You may know Phil Collins as a singer, but he originally started out playing the drums. As his musical career progressed, he began to sing from behind the drums. In time, he came out from behind the drums completely and took center stage. Collins is a fantastic drummer, so when he performed recently on EM's Performance Theater, he was asked about the idea of singing lead vocals and playing drums at the same time:

*Most songs are vocally driven. Yes, it is physically possible to sing from behind the drums.... But they want to see you. When you're behind a drum kit, it is very difficult to connect to people. That is why I am out in front.*

— Phil Collins

In his early days with the band Genesis, Collins said singing from behind the drums was his “security blanket.” Sitting behind the drums is indeed a pretty secure place to be. Karen Carpenter of the Carpenters was very hesitant to come out from behind the drums back in the '70s. It's scary to stand front and center, but that's where connection, engagement, and true communication live.

Physically, it's possible to sing lead vocals from behind the drums—and you can sound just as great—but what of the connection with the audience? Likewise, if you present from behind a lectern, you may, more or less, sound the same. And the media behind or beside you may look the same, but the connection is weakened. A lectern may be fine for a 15-minute speech at a university graduation ceremony, but it's a barrier in almost every other setting. For a situation where the people have come to specifically hear from you, to learn from you, and to be convinced or inspired by you, you need to do whatever you can to remove the barriers—literally and figuratively—between you and the audience.



For this presentation I remove the lectern and place the projector and computer together out of sight from the audience in the center of the room, leaving the front barrier-free.

## Use a remote

If you are using multimedia that requires only a simple advance to the next slide (or next animation, start/stop video, etc.), which is all that most sequence-driven presentations require, then use the smallest remote control device you can find. The remote is an essential device that anyone who presents needs to own. There is no excuse for having to glue yourself next to a table or lectern just so you can use your fingers to advance slides. Having a small remote allows you the freedom to not only walk to different areas of a stage (or the front of the room) but to go into the audience as well.

If a presentation requires you to use your computer for more than simply advancing slides, then it's fine to occasionally go to the computer to start a program, demo a web site, and so on. However, you should also move away from that lectern when you do not have to be there. Hans Rosling, a doctor, researcher, and presenter, is extraordinary at doing this. When he needs to pull up some data or start the Gapminder program, he will occasionally go to his computer on stage. But Rosling also spends a lot of time near or in front of the screen explaining how to read the data or pointing out important points. Rosling is a technical presenter with passion; he is able to engage his audiences with the visualizations of data in part because he removes the barriers by often moving away from the lectern.



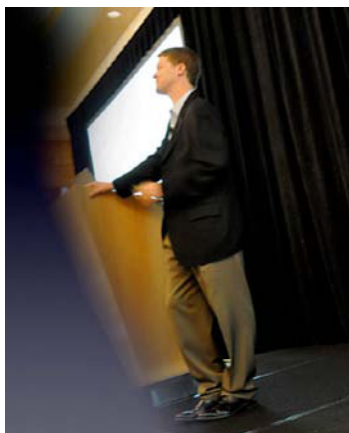
Hans Rosling removes the barriers and gets involved with the data, making things clear for the audience. (Photo: Stefan Nilsson.)

## Performing demos

If you are performing a demo and you need to show how the software actually works, position yourself front and center so the audience can see you and the screen behind you. It's possible to keep a good connection with the audience while you use the computer—as long as you keep things moving and the conversation flowing. Apple's Steve Jobs is fantastic at doing this. Citrix CEO Mark Templeton is great at demoing his company's software in a friendly, engaging style as well.



The CEO of Tableau Software, Christian Chabot, is another high-tech leader who knows how to engage an audience with a demo. Chabot started his keynote at the company's 2010 annual customer conference in Seattle with a Gothic fairy tale complete with powerful imagery on screen. "The year was 2010," Chabot said. "It was a dark time for data." He then began to describe the current state of the business intelligence landscape, which included the evils of slow painful rollouts, explosive costs, and low user adoption (for people who didn't already use Tableau). Chabot told a dark story of user interfaces that included ancient wizards, complicated scripts, and the crumbling monolithic tower of the centralized data structure. After laying the foundation of where we are today, Chabot exclaimed, "People began to dream about a new way!" The CEO then unveiled Tableau 6.0 and showed the power of the new version and how easy it makes it to quickly query and analyze massive amounts of data.



