

Peak performance presentations

An approach incorporating stage techniques to support and develop presentation skills, in particular focussing on confidence, delivery and authenticity. Extracted from: *Peak Performance Presentations* (2004) Richard Olivier and Nicholas Janni. Articulate Press. Available from <http://www.oliviermythodrama.com/shopwindow.asp>

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Presence

When you are in tune with yourself and surroundings, and speak from a feeling of connection with what you are saying you will have Presence. Imagine children who live in the present. As adults we are often thinking about the future or worrying about the past. Having presence helps you to deliver with confidence, energy and confidence. The first step in developing presence is to work with relaxation, to release the tension we carry around with us. This relaxation enables our body to act with our mind, like an actor or even think of a cat.

1. **Relaxation** – lie down or sit somewhere quiet and comfortable. Start to become aware of how your body feels, become conscious of breathing in and out, start to take deeper breaths, and as you breathe out feel the tension release. As you lengthen your breaths you can feel the lower chest opening, and the breath reaching a deeper level. Be conscious of the floor or the chair supporting you. You may become conscious of an emotion, don't try to actively change it – just become aware of it.
2. **Grounding** – from the outside someone who is "grounded" looks and feels as if they are really there, and are able to stand their ground comfortably, really helpful when you are giving a presentation. An exercise to help with grounding is to stand with you feet shoulder width apart and parallel, balance the weight evenly between the front and back of the foot, relax your knees rather than bracing them. Start by gradually pushing your feet into the ground, gently and slowly at first, and then increase the speed and firmness. It can help to imagine you have roots coming from the soles of your foot going down through the floor, the foundations of the building and into the earth below. This can be a very helpful exercise to do before a presentation – and no one can see what you are thinking!

3. **Dual Attention** – this means being aware of what is happening around you and what is happening inside you at the same time. We often forget this balance, getting more focussed on what is happening outside. As we become more skilled for example when consulting we get better at doing both together and developing the same abilities in presentations will help make you more effective and responsive to what is needed. An exercise to help this is to start by becoming more aware of yourself, of your body, your breathing and the sensation of contact with the chair or floor. Accentuate this by closing your eyes. Now start to become aware of the sounds around you, imagine you are going to open your eyes and look out into the world. But at the same time remain aware of yourself. When you are ready open your eyes, look at the ground as you start to stabilise dual attention. This is something you can practice at any time – keeping 50% of your attention focused inwards on how you feel, your breathing and your grounding, and 50% on the outside world. Whilst it might seem this will make you less effective and attentive, with practice it will make you more so. It will help you develop a “pilot” or “witness” part of your consciousness that will be ways be looking on and assessing constructively. This is not the same as self consciousness. Try practicing it whenever you can, and ask yourself “am I in in 50-50, 60-40 or 40-70?”

Finding Your Voice

The sound of your voice plays a crucial role in how you come across in presentations. When someone starts talking about something they genuinely care about, their voice can change quite dramatically – this is evident to the audience, and a useful thought in public speaking is *“if it matters to you it matters to us”*. There is some research that shows that how you appear (energy and confidence) counts for 60% of your impact, how you sound (the quality and tone of your voice) counts for 30%, and the words you say count for only 10%.

The voice is a physical instrument. Releasing tension as in the exercises above will have an immediate effect. Tension means that many people’s habitual voice – the voice they speak with every day – is several notes higher in pitch than their natural voice. Tension thins the voice out and restricts it’s resonance. The body has three main vocal resonators – the head, the chest and the stomach. Most of time, particularly at work, we use the head resonator exclusively. This is probably the result of spending so much time thinking and communicating data, and not expressing emotion. Speech can be dry and flat, and carries no feeling, and is hard to sustain attention with. The moment you use the chest resonator as well as the head then the whole timbre and quality of the voice changes. The third resonator the stomach, creates a powerful low sound, it carries a feeling of deep melancholy – you will rarely use this, although at peak moments in a presentation, all three resonators can be used. Using your chest resonator as well as your head can enable you to be heard in a large room without shouting – that is how actors manage it. To imagine the power of resonators think of John Gielgud.

