



# *The* Look & Sound *of* Leadership™ SINCE 1990 *Executive Coaching Tips*

## TALKING LIKE A TED TALKER

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TED Talkers turn us into engrossed detectives, absorbed in solving the mysteries unfolding before us. But TED Talking doesn't have to be saved for special events. This month's coaching conversation explores ways to turn everyday presentations into TED Talks.

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### One big idea

Kurt was a little freaked out.

"I don't mind talking in front of groups," he told me during our coaching session. "I actually enjoy presenting at these annual global meetings. But I don't know what she means when she says she wants us to talk about our groups as if we were giving a TED Talk."

Kurt was referring to Dorothy, the company's CEO. Her vision for this year's global gathering was that she and her senior team would stop delivering droning monologues, one after the other. Instead she wanted everyone on her team to talk about their part of the business as if giving a TED Talk.

I loved the idea. I said, "TED Talkers have a wonderful way of making us curious. We suddenly become fascinated by something we didn't know was fascinating."

"You think I'm going to get people to think talent is fascinating? Not that group!" Kurt was chief talent officer.



“But the work interests *you*, doesn’t it?” I asked him.

“Sure!”

“So your job is to show me what interests you. And to do it in a way that will interest me. That’s what TED Talkers do so well: show us *why* something is interesting.”

He gave a skeptical smile. “Nice work if you can get it!”

“Well, here’s my first question. What’s the one big idea you want me, your listener, to take away? In twenty words or less.”

He took a big breath. “Without the right talent in the right places, we’re not going to win. People have to get involved in the recruiting process. And they have to be better interviewers or they’re going to recruit the wrong people. And they have to develop their people once they get here. We’re kidding ourselves if we think we can compete with B-list players.”

“OK,” I said. “That was a great first take.”

He laughed. “Not exactly twenty words!”

“First takes usually aren’t,” I said. “Oh! I forgot to ask. How long do you have for your talk?”

“Just like a TED Talk. Eighteen minutes.”

“OK. Now, take two. Twenty words or less, for real this time. What one big idea are you going to get from your head to mine in eighteen minutes?”

He took time to think. Then said, “Talent drives our business. It’s our competitive advantage.”

I rocked forward. “That’s fantastic. Does that sound compelling to you?”

He was cautious. “I don’t know. Sounds simplistic.”



“Well, it’s just one big idea. It’s the skeleton everything else will hang from.”

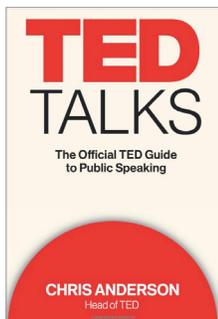
“Then it’s okay there’s no meat on those bones?”

“It’s okay for now. Because now that you have your one big idea, you start hunting for the movie that’s going to illuminate that big idea.”

He drew in his chin skeptically, leaning back.

I changed my approach.

### Details of actions, words and feelings



“The president of TED is a guy named Chris Anderson. He wrote a [terrific book](#) about how to give a TED Talk. There’s a million great suggestions in there but one in particular stuck with me because it was so simple and so incredibly true.”

“And it was...?”

“Overstuffed equals unexplained.”

He gave an immediate laugh of recognition. “Oh, brother, have I ever told you about Dylan? He’s one of my direct reports. That perfectly describes every one of his staff presentations. He jams in way too much information and none of us know what the hell he’s trying to tell us.”

“You know what I call those overstuffed, unexplained presentations? Fly-overs.”

“Like tree-topping,” he said, bouncing his hand along an invisible line above his head. “Bumping off the canopy.”

“Exactly. An overstuffed presentation will never be a TED Talk. Instead, find the movie in your head that illustrates your big idea. Then, you have to get the movie that’s on the screen inside your head projecting onto the screen inside my head. That’s never going to happen if you do a fly-over. The only movies that light up our screens are the ones with close-ups.”



“I’m not sure I get this whole movie concept.”

“Well, here’s what I’m talking about. I’m talking about specifics of what people did, said and felt. That’s what makes a movie. And it’s what turns boring blah-blah-blah into something we want to listen to. Everyone wants to hear about what people do and say and feel.”

“I’ve got a daughter who is pretty analytical. I think she’d argue with you.”

“Bring her on!” I said. “I think I’d win. I find even the highest analytics can’t resist listening to a situation that has drama in it. And drama only comes to life when you tell me actions people take, words they say to each other, and the impact it all has on them.”

He gave a long, unconvinced, “Okay.”

“Can I show you how this works?” I offered.

“Please!”

## Finding your movie

“Suppose Dorothy came to you and said she wanted to go out for a long lunch.”

“The woman who never stops to eat? Ha!”

“Just suppose,” I laughed. “And suppose she says she really wants to understand how you think about this idea of talent driving the business. What details would you want to tell her? What comes to mind?”

He thought seriously a second, then said, “The San Diego office. They consistently make bad hires. Time after time. They have deadwood that’s been around for years. It’s affecting their numbers. Matthew, he’s the head there, he’s heard me say it. But it’s not getting better.”

Then he signaled a stop, saying, “But I would never tell Dorothy that. I’m not trying to throw Matthew under the bus here.”