Christian Chabot, CEO of Tableau Software.

While keeping his eyes mostly on the audience, Chabot took the audience through a journey of discovery that felt more like an interesting short documentary than a software demo. The key to Tableau is that it's a great platform for telling the story of data. Even though Chabot stood behind a lectern so he could demo the software himself, his demo was very compelling precisely because he engaged his audience in the manner of the passionate and friendly storyteller.

## Technology should be invisible

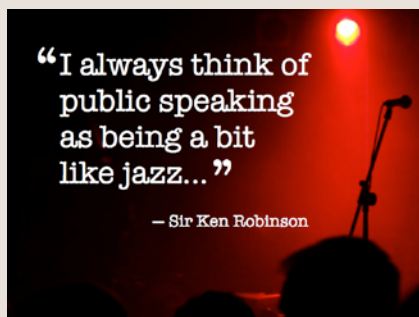
Don't let technology or props take away from the experience. Very often in presentations given with slideware, we are all too aware of the software and computer. The technology should be as invisible as possible. While setting up, for example, don't have the screen on until your first slide is already in play mode. Many presenters actually allow the audience to see the computer screen boot up and then watch them mouse around for their PowerPoint file. This gives the audience the chance to glimpse the desktop picture of the presenter's cat before the first slide appears. How wonderful—and how irrelevant. All of this subtly takes away from the moment and purpose of the presentation, which is about the message and the story, not what software you are using.

## The show must go on

Little mistakes can happen, but so what? Move on immediately to what is important. For this we can take a lesson from professional performers. For example, while attending a performance of Cirque du Soleil's Alegria in Osaka, I noticed one slip and gracious fall on to the net below during the Super Aerial High Bar. But the performance continued without missing a beat. The point was not the one slip—the point was to continue amazing the audience with the 1,000 other things that are going right. The audience does not even notice small mistakes; they often are too engrossed in the big picture. In a presentation context, the audience does not know (or care) if you forgot to insert a slide or if the color is not as perfect as it was on your computer. Why dwell on the small imperfections? When small technical errors occur, you must go forward. And in the event that the technology fails completely, you must have a backup plan—such as speaking from notes sans visuals or speaking with the aid of a whiteboard. Remember, the show must go on even if your technology doesn't.

# Sir Ken Robinson on Public Speaking

Sir Ken Robinson is an educator and an expert on creativity. He's also one of the most popular TED presenters ever. His ideas on creativity and education—and his own personal presentation style—are truly an inspiration for many. Sir Ken does a lot of public speaking, almost always with no multimedia. During a podcast with the International Mentoring Network Organization, he spoke briefly on the issue of public speaking and presentation. A summary of his six major points on the subject of public speaking follows.



## **1. Remember, you are speaking to individuals not an abstract group.**

The size of the audience does not matter, says Robinson. You are always speaking to individuals. So speak as naturally to a large audience as you would to a small group.

## **2. Be as relaxed as possible.**

People will feel relaxed if you are relaxed, so be as relaxed as possible, right from the start, to put the audience at ease. Seems like a small thing, but actually it is huge.

## **3. Be conversational and make a connection with the room.**

But also keep the energy high. Being relaxed, natural, and conversational does not mean that your energy as a presenter should be the same as when you are chatting with friends in a cafe, however. Robinson says he gets a lot of energy from the audience so the connection is very important. If you have the connection and the energy (which is cyclical), then your impact and your message is more effective.

#### **4. Know your material.**

OK, this may seem a wee bit obvious, but then why do so many people use detailed notes? Partly it's due to nervousness, convention, or habit. But often it's because people are not fully prepared to be talking on the topic yet. If you know your material well, you should not need much more than a few bullet points on paper to remind you of the structure. Robinson says he thinks long and hard about his talks and writes down a few key bullet points on paper, not on screen. (A mind map on a piece of paper can also be a useful reminder and a road map for you; I sometimes use these.) Robinson never has extensive notes, just bullet points. If you know your material, you will be relaxed. If you don't, you'll seem nervous and this makes the audience nervous.

#### **5. Prepare, but don't rehearse.**

Think and plan ahead instead. There is nothing wrong with rehearsal, of course. Different people have different methods for preparing. But the danger in rehearsal is that it is possible to seem too rehearsed when you present. That is, you may seem too perfect, too inflexible, unnatural, and though technically perfect, you may lose the ever important natural connection with the audience.