Exercises

Align the head – imagine a ping pong ball on a spout of water – imagine your head is that ball, neither jutting forward or pushing back. Your neck should feel slightly elongated. Stretch your face wide, make the biggest startled expression you can, then relax your face. Then make some smaller movements like raising your eyebrows, then your forehead. Each time settle back into a relaxed face and remember what it feels like.

The shoulders – breathe in and raise your shoulders as high as you go – hold for a moment and then breathe out and let them drop to a natural position. Start to circle each shoulder in turn in its socket, forwards and back till they become looser. Then swing each arm in turn, forward and backwards. Let the weight of the arm do the work, and then go through 360 degree with each arm.

The jaw - start by massaging the face all over, use your fingers and also the palms of your hands, gently stretch the mouth open and release it, circulate the jaw with a chewing movement gently. Stretch the tongue – open your mouth wide, then put your tongue right out without developing any feeling of strain.

The soft palate - we don't usually think about this, though it has a big impact on how we sound. Try bracing the tip of your tongue behind the bottom teeth. Try and keep the jaw relaxed and make sounds "k" and "g" repeat then quite quickly. This will loosen the soft palate.

The spine - stand up and imagine the vertebrae stacked evenly on top of each other. Start by wriggling the spine, make the movements undulating. Circulate your chest in a big circle and push it right back, and then forward. If your spine is strong, from a standing position start to tilt forward very slowly one vertebra at a time. Continue very slowly until you are fully bent over with knees bent, arms hanging and head and neck relaxed. If your spine is weaker an alternative is to sit upright on a solid chair, and keeping upright move about gently so you become aware of your spine and how it supports you, by gently undulating the spine.

Resonator breathing

Place the palms of your hands on the sides of your torso, just below your ribcage. Breathe out, relax, feel the need to breathe, and allow your body to take a big in breath. Feel the expansion of your ribcage as you breathe in, continue for a few breaths. Then put your hands together on your stomach and become conscious of your stomach expanding as you breathe in.

Lie down with your knees bent and flopped together – or stay sitting. Take some deep breaths, and use the out breath to let go of tension. Keeping the mouth and jaw relaxed on the next out breath make a sound "zzzz" counting to 10 on your fingers. Repeat three times, gradually lengthening the out breath to a count of 15 or 20. Do the same with the sounds "ssss" "haw" and "hoo". Finish by making an "mmm" sound and feel the vibration through your body.

The Elevator

Start by deliberately placing your voice in your head area. Use "mmm" sound, and then imagine that this sound is travelling down through your body as if it was an elevator. Go down floor by floor, down your face, neck and into your chest. When it has arrived in your chest make an "ah" sound. Do not try to push it into an artificially low sound, as you relax it is likely to drop a couple of notes only.

Speak some tongue twisters

Try *"The lips and the teeth and tip of the tongue"* getting faster and faster. Also *"Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled pepper"* or *"Red lorry Yellow lorry"*.

Vocal awareness will add depth to your presence and heighten your impact. As you find your true voice, and its natural expressiveness you will deliver your material in a more spirited, animated way.

The Inner Critic

Many people think that it is nerves that stop them presenting as well as they would like. In fact being nervous is not in itself a bad thing. It is natural to be nervous, and is a way of life for actors and musicians. Nerves mean adrenalin, and this can give us a heightened sense of awareness and access to extra energy.

The aim is to *"ride the tiger"* with you being the rider and the nerves being the tiger. If the nerves have you, then you feel like you are being dragged by a wild animal. If you stop the nerves all together it can be like watching a doped up tiger – no bite or interest. If you and the tiger are *"in flow"* then there is an exciting edge that others enjoy watching.