“Of course! *And* that situation does have a lot of drama in it. *And* it’s a great example of talent driving the business.”

“Or *not* driving the business,” he said ruefully.

“Can you hear, Kurt, that you have passion about that situation?”

“Yes!”

“That means it will be a great seed for one of your stories. And it came to you when you imagined talking about something important to you.”

“But I’m not going to tell it, right?”

“Not in that format, no. But now we have a starting point. And now I can teach you a three-part structure you can build on. The parts can go in any order, but the first one is what I call the future perfect.”

“Like the future perfect tense?”

“Right. It’s already been completed in the future. It already exists.”

## Future perfect

“Sweet.”

“You get to say, ‘Imagine a time when...’ Or ‘I can see a time when...’ You paint a picture of a future where today’s problems don’t exist. You show me a movie about a time when the current pain, whatever that pain is, has been eradicated.”

“Ah! And then I’ll tell you how to get there.”

“Yes, those are other parts,” I said. “But for the moment let’s stick to this first part, the future perfect. Your challenge is to show me a movie with close-ups of what people do, say and feel in that perfect future.”



“No fly-overs,” he said.

“Right! You can say something like, ‘Imagine a time when people act in this particular way.’ And you’ll tell me what those actions are. In detail. Then you can say, ‘And imagine that when these people talk, they say things to each other like this.’ And you’ll replay actual conversations. Like a transcript.”

“Like a movie!” he tossed in.

“Like a movie,” I echoed. “And then you can say, ‘And those actions and those words make these people feel like this.’”

“A positive feeling, I presume.”

“Yes. Because you believe that all those actions and all those words represent ways that talent is driving business in the future. And that is a very positive feeling.”

“And it’s my one big idea.”

I nodded. “Because every detail in your movie connects directly to your one bit idea. If it doesn’t, cut it.”

“I like that. So, okay, future perfect is part one. What’s next?”

### **Present hope / Present pain**

“Parts two and three both take place in the present. And, in both instances, just like in the future tense, you’ll show us what people are doing and saying and feeling. In detail.”

“Show the movie. Got it.”

“Part two is a movie about words and action that are creating the current pain.”

He picked up the ball. “And part three is about actions and words that are helping alleviate the current pain.”



I said, “I assume there is someone in the company who you think handles their talent well.”

“Melinda,” he said in reply. “She’s in Ottawa. She’s great about developing her people.”

“Could you describe the specific things she does and says and feels?”

“Oh, absolutely. Well, I’m not sure I know how she feels. No, that’s not true. I do. She loves developing her people. She’s proud of it. She’s told me that.”

“So in part three you’ll tell us her story. Her actions and words will point towards the future perfect. And you can use her name. Give her public props. Melinda in Ottawa becomes the representative of the present hopeful.”

He was definitely on board. He said, “OK. Together the three parts are the good future, the good present day and the bad present day.” I nodded. He thought, then said, “I get the outline, but I’m not so sure I know how to weave them together.”

“Want to hear my version, off the top of my head?”

“Go for it!”

### **Putting it all together**

I paused, then said quietly, “‘Imagine a time when...’ And then I get you watching that future perfect movie by giving lots of details about actions, words and feelings. Then I say something like, ‘That’s our company as I dream about it. Talent is driving the business. But the future is fragile. It’s not guaranteed we’re going to get there. Do you know what might stop us? Things we’re doing today. Things like hiring B-list people.’ That transitions you into part two, the pain in the present. You name it as a threat to the future.”

“Just name it? Or am I going to do the whole ‘did, said and felt’ thing? Really show them one damned scary movie?”



“You are absolutely going to show them the scary movie. In detail. But you don’t have to say it’s happening in San Diego.”

He nodded, considering. Then, he said, “And then we close with the rah-rah of Melinda.”

“Right. Part three is always fun. You can say something like, ‘But there’s lots that’s going well. In fact, in some places, we’re doing things that look a lot like that future I described to you. Let me brag a little bit about Melinda in Ottawa.’ And you’re now in part three, the hopeful future.”

“Detail, detail, detail. Do, say, feel,” he said in a singsong.

“Right.”

He leaned back. “It might make more sense if I switched parts two and three. End with the pain, the threat.”

“Yes. Great. Or you could end with the future perfect if you want. You can rearrange them in any order depending on the point you want to make.”

“You know what occurs to me?” he asked.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I could teach this to Dylan. He could use this structure for his staff reports, couldn’t he?”

“He could. But, first ask him what his one big idea is.”

“He doesn’t have one,” said Kurt. “He has twenty.”

“Help him get clear on his one main point and he’ll start sounding more like a TED Talker – because that is, after all, one great way to display *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.”



### Core Concepts:

- Articulate your entire presentation as one big idea in twenty words or less.
- Be rigorous: every idea, every bullet point, every sentence, should tie to your one big idea. If it doesn't connect, cut it.
- Three stories you can craft:
  1. The future perfect: "I can imagine a time when..."
  2. The present pain: "What could stop us from a perfect future is..."
  3. The present without pain: "What is helping us achieve that perfect future is..."
- Every story needs details of what people do, say and feel.

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