

7 Steps to a World-Class Rehearsal (Jul 09)

Rehearsal is a practice more honored in the breach than the occurrence, and it should be the other way around.

Presenters wiggle out of rehearsal in a variety of ways. They say, “I’ll just wing it.” That’s usually fatal, and ends up turning a modern virtue — the casual approach — into a sin. Or they say, “