So if it is not the nerves that cause the problem, what is it? It is more likely to be the negative messages you give yourself about your performance that do the damage, by evoking a distracting anxiety. It seems that many people have an Inner Critic that they hear speaking inside their own head. The good news is that because the problem is in your mind, this solution is too. The bad news is that the Inner Critic has probably been there a long time and may take some shifting – though even being conscious of it can help you rationalise its effects.

Sometimes a message can be traced back to something someone as said or done. Other messages seem to cluster round common themes:

"you're going to get too nervous and muck it all up"

"They don't want to listen to what I've got to say"

"I don't have anything worthwhile to say, I'm wasting their valuable time"

"Anything less than perfect is not good enough"

All of these can do a good job of unsettling you.

Identifying the inner critic

Try sitting down quietly and closing your eyes. Imagine yourself walking into a room to give a presentation, picture the room and people as clearly as you can. Now try and catch what thoughts, worries and concerns would be running through your head. What would you be thinking, what messages would you think? Sometimes you may remember a previous experience that initiated a

message or criticism. If the exercise doesn't work, try thinking about it when you next do a presentation by focussing especially on presence and dual presence. Sometimes it can take time and a few attempts before the nature of an inner critic becomes apparent.

The Inner Coach

Developing an Inner Coach can help counteract the negative effect of nerves and the Inner Critic. Instead of that critical voice in your head, imagine a friendly coach, giving helpful advice and encouraging you to do your best.

Developing a sense memory can help. It is a technique used in acting, to help express emotions more genuinely. Rather than imagining how you feel you can remember a sense from a situation that you can then transfer.

Sit quietly and close your eyes. Think about your two or three favourite places in the world. With each one take time to sense the memory – imaging being there, feel the temperature, remember why you love the place. Be aware of your physical, emotional and mental state. You can repeat the exercise with two or three of your favourite activities, hobbies, people or positive role models.

Next time you do a presentation give yourself a few minutes before you start, practice some deep breathing, and bring these positive memories into your mind. Let them soak into you, physically, emotionally and mentally, and allow them to add positive energy and feeling to your state of being.

Sense memory will help you get into a positive state of mind before important meetings and presentations.

If you still have a persistent Inner Critic you might need to develop a more specific antidote to the Inner Coach.

Developing an Inner Coach works can work along the following steps:

1. Someone says something
2. You believe it
3. You internalise the belief
4. It begins operating in your head as a positive voice
5. It affects your performance when you present in public.

Sometimes the inner coach can develop naturally as you receive positive feedback. It can be worth actively identifying the positive messages that would help you, and actively imaging your Inner Coach – where would they be when you are presenting, what would they sound like, what would they say, and how would that make you feel. An Inner Coach can be particularly helpful on days you feel less confident, and also to counteract an Inner Critic. We often only remember the negative

comments we receive – it is helpful to remember the positive ones, as well as supporting each other as educators to give positive feedback where appropriate.

Playing the right character

This is an approach and style to help you get your message across in the best way. Think about the four characters below:

Good King

Sets objectives, praises success, informative, recognises effort, authoritative, attends to detail, logical.

This is useful for: Building consent around common goals, presenting context with calm authority, calms in a crisis, practical, praises success, and exudes authority.

To get into role Imagine yourself sitting on a throne, find the feeling of weight and gravitas in your body.

Great Mother

Reassuring, supportive, responsive, encouraging, radiates warmth, welcoming, builds trust, relaxed

This is useful for: Establishing trust in a team environment, highlighting the power of listening, developing others and encouraging a collaborative effort. Welcomes new people, reassures in tough times, demonstrates empathy and develops others.

To get into role think of someone you really care for. Let your heart open, imaging connecting with and caring for the audience you are about to speak to.

Warrior

Inspiring, persuasive, sells vision, competitive, confident, challenging, task focused, and call to arms.

This is useful for: Selling a vision, instilling belief, rousing passion, motivating others, challenging people to win, delivering difficult messages, motivating a team towards a successful outcome.

To get into role: Shadow punch, box the air, jump up and down, generate some physical energy. Think of some warriors and let their energy come to you.