#### **6. Leave room for improvisation.**

"I always think of public speaking as being a bit like jazz or the blues," says Sir Ken. He explained that he does not always necessarily know exactly what he is going to say, but he believes in stories. His presentation—like a jazz musician—is telling a story and he is taking people someplace. Yes, he has ideas in mind before he takes to the stage, but like a musician, he feels free to improvise. This is actually more natural and more flexible, and it enables him to engage more with each unique audience. Sir Ken Robinson also believes in humor, which he believes is important for stimulating creativity. And humor is good for getting people engaged with you and your message. "If they're laughing then they're listening," he says.

## Make your visuals big

Nothing is more frustrating to an audience than being unable to see the information on your visuals because the elements are too small. When you project images that cannot be seen clearly by everyone in the room, this becomes a barrier and increases the feeling of distance. It also sends a message that the presenter is unprepared or does not care about the audience. You can shorten the distance if you remember to make sure you create the visuals that can be understood easily, without any eyestrain, from anywhere in the room. When it comes to visuals, think big.

## Develop Play

We were born to play. Play is how we learn and develop our minds and our bodies, and it's also how we express ourselves. Play comes naturally to us. I was reminded of this while listening to a cool little jazz gig near the beach on Maui, Hawaii, in early 2010. I snapped the photo below of a little girl enjoying the simple beauty of that musical moment by dancing happily all by herself.



I love this picture because it shows both adults and a child at play. The adult musicians are expressing themselves through jazz, a complex form of play with rules and constraints but also great freedom—freedom that leads to tremendous creativity and enjoyment for the players and for the listeners. The child did not know or care about the complexities of the chords and the rhythms or the wonderful interplay among the musicians, yet the energy and beauty of the music made her smile, laugh, and dance. She did not care if her dance was “good enough”—she just danced because she was moved by the music. She danced with such exuberance and speed that she appears only as a blur in the photo. Dance is perhaps the purest form of play. Children move to music long before they receive instruction on how to dance. We are born to move and we are born to play. Children remind us of this. They remind us that we are passionate, expressive, social beings.

No matter what your age, play is important for learning, creativity, and innovation. Play makes us smarter. “Nothing fires up the brain like play,” says psychologist Stewart Brown. “The thing that is so unique about our species is that we are really designed to play throughout our whole lifetime.” You can be a serious professional or student and be playful. We need to think differently about play and realize that it is not the opposite of work. As Brian Sutton-Smith famously said, “The opposite of play is not work. It’s depression.” The playing skills we learned as kids are not superfluous, they are a necessity today.

We need trust to play and be creative, and trust is established through play signals such as a smile. We can use the tone of our voice, a facial expression, a gesture—all of these send subtle nonverbal signals and encourage playful engagement.

## Overcome the Obstacles to Success

Budō, or the “martial way,” is a term that encompasses the martial arts here in Japan. Bu (武) conveys the meaning “to stop clashing weapons.” Dō (道) is “the way” or “the path” to truth and liberation. There is much we can learn by examining the principles found in traditional disciplines, even though they may seem quite removed from the daily experience of most people.

At the risk of greatly oversimplifying things, think of Budō practice as not only being about competition, fighting, and technique, but also about being a mastery of self. The items on the next page come from The Ten Evils for a Budō Practitioner, a list from a Kashima Shin School scroll that appears in the book *Budo Secrets* by John Stevens (Shambhala, 2002). These 10 items apply to one’s character as a martial artist, but as the author points out, these are really aspects of ourselves that everyone needs to overcome. All of these evils are in us—we’re just human after all—so the key is not to be defeated by them. Our enemy is not in the audience (or the competition). The biggest obstacle to success usually is not from without, but from within. I love these words by the late Aikido master Kensho Furuya: “You have the infinite capacity to do anything you want. You compare yourself to others—that’s why you feel so limited.”



## The Ten Evils for a Budō Practitioner:

1. Insolence
2. Overconfidence
3. Greed
4. Anger
5. Fear
6. Doubt
7. Distrust
8. Hesitation
9. Contempt
10. Conceit

Although these may be within us, you can see how none of these 10 evils are helpful when making a presentation, performing a piece of music, or teaching a class. All of the 10 listed can be destructive and hold us back—fear and doubt, in particular. Fear holds a lot of us back. It is our fear of failure, our fear of what other people may think. We're afraid. We're not sure. So we hesitate, and we fail to act. Popular authors such as Seth Godin call this the Lizard Brain.

