

Presenting with Enthusiasm and Energy

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“A man can be short and dumpy and getting bald but if he has fire, women will like him.”

-- Mae West

I am here to discuss presenting with energy and enthusiasm. You might prefer to think of this as your “state of mind” during a presentation, or your “intensity level,” or “connecting with your audience.” Or yes, even the fire you radiate.

Why am *I*, an introverted social misfit, advising *you* about effective presentations? I’m *terrible* in social situations. Why *me*? Partly, it’s because I prepare. That compensates for a multitude of sins. But other people have said that. What’s my comparative advantage?

The answer is that I have *fun* up here.

Here is my Summary:

1. If you don’t intend to have fun, then don’t stand up.
2. If you aren’t having fun, then sit down.

Unfortunately, there’s a Case 3. This third category applies to far too many situations: The speaking engagement or topic is no fun, and yet you *can’t avoid it*. I’ll spend most of my time on that one.

Why Have Fun?

First, it’s *fun!* Fun is its own reward. Second, it’s also a *means to an end*: If you intend to have fun, then you will do a better job. That’s because you’ll find more time to prepare, you’ll be more confident and energetic, and your listeners will respond. *Everyone* wants to have fun. When people see others -- like you -- having fun, they want to join in.

In speaking, this means that the audience *connects* with you in some sense. They become *active listeners*. The world surrounding you and the audience shrinks -- nothing else really matters. The focus *narrows* to each other.

Notice that having fun doesn't mean being all giggly or doing standup comedy. I'm not advocating hyperactivity. Don't confuse speaking loudly or talking fast with being energetic and enthusiastic. The Stereotypical Southern Preacher spewing fire and brimstone is having fun. The Blues Singer is having fun. They are *earnestly engaged in what they are doing*. But they won't always speak rapidly, and not always loudly. They're *certainly* not giggly. Yet listeners can feel the fire, the energy, and the intensity in their work.

How Do We Get There? How Can *We* Do That?

You begin planning to project a sense of energy to engage your audience when you first pick your topic. *If I'm not energized about being up here, then why should you be energized about sitting there?* If this topic doesn't energize me, then why did I pick it, anyway? And when you're presenting *your* research, the same question applies: Why did you pick that particular topic?

If you're excited about your research, then you needn't be here listening to me. You'll have fun during your presentation, and your audience will respond accordingly. But maybe you picked your research topic because you already had the database -- after all, we all need another publication -- or perhaps you picked it because it gave you the chance to work with someone you admire. If so, then I can still recommend a few things that you can do to help focus your listeners on you, and you on your listeners.

The General Principal is this: You can *train your mental state or enthusiasm level*, just as you would train for an *athletic* contest. Psychologists tell this story:

A woman contacted a lawyer. "I want to divorce my husband. He never pays attention to me, he never listens to me, and he doesn't appreciate me. I want to make him regret it and make him suffer as much as possible." The lawyer said, "I know exactly how to do that. For the next three months, be as nice to him as you can. Cook his favorite dinners for him, be supportive of his troubles at work, and tell him how much you love him every single day. When you divorce him after those three months, he'll miss you terribly and never forgive himself." "That's a great idea!" The woman said. "I'll see you again in three months." But when she returned, she announced that she no longer wanted the divorce. "I can't *believe* it!" she exclaimed. "My husband has become the nicest, most loving man in the world! He complements me about how nice I look, he listens to me when I tell him about my troubles at work, and every day he tells me how much he loves me!"

Psychologists use this story to make several points. First, the woman's change in behavior affected her own happiness: She simply chose to shift her focus away from her own troubles.

Second, and more relevant to us, her husband *really did react* to her new behavior, and he *really did* become a better husband. He began to focus more on his wife. It wasn't a one-way change of behavior. *The couple responded to each other's actions.*

Finally, and *most* important for us, is this: Having performed the behaviors for a while -- *even though faked*, the wife will find it *easier to perform them again* later. She has learned to behave differently. And now that the *husband* has behaved differently for three months, he will find it easier to continue along that path, too. The behaviors -- and the attendant emotions -- have become *genuine*. When we perform *any* activity -- shooting a basketball, falling asleep on the train, or speaking with enthusiasm -- it makes it *easier to repeat it*. *Even involuntary or unintentional practice makes perfect.*

I'm describing an extremely simplified version of what psychologists call *Cognitive Programming*: Just as we can train *muscles* to react easily and naturally, we can train the *neurons affecting our mental state* to fire the way we *want* them to fire, *when* we want them to fire. This is nothing magical -- these are the same techniques people use to manage stage fright or nervousness:

Marie McIntyre, Ph.D., is head of a consulting firm named Executive Counselors. She discusses nervousness this way:

"... some anxiety is only to be expected. The key is learning how to manage it." You may be working yourself into a tizzy "by endlessly worrying about screwing up -- thereby creating a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Psychologists have a buzz-word, "self-talk," meaning the running commentary we all have going on inside our heads. They cite evidence that you can talk yourself into failing. So, McIntyre says,

"Make a conscious effort to change your self-talk. There really is a mind-body connection. Taking deep breaths and practicing muscle relaxation will help you ... Relaxing your body also relaxes your mind."

