

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP

By Tom Henschel



ESSENTIAL
COMMUNICATIONS

TELE 818.788.5357
info@essentialcomm.com
www.essentialcomm.com

EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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The Power of Rehearsal ▶ 08/05/10

Rehearsal rescues a downward slide

The division's executive vice-president demands high performance from anyone presenting in front of him. If you're at the director level or above, he expects you to succinctly summarize key points, then lead a lively discussion.

This works well for many men and women in his division, but not for Kris. The more he prepared for the EVP's presentations, the more anxious he got. Over time, his performance declined to the point where the EVP was close to banning him from presenting. Kris felt himself hurtling towards a cliff without any way to stop himself from shooting off the edge.

After meeting Kris, I felt certain he was plummeting downhill not because of his presentation skills but rather because of his *rehearsal* skills.

If your presentations could use a bit of polishing, rehearsing wisely is a must. Here are three ways to make your rehearsals productive and powerful.

First, accept it: rehearsal improves performance

Kris desperately wanted to believe his rehearsals would improve his performance. And they might have if he weren't clutching them so tightly that he strangled all the benefits out of them. But at least he was doing it!

All too often, corporate presenters think they can work on their slides one minute, then walk down the hall and present the next. To which I say, "Oh, really?" I think that's like putting a football player in a chair to study the playbook without letting him on the field until game day. How good will he be?

Another argument I hear against rehearsing is that people are so busy they simply don't have time to do it. I understand. And, if you're prepping a couple slides for the weekly staff meeting, it may not be a good trade-off to block out rehearsal time from your schedule.

Although I would challenge you on that. I bet you could find ten minutes to talk through your key ideas. Maybe during your commute the night before. Or in the shower in the morning. Or on your



way in to the office. Any of those would be a rehearsal. And it would improve your performance. So, for a low visibility situation like that, you might not have to block out time to rehearse formally.

But it's astonishing to me that people make the same I-don't-have-time argument when they're facing a "money" presentation where their performance could affect the outcome. Not rehearsing in that situation is a losing trade-off. Research has shown unequivocally that rehearsal makes you better. That's why we use it to train our police and pilots, astronauts and ambulance responders.

Accept it: rehearsal improves performance. Schedule rehearsal time on your calendar—and keep the appointment!

Second, rehearse out loud

Have you ever had this experience? You rigorously think through a set of ideas. Everything is completely clear in your head. Then, when you explain it for the first time, it doesn't come out of your mouth at all the way you imagined.

Why does this happen? Because the part of your brain that manages spoken language doesn't get any stimulation when you reflect thoughtfully about your ideas. Nor is it activated while you're building your PowerPoint slides!

So working at your computer is only half your prep. The other half is rehearsing out loud. If you don't speak your material out loud before presenting, then, once you begin, you'll be showing us your first rehearsal. There's no way you'll be at your best.

Although Kris accepted this lesson, his rehearsals were paralyzing him because he was violating the third and final rule for rehearsing.

Third, don't rehearse to repeat

Memorization is hard work. Should you happen to master that task, speaking memorized words authentically is even harder. That's what paralyzed Kris: he was trying to learn words to say by rote.

But rehearsing shouldn't be about speaking a memorized script.

Instead, think of your material as a ski slope. You're standing at the top of the mountain looking down the run. You don't have to ski in the same tracks you made during your previous run. You only have to get safely to the bottom of the hill. And there are lots of ways down the hill.



Are some paths better than another? To be honest, yes. But if you happen to cut left and suddenly realize you're going to skip that wonderful clump of trees on the right, well, no one knows but you. It doesn't matter. Focus on getting down the hill.

I'll bet you already do this quite naturally. Don't you have a story you've told for years about some event—a vacation or a wedding or the birth of a child? Depending on who's listening, can't you make it funny or suspenseful? Short or long?

When you weave your way through those variations, do you try to tell the story exactly the way you said it last time? No. You know how to get down the hill no matter where you find yourself on the hill. You're comfortable with all the variations because every time you told it before was a rehearsal for telling it this time.

I coached Kris to consider his rehearsal a success if he expressed his ideas differently from his previous rehearsal. To help him relax further, I encouraged him to rehearse (out loud!) as if he were talking to a close colleague or friend. He found his stranglehold easing. And, with these three lessons in mind, his performance began to improve and that terrifying cliff he'd felt himself rushing toward turned into a very manageable bump.

The three lessons

- 1 Make rehearsal part of your prep every time—it improves performance
- 2 Rehearse out loud—activate the spoken language center of your brain
- 3 Don't memorize or repeat yourself—strive to say it differently each time

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