Confidence, meanwhile, is necessary and important, but overconfidence can sometimes be as destructive as fear. It can also hold us back. Overconfidence, conceit, and contempt also prohibit us from seeing the lessons from people and experiences around us. The old adage is, "Once you think you have arrived, you have already failed."

Humility, a virtue often gained through much practice, study, and experience, is key. Yet humility and great strength go hand in hand. A kind of projected modesty that is really a cover for self-doubt and fear, however, is not the same thing as humility. Genuine humility comes from a place of strength. It is the truly courageous who remain always humble. These are lessons we need not leave behind in the dojo. These are lessons for everyday life and work, including the work of presentation.



## Play keeps us in the moment

A spirit of play engages us and brings us into the content and into the moment. Children remind us that we need more play in the classroom, the lecture hall, and especially the typical conference presentation. But first, we adults must give up the notion that play is not serious. We must abandon the notion that work (or study) and play are opposites. Work and play are inexorably linked—at least the kind of creative work in which we are engaged today and hope to prepare our children for. As designer and computer scientist Bill Buxton declared in his impassioned presentation at Mix '09 in Las Vegas, “You can not be anal. These things are far too important to take seriously. We need to be able to play.”

Play is not anarchy, however. There are rules, especially for group play. Play also involves negotiation. There are rules about how and when to play. Old habits are hard to break, which is why we need some rules (for example, suspending judgment during a brainstorming activity) to break free from the habits that get us down and dampen the creative process. Shocking people out of their normal way of thinking and getting them to forget their “adult behaviors” for a while can lead to better ideas.

## A spirit of play engages

Play creates a relaxed feeling of connection between the presenter and the audience and among the audience members themselves. Play fosters a collective experience of engagement with the content. That doesn't mean you shouldn't take the needs of the audience and the material seriously. It's important to take our work seriously, but we should be careful not to take *ourselves* so seriously. We do not need to be somber, especially during a presentation when we are trying to effect a change in people.

Good things happen when we stop taking ourselves so seriously. It's OK to have fun. It's OK to enjoy the experience and expose

some of your true self without the doubt and worry about what other people will think. What would happen if you removed the fear? Play energizes. Do you want your audience to be energized or solemn? Or merely observe the established norms of formality?

## Infuse play in your presentations

To instill a playful spirit, the presenter needs to create a secure environment. Tim Brown is the CEO of IDEO, one of the most innovative design firms in Silicon Valley and a company that understands the importance of play. According to Brown, children who feel the most secure in their environment are the ones who feel the most freedom to play. We can extend this to adults in the workplace as well. Fear—including fearing judgment from our peers—inhibits us and often prevents us from taking chances or sharing our ideas with others. Fear, says Brown, leads us to be overly conservative and to keep our “wild ideas” inside. As adults we become overly sensitive to the opinions of others and we lose a bit of our freedom. In presentations, we should create the kind of safe environments that encourages others to participate and take chances.

You can instill a subtle atmosphere of play by using humor naturally, as discussed in Chapter 3. Using humor naturally means relaxing, being your playful self, and interacting with your audience. You can point out irony, bust a myth, tell a story with an unexpected twist—anything that evokes a smile or a bit of laughter. Laughter is a fundamental social activity. When you laugh—and laugh together with others in your audience—you create engagement. In the best-selling book *A Whole New Mind* (Riverhead Trade, 2006), Daniel Pink identifies play as a key aptitude for success in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century world. Humor, of course, is a key component of play. “Humor represents many aspects of sophisticated thinking required in automated and outsourced times,” Pink says. “And just plain laughter can lead to joyfulness, which in turn can lead to greater creativity, productivity, and collaboration.”

A child's playful activities often involve exploration and experimentation. These are the very activities that some "serious" adults engage in as well, at least until they get up in front of a group of people to speak. As adults, we are too quick to categorize and put things in nice little boxes. We quickly come up with reasons why it can't be done rather than explore the possibilities and use our imagination the way children might. It's important, then, to encourage playful exploration and experimentation that contribute to a sense of discovery in presentations. Experimentation is crucial.