Doctors use the same idea to treat disorders such as insomnia. They say:

Do not watch TV in bed. Do not read in bed. Do not snack in bed. When you lie down, turn out the light immediately. The bed is for *sleeping*. Train your mind to recognize *automatically* that when you go to bed, it's time to *sleep*.

Studies show that this almost always helps. In fact, it works as well as medication for many people.

Learning theorists use a related concept which they call *State-Dependent Learning*:

We remember better if we are in the *same physical and mental state* as when we learned in the first place. This is no surprise: We all know that if we studied and learned everything when we were wide awake and well fed, we won't do as well later if we are tired and hungry. That's just common sense. But up to surprisingly extreme limits, if we learned everything when we were tired and hungry, then we won't do as well later if we are wide awake and well fed! The evidence is that the neuron synapses that represent learning work better under familiar conditions, even if those conditions aren't the best. *Even for neurons, practice makes perfect.*

Here is my Beginner's Guide to Managing your Energy Level (for situations you can't avoid):

First, decide how you want to feel during your presentation -- maybe it's excited, or urbane, or cheerful or brazen. It doesn't much matter how you want to feel, so long as it fits that particular presentation.

Next, find a way to evoke that state of mind. Perhaps you can listen to a certain type of music. That works for many people. Others prefer yoga, or dancing. Some might want to go for a swim. Other might sing. It doesn't matter *how* you reach that state of mind, so long as you reach the energy level you seek.

Then, *perform that activity*. Study your behavior when you are in that state of mind, with the right energy level.

Did you stand or did you sit?

Did you move around?

Did you talk faster?

Did your vocabulary change? Did you use more contractions?

Did you gesture more, and were they more expansive?

Better still: What *specific* gestures did you make?

Then, build as many of those behaviors as you can into your presentation. Oh yes, they will feel strange and seem affected initially. *Do it anyway*. Remember, you're just *in training* at this point. You don't need to be comfortable with every specific behavior yet.

Then, use state dependent learning: Rehearse at the same time of day as the presentation. When I agreed to speak about presenting with enthusiasm, I *didn't* choose 8:00 a.m. The audience doesn't want a boisterous, brazen presentation at this hour. This hour is not fun for you *or* me, and I can't control it: Case 3. But I can *adapt* to it:

I abandoned the multimedia laser-light show in favor of low-tech methods, because I didn't want to blind and stun the audience at 8:00. Besides, equipment often doesn't work right at 8:00, and I didn't want to risk a distraction.

I choose to remain behind the podium rather than move around, because at 8:00, I tend to stumble when I walk. So I *rehearsed without moving*.

I *adopted the same posture* -- for this talk, I chose to *stand*. That's the way it's usually done at meetings like this, and I wanted to *simulate the actual situation* as much as possible.

I *rehearsed* at 8:00 a.m.

I spoke audibly when rehearsing -- just listening to the little voice in my head as I rehearsed, or even sub vocalizing, wouldn't have been *nearly* as effective.

If I had been truly dedicated to practicing, I could have *dressed appropriately*, or even *sat* for 30 or 40 minutes before rehearsing, just to practice waiting my turn to speak.

The idea is to *simulate the actual situation* as much as possible.

If you follow this approach, you'll find that within a relatively brief period of time, you'll *train yourself* to adopt the mental state you seek *automatically*. Your enthusiasm will become *genuine*.

What if you can't adopt all of these suggestions -- they're just *too foreign* or *too strange* -- what do you do? In that case, you do what you *CAN* do. After all, doctors tell patients recovering from physical problems to build strength gradually. Athletes do not compete the day after surgery. Rehab is *gradual*. Similarly, doctors often begin treating mental problems such as phobias by *gradually challenging* the irrational response to the feared stimulus.

For example, a physician treating Ron Weasley for arachnophobia would begin by placing him in a situation that causes mild discomfort. For example, he might begin by having Ron imagine a dead spider in the next room. This would cause Ron discomfort, but the spider is far away, and safely dead. The next step might be imagining a *live* spider in the next room, followed by an imaginary scientist carrying an imaginary lab specimen, properly packaged in its imaginary container, into the room. And so on, until the patient is comfortable with his level of anxiety and it doesn't interfere with his life.

Similarly, you might not be an expert immediately, and perhaps you can't bring yourself to walk around in an empty room, talking to yourself and observing how your vocabulary changes when you get enthusiastic. You might think it's just too *silly*. But you can at least stand up while you rehearse. The next time, you can also take a few minutes to get yourself in the right frame of mind before you rehearse. You'll improve over time with practice, it'll become automatic, and speaking about a wider range of subjects genuinely *will* be fun.