

Yeung At Heart –

Four essential steps for preparing a great presentation



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When I left university and started my first job as a junior consultant at The Boston Consulting Group, I was sent on a project to support a team of managers. On my first day on the project, I had to present the recommendations that my boss and I had put together for how the project team should run. When I spoke, I could hear in my own voice that I sounded nervous. My PowerPoint presentation was a little jumbled and didn't flow as well as it should have done. Overall, it wasn't a terrible presentation, but it definitely wasn't a good one either.

Fast forward more than 10 years to the present and now I frequently run training workshops for managers on how to present effectively. It's a skill that all managers need. Even if you don't currently give presentations, you will no doubt need to should you wish to progress up the career ladder into more senior roles. So in this two-part article that runs across this month and next, I shall share some thoughts on how to give effective, engaging presentations.

When you sit down to think about what you want to present and how to present it, I think there are four essential components you might wish to consider, which I call the "four Ss". Considering these four components will help you to prepare effectively. Let's go through these in turn.

Psyche

Yes, technically, this doesn't begin with the letter S, but the P is silent! Begin your preparation by thinking about your audience and their psyche – i.e. what's going on in their heads. Who exactly is coming and why are they there? For example, consider that you're giving a 15-minute presentation on "What it's like to work in this company." Is the audience packed with young graduates with little work experience, a group of senior managers, or a group of financial experts? Each group would need to hear a slightly different presentation, even on this same topic.

Are they there because they *want* to learn something from you or because they have been told that they *must* attend? What content do they expect to hear – and in what style would they most like to hear or see it? At the end of the day, consider what would help them feel that they had attended a good presentation. If you keep the psyche of your audience in mind at all times, you will be able to craft a presentation that meets their needs. You can avoid falling into the trap of presenting the parts of the topic that *you* find most interesting.

Set-up

Think about the physical aspects of your presentation. Here are two key questions to cover in your preparations:

- What visuals will you use? PowerPoint can be useful for highlighting key points, but can be a waste of time for short, informal presentations.
- What's the physical plan of the room? How will the seating be arranged? For example, when I'm presenting to large groups, I prefer to have the audience sat around round tables, with between six to ten people at each table. If you only have a dozen people in your audience, you could arrange the seating in a U-shape, allowing you to walk into the centre of the room. Control the seating and you control how you can move and perform.

Structure

Plan the structure of your presentation itself. Effective presenters are like the writers of books, thinking about the organization of their material so that it is logical and has a flow, rather than simply bombarding their audience with facts.

For example, you could try arranging all of your material chronologically, talking about what happened in the past, what's happening at the moment, and what you recommend should happen in the future. Or you could tell your audience that you will look at a series of problems and present the solutions at the end.

By telling your audience how your presentation is structured, you make it easier for them to follow the flow of your presentation. In turn, that ensures that you get your message across effectively.

Stories

Finally, think about anecdotes that you might tell during your presentation to illustrate your points. Simply hearing fact after fact after fact can be incredibly boring for an audience, with the result that they may start to drift off, chat amongst themselves or check their emails.

Stories help to bring a presentation to life. If you're trying to tell your audience how to behave at work, perhaps tell them about someone who didn't behave in the right way and the consequences of their mistake. Think about your own experience but think about what's happened to friends and colleagues too. Just because a situation didn't happen to you doesn't mean you can't borrow it to illustrate your points and help to make your key messages stick.