When you instill play by taking people on a journey of exploration, experimentation, and discovery, you arouse the brains of the participants and you just never know what you'll discover together. Discovery happens, after all, through a kind of play. Learning happens through a kind of play. And a playful spirit is opened to the possibilities. This is just as true for medical doctors and scientists as it is for designers, businesspeople, and teachers.



Children are natural explorers. But it's still in us. We can engage our audience by appealing to their natural attraction for discovery and exploration.

## What is the role of entertainment?

Our society generally condemns the adults who dare play at work. People say play is simply entertainment, and therefore a passive and superfluous diversion. Many presenters resist the idea of bringing a playful spirit to their presentations. They may say that they are not in the business of entertaining. Their job, they will say, is simply to give the information and analysis, not to entertain. But there is nothing passive or distracting about a brain that is engaged, exploring, and discovering something new. Isn't an engaged brain in a sense an entertained brain? Perhaps the word "entertainment" has simply gotten a bad rap with the rise of infomercials, infotainment, and the watered-down version of cable news networks that put sound bites, glitz, and pizzazz ahead of journalism and hard news.

We have to be careful with the term entertainment since it has many associations that serious businesspeople want to avoid. Its synonyms, after all, include distraction, diversion, and leisure activity—not what we usually think of in terms of business or academic presentations. But entertaining is also synonymous with many very appropriate terms, such as absorbing, affecting, compelling, delightful, engaging, engrossing, exciting, fascinating, inspiring, interesting, lively, moving, poignant, provocative, stimulating, and so on. We should be so lucky as to have an audience describe our presentations with one or more of these adjectives.

Nicholas Negroponte, the founder of the MIT Media Lab, is a visionary and driving force in the multimedia revolution. While speaking to an audience in Monterey, California in 1984 about the future of technology in education, Negroponte said, "Good education has got to be good entertainment." He is right—and this goes for most public-speaking situations as well. Anytime we are trying to teach, inform, and create a change in people, we need to entertain them. But you have to think differently about the word entertainment. By entertainment, I think Negroponte means engagement, meaning, and "personal involvement as well as activities that stimulate

our natural curiosity and attraction to that which is novel and challenging. Education is knowledge and information. But the hunger, drive, and curiosity in the pursuit of understanding and meaning is emotional—it's human.

Many presentation situations—and education in general—have a lot in common since both can leverage the power of entertainment. The thing about being entertaining is that it is focused on others, the way it should be. It's not about us, it's about them. Different audiences are engaged and actively entertained in different ways. It's up to us to figure out what the most effective methods are for stimulating, affecting, and informing. Entertainment is not necessarily a distraction, diversion, or escape. In the best sense, entertainment is about engagement, connection, and meaning; it's about instilling a sense of play that opens minds and amplifies the engagement. You do not need to think of yourself as an entertainer or a performer, but virtually all solid presentations will be entertaining if targeted to the right audience. You say there are just some data sets that cannot be interesting (or revealing or provocative)? Then, as the saying goes, perhaps you have the wrong data (or the wrong audience).

Children need play to develop healthy brains. Everyone gets that. But the need for play is not limited to children. We'll have better and more empowered lives if we don't think in terms of a work-play differential. Rather than view play as something we do only outside of work time, we should instead live a life that is consistently infused with the myriad transformational dimensions of play.

Bringing a spirit of play to your presentations—and the feeling of exploration and discovery that it instills in the moment—improves learning and stimulates creative thinking. But often it's good to play for no other reason than to have great fun and feel good and recharged. We can find inspiration in play itself, and we are inspired by those speakers who understand that play is too important not to bring to work and include in presentations.

## In Sum

- You can't fake interest and the passion that accompanies it. So the question is not "How can I be more interesting to this audience?" but "How can I demonstrate why this topic or information is important and how can I show why it matters to them?"
- Our story and our evidence matter, but the genuine emotions that we project have a direct and strong influence—for good and for bad—on the message our audience ultimately receives and remembers.
- As a general principle we must (1) shorten the distance between ourselves and the audience, (2) bring individual audience members closer to each other while still being sensitive to local perceptions of personal space, and (3) remove any barriers between us and the audience.
- Bringing a spirit of play to your presentations—and the feeling of exploration and discovery that it instills in the moment—improves learning and stimulates creative thinking.



**No one is obliged to be a genius,  
but everyone is obliged to  
participate.**

**— Philippe Starck**

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