Medicine Woman

Visionary, creates change, enthusiastic, sparky, imaginative, paints pictures with words, demonstrative, animated, inspired

This is useful for: Imagining and planning for the future, paints pictures, dares to dream, animates others, brainstorms, sparks “out of the box” thinking, uses metaphor, encourages.

To get into role: Think of the art, music or poetry that inspires you; connect to your imagination and the imagination of the audience. Remember the images, pictures and stories you are going to share with them.

Think which of the characters above would be best able to deliver your presentation – several may be needed for some.

You can imagine the different characters and how they would be – it can help you to do an exercise where you think of them in some detail, and imagine then “backing in” to you so you can speak with their voice.

Authenticity

“Some people like me and some people won’t. So I might as well be myself, and then at least I’ll know that the people who like me like me!”

When you are being yourself, and people can “see” who you are then people will find it easier to listen to you.

Authenticity is about being yourself and not being afraid to show others who you are – being real, being you. This can be as simple as making one statement about your interest in what you are presenting. People notice this, and pay more attention. When you simply present facts and figures people turn off and stop listening.

There are different levels of authenticity. At a simple level it can mean acknowledging part of the reality of the situation that we would normally conceal e.g the terror you feel when you forget an important point *“You know what, I’ve forgotten what I was going to say next. I’m just going to check my notes...”* Or *“Good question, I don’t have that information right now. I’ll get back to you.”* This kind of authentic response wins sympathy and understanding from an audience.

A deeper level of authenticity comes with finding a moment within a presentation to share a real connection with what we are saying and why, or acknowledge a genuine emotional event.

The deeper layer of showing others who we really are can be difficult to access – most of us go about at least some of the time wearing a very carer fully constructed mask – constructed, in fact, precisely to hide who we really are from others. Often this is necessary, because – if the truth be told – we left a little bit of real selves at home and a bit more in the care park.

As John Lennon once remarked *“Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans”*

Sometimes the mask is essential to our survival, so it is not about suggesting throwing it away – rather to become more aware of it, and begin to choose when to wear it and when to drop it.

Exercise - sit down and reflect on the masks you wear at work. Can you remember times when, deep down, you felt there was something else – more genuine, more authentic that could have been said, but in the moment you felt what might have been an easier option.

Thinking of your core values and being clear about what you stand for can be very helpful in developing authenticity.

Exercise - Make a list of what you care most about in the world. Add a list of your personal values. What do you stand for? What are you prepared to stand up for? What are you prepared to stand against?

Think about your work, write a list of what you care most about in the different parts of you work, the practice or organisations you work for. When have you felt happiest at work, and when it has had most meaning for you. Are there any common denominators?

You are much more likely to be authentic if you can relate a presentation – however tangentially, to something you care about. It can be very hard sometimes when we are asked to present something we don't believe in. Working on an aspect of it that you can present with authenticity can help. For example if you are explaining something you aren't happy about sometimes you are able to relate it to "the big picture" or acknowledge that it is the best option in a difficult situation.

Final preparations

Remember the room layout and try to make the best of it – be prepared to move things around if necessary.

Give yourself time if possible

Take some deep breaths and ground yourself to help develop presence. Be conscious of yourself as you do simple actions like dressing or eating. Be aware of your surroundings.

Do a vocal warm up by massaging your face and loosening your jaw, align your head, shoulders and spine. If possible try "zzzzzz" "sssss" and "haw hoo" and try the elevator exercise with an ah sound into Good morning my name is.....

Speak some tongue twisters and key sentences from your presentations.

Imagine your inner coach

Think which characters you want to summon up

Remember authenticity, and what connects you to your material

As you step onto the stage remember dual attention, stay very present and monitor your audience

After a presentation we often feel upset we have forgotten something or that it didn't go as well as it could – use your Inner Coach to help recognise the good bits.

Doing a presentation multiple times makes it easier – remember some of the presenters that appear most skilled are often delivering work they have done many times before.