



# The Look & Sound of Leadership™

Executive Coaching Tips

SINCE 1990

## PREPPING LIKE A TED TALKER

TOM HENSCHHEL

JULY 2017

Preparing a presentation raises many questions. How much are you going to rehearse? What will you actually do during your rehearsal? Are you going to memorize your talk? This month's coaching conversation covers all that and more.

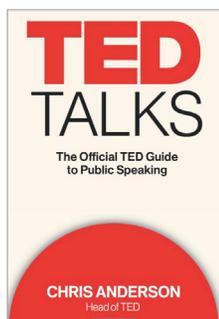
LISTEN

DOWNLOAD MP3

SUBSCRIBE

### Committing time

Dorothy was two years into her role as CEO of a global business services company. She wanted this year's global management meeting to be engaging and lively. She told her division heads they all needed to talk about their divisions as if they were giving TED Talks. Each person's eighteen minutes needed to be riveting, she told them.



The eight division heads cried out for help and as a solution, they were given me. Before our first conversation, I learned they'd all received a copy of *TED Talks*, by Chris Anderson, the president of TED. I quickly created a three-page reduction of Anderson's terrific book and sent it to them. It's available [here](#).

Over the next eight weeks, I would work individually with each of them. My conversation with Kurt, in Chicago, was the topic of an Executive Coaching Tip in May 2017, called *Talking Like a TED Talker*.

But before the individual work began, we had a 90-minute group call as a kick-off. I had a million questions for them. I began with this one.



“If we imagine this as a project,” I said after the introductions, “how will each of you approach it?”

“You mean how much time are we going to put into it?” asked Adam in Phoenix.

“Yes,” I answered.

Caroline, in London, jumped in. “But how are we measuring time? Are we counting, like, time in the shower? Because I know I’m going to be thinking about this all the time. Are we counting that?”

“Does it matter?” asked Cloé from Montreal. “It’s like any other part of our work. It gets better when we think about it.”

“Up to a point!” laughed Adam.

I said, “I’m assuming this is like any project: you’ll all have your own approaches. So, thinking of it like a project, how much time is each of you allotting?”

Their answers ranged widely. Caroline was on one end. Admitting she was nervous, she said she was going to devote at least an hour a day, which would be about forty hours. Tracy, in Hong Kong, an experienced, confident speaker, was on the other end. She felt she’d probably devote six or seven hours.

Kurt asked, “How many hours *should* we be rehearsing?”

Caroline jumped in again, asking, “Didn’t I read you were an actor, Tom?”

“I was,” I said.

“In theatre?” she asked.

“The whole first part of my career, yes,” I answered.

“So how many hours did you all rehearse? You were professionals, yeah?”



I said, “We rehearsed six days a week for four weeks. Sometimes five.”

Adam tossed out, “That’s over 200 hours.”

Caroline said, “And a typical play is, what, two hours? So that’s like a hundred to one!” She gave a strangling sound. Everyone laughed.

Adam spoke again. “But, for us, at eighteen minutes, a hundred to one is only about thirty hours. Caroline, you said you were going to put in forty!”

She laughed heartily. “I did, didn’t I? Well, see? I’m really a pro at heart!”

I was excited that it was a foregone conclusion to each of them that they would dedicate rehearsal time on their calendars. I told them I was glad I didn’t have to persuade anyone about the importance of rehearsal.

### **Memorize? Yes? No?**

Cloé said, “Making time to rehearse isn’t my concern. What I don’t know is what to do when I’m rehearsing. Do I just start talking to myself in my office and hope I say something good?”

“And that you remember it!” Caroline tossed in.

“Or do I sit down and start writing a speech?” Cloé continued. “As if I know how to do that! I really don’t know what to do.”

For the first time, silence fell. Cloé’s question seemed to resonate with them all.

I said, “It depends on how you like to work. So let me ask you another question. Are you planning to memorize your speeches?”

“Like word for word for word?” asked Marissa in Cupertino.

“You tell me,” I answered.



Tracy, the most experienced, said, “I don’t really memorize. Well, I do, but I’m not saying the same words every time. I work off a couple bullet points and I know what I’m going to say. But not word for word.”

“That sounds like some weird presentation ninja voodoo,” laughed Caroline. “If I don’t memorize mine, I’m worried I’ll be a bleeding zombie up there.”

Everyone laughed. I asked, “Zombie how?”

“Frozen brain,” she shot back. “Blank like a washboard. Eyes like a cat with her tail in an outlet.” She continued to keep everyone laughing.

I asked, “Why would that happen?”

“Because my brain would go completely blank looking at all those people.”

“Uh, can I change the topic for a second?” I asked. “Caroline just led us into a whole other part of rehearsal that I think goes on 24/7. It’s the self-talk part of rehearsal.”

### **Manage your self-talk**

“At which I stink,” said Caroline. Then, drily, “She said, proving the point!”

“Self-talk is so important,” I said sincerely. “What we tell ourselves about the future completely affects the outcome. Catastrophizing does not set you up for success.”

“But how do I turn that voice off, Tom?” Caroline asked. “I’m not being funny now.”

“I know,” I said. I slowed down. “To be honest, Caroline, I don’t think you can turn off your negative self-talk in the next eight weeks. But you can get conscious about it. Pay attention when you hear it. Don’t let it play unchallenged in the background like mental muzak.”

“Ooooh, have you been listening inside my head?” she laughed.

“When you notice negative self-talk,” I continued, “answer it back. Consciously counter the narrative. ‘I’m



going to go out there and be riveting.”

“I’m going to go out there and kick ass,” Caroline replied. The others cheered.

Marissa asked, “Can we get back to memorizing? Is it a good idea or not?”

“Well, I’ll speak for myself here,” I said. “I’m pretty close to Tracy’s style. I memorize the bullets, not the words. But first, before there are any bullet points to memorize, I spend a lot of time developing my throughline.”

“That’s from Chris Anderson’s book,” Kurt said.

### **Throughline as puzzle**

“It is indeed,” I said. “He talks about how crucial a throughline is. Sometimes my throughline will pop into my head right away. But other times, I have to spend a lot of time thinking about it before I find something I like.”

“And what exactly is the throughline?” asked Cloé.

I spoke distinctly. “It’s the question I am going to put in my listeners’ heads. And it’s the answer I’m going to give them. I’m creating a little puzzle I’ll end up solving.”

There was a pause. I sensed people were writing that down.

I continued. “Once I’ve got my throughline, I start rehearsing. And I rehearse out loud. Those are the key words: out loud. You have to talk out loud. It’s the only way the ideas will get embedded in your brain in a way you can retrieve them.”

“Are you saying I won’t have brain freeze if I rehearse out loud?” Caroline asked.

“Have you rehearsed out loud in the past?” I countered.

“I haven’t done bloody anything in the past, Tom. I’m not a speaker.”



“You are too,” said Marissa.

“Negative self-talk!” called Adam.

“Oh, damn! You’re right,” Caroline said. “A shilling in the jar.”

Coming back in, I said, “Here’s a trick when you’re rehearsing out loud. Don’t say it the way you said it before. Free yourself from the worry of repeating yourself. It doesn’t matter what you said the last time. Yes, yes, yes, there were some good things in it. And you’ll say some good things today, too. It will just be different. So don’t talk words. Talk ideas. The words don’t matter.”

“You can’t be serious!” said Cloé.

“Well,” I said, “it’s not as if we’re doing Shakespeare. I don’t care how good a writer you are, the ideas are more important than your words.”

“But the words *are* the ideas,” said Tracy.

### Exploring the woods

“Let me make this into a metaphor,” I said. “Suppose all of you are my audience and I’m the speaker. Imagine we’re standing in a bright meadow. Right in front of us is a thick stand of woods and I’m going to guide you through them.

“Once we enter those woods, it’s going to be dark and cool and sweet smelling. I know that because these are my woods. I’ve been through these woods so many times the trees think they know me.

“But the woods are new to you. You can’t tell one tree from another. You can’t tell what’s safe and what’s not. So I have to guide you – all of you – through my woods. And I only succeed if we all come out of the woods at the same place, at the same time. If I lose any of you along the way...”

“Like if we start snoring!” Adam slid in.



“...then I didn’t guide you well. But remember, these are my woods. I own them. So if today I guide us more towards that creek, that’s fine. Or if I guide us over towards that little patch of hillocks over there, that’s okay, too, because no matter where we are in the woods, I know my way, and I’m going to get us out together.”

“So you don’t have to memorize word for word for word,” said Tracy, as if I’d just proved her point.

“Well, you don’t have *rehearse* word for word for word,” I clarified. “Rehearsal is when you should be exploring the woods. Make them yours. Take wrong turns and loop back. Get lost and start again. But do it out loud. Talking out loud is how you carve grooves in your brain.”

“Paths through the forest,” said Cloé. Then, she went on, “So my rehearsal starts with finding my throughline...”

“No,” called Caroline, “it starts with positive self-talk.”

“Right! I am going to kick ass!” said Cloé. “*Then* find the throughline and start rehearsing out loud.”

“And use rehearsal as exploration,” said Tracy. “Don’t repeat yourself.”

“What did we miss, Tom?” asked Kurt.

“That was a good recap. Positive self-talk, find your throughline, rehearse out loud. That’s a good way to think about rehearsing.”

Caroline jumped in again. “That’s all good for our ideas and our words, but how do we rehearse our bodies?”

That topic, and several others, is covered in *Performing Like a TED Talker*, which is next month’s installment of *The Look & Sound of Leadership*.



### Core Concepts:

■ **Rehearsal is obligatory**

100 minutes of rehearsal to 1 minute of performance is not out of the norm.

■ **Manage your self-talk**

How much better would you be if you looked in the mirror every morning and said, “I’m going to knock this out of the park!”?

■ **Find your throughline**

What question are you going to get your listeners to ask themselves? And how are you going to answer it for them?

■ **Rehearsal means “out loud”**

Thinking silently is like looking down on the forest from above. Talking out loud carves the paths through the trees.

### Related Coaching Tips / Podcasts:

[Captive Your Audience](#)

[I Talk Too Fast!](#)

[Managing Nervousness](#)

[The Power of Rehearsal](#)

[What Compelling Speakers Share](#)

### CONNECT



**CONTRIBUTE**

an idea for future Executive Coaching Tips



**SUBSCRIBE**

to the Podcast



**LISTEN**

to episodes of “The Look & Sound of Leadership” podcast



**VIEW**

searchable archive of Executive Coaching Tips



**CONTACT**

the Essential Communications team

**818 788 5357**

[essentialcomm.com](http://essentialcomm.com)

[info@essentialcomm.com](mailto:info@essentialcomm.com)



**3+**  
MILLION  
PODCASTS  
DOWNLOADED

