

ADVICE FOR CREATIVES NAVIGATING THE WORKPLACE



JUDY BELL
FOUNDER
ENERGETIC RETAIL

I have been asked to present updates on my team's projects to large groups of 100 or more members. Do you have any tips on how to overcome my anxiety and develop a captivating presentation?

– **Fearful of Public Speaking**

Judy: Congratulations! You have just been handed a golden ticket to accelerate the upward pace of your career. There is no better way to emotionally connect with a large number of team members in a single event. But do understand that this is *showtime*, and it demands committed preparation and practice.

To relieve your anxiety, think small. Rather than focusing on presenting to a large group, consider that you make presentations every day, in one-on-one conversations with colleagues, in discussions at small group meetings, even when visiting with your family and friends. While engaging in a routine conversation, you speak “to” people not “at” people, and presentations are no different. When you look at presenting through this lens, it doesn’t matter if you are speaking to one person or to 1,000; you are simply having a conversation. The role of your audience is to respond, hopefully with rapt attention, curiosity and even laughter. When they laugh, you know they are listening.

My first national presentation was at a WAVM (Western Association of Visual Merchandising) event in San Francisco in the 1990s. It was early in my career at Target, and I was “bite-my-nails” nervous. But while backstage, I had a memorable and inspiring moment. I anxiously asked another speaker, “Are you nervous?” He said, “No, I’m just excited to present all of the interesting stuff I pulled together.” *Hmmm*, I thought, *that’s a new way to think about this. Am I excited about what I have to say?* My answer was “Yes!” In that moment, I realized that telling my story was all that I needed to think about. By focusing on my message and passion for my work, I had more confidence as I stepped onto the stage. After that experience, I accepted every invitation to present and, in time, the day came where I had no anxiety whatsoever, only enthusiasm for my story.

Speaking of story, a book that is bound to

inspire you is the “Storyteller’s Secret,” where author Carmine Gallo asks, “What makes your heart sing? The answer is the foundation upon which all great stories are built.” At the end of each of 37 chapters in the book, Gallo shares another of his secrets. Those I value most are:

- “Leaders don’t move mountains with mountains of data. They do it by giving their audience a piece of their heart.”
- “Storytellers who capture the public’s heart are passionate about their message and they share that content in simple, approachable language.”
- “Effective educators serve up serious stories with a side of funny.”

To learn more about specific presentation techniques, visit Barnes & Noble, skim the shelves on public speaking and pull a few books that interest you. By studying these resources, you



can build a powerful list of tactics. Then set up a simple framework with your personal favorites. As part of my strategy, I like to begin my presentations with an attention-getter. In Gallo’s “Talk Like Ted” book, he dedicates an entire chapter to the topic—“Deliver Jaw-Dropping Moments”—and says, “Every performer has at least one...an emotionally charged event that your audience members will be talking about the next day. Get one and use it.”

Next, I decide on a few main points I want to make and think about how I can support them

with photos or props. As an alternative to ubiquitous PowerPoint presentations filled with stats and bullet points, I like to show something tactile, like a T-shirt with a special message, printed shopping bags, a new toy, etc. In “Storyteller’s Secret,” Gallo says: “Statistical evidence and industry jargon are the least effective means to educate a general audience on complex topics. Personal stories and analogies help people make sense of information and ideas they know little about.”

Finally, I develop a memorable conclusion. I restate my main points in a new way, sometimes using a metaphor or other device. Most importantly, I always end my presentations on time. My intent is to leave the audience wanting more rather than overwhelming them with information. I allow only limited Q&A with the group. I prefer to invite interested individuals up after the presentation for one-on-one conversations.

When you have developed your own signature presentation framework, fill in the blanks with your material and then practice earnestly. As you do so, think about your presentation style. Capitalize on your personal tone, your sense of humor, etc. Don’t try to be someone other than who you are. If you are generally not funny, don’t force a joke. Videotape a portion of your presentation and check your habits. Ensure that you are standing tall, not rocking from foot-to-foot or pacing back and forth. With those repetitive movements, speakers may relieve their anxiety, but the audience will undoubtedly focus on that and not hear their message. Speak “to” your audience, not “at” them, just as if you were talking to each one as an individual. Communicate with passion and always from your heart.



OOPS!

I am just beginning my career and made a misstep on a highly visible project. Do I try to redeem myself or move on?

– *Made an Oopsy*

Judy: As a newcomer to your career, it's a good time to develop a process that you can put into motion in challenging situations. Your question as to whether you should redeem yourself or move on is "all-or-nothing," allowing for no middle ground. Sounds like your emotions are in play, and before you speak, act or make any decisions, pause for a minute. Rather than sink into feelings of regret or embarrassment, look at the FACTS. Ask yourself a few questions: How big of a deal is this? Is it a real or imagined threat? Is my job or reputation in danger? Will the project move ahead, or is it at a standstill?

Next, ask yourself what you would have done differently. As a novice, did you have the skills to respond in another way? If you did the best you could, cut yourself a break. Then develop a strategy to remedy the situation, or to prevent it from happening in the future. First consider talking with someone who worked alongside you on the project. Is there a colleague who will tell you the truth about your misstep? Do you have a mentor who can advise you? Does your company offer training programs that will equip you for these types of challenges?

Once you have a plan, meet with your boss and present your strategy. Ask for guidance and express your willingness to set goals to build your competency. You will be clearly demonstrating your ability to take responsibility for your mistake, study the facts and design an action plan to move forward. There will always be challenges in your workplace, but the way you respond to sensitive circumstances can make a lasting, positive impression. Beginning with a pause, and then moving from "feeling" to "thinking" will open your eyes to a bigger picture. Then you can evaluate your behavior in a more realistic manner. In these early stages of your career, be compassionate with yourself. Learn to appreciate challenges as gifts that encourage you to grow and develop new strengths. 

JUDY BELL IS THE FOUNDER OF ENERGETIC RETAIL (ENERGETIC-RETAIL.COM) AND AUTHOR OF "SILENT SELLING." SHE HELD AN INSPIRATIONAL ROLE FOR 22 YEARS AT TARGET CORP. AND NOW SHARES HER INSIGHTS ON NAVIGATING THE CREATIVE WORKPLACE WITH DESIGN:RETAIL IN THIS BI-ISSUE COLUMN. SEND YOUR QUESTIONS FOR "ASK JUDY" TO JESSIE. DOWD@EMERALDEXPO.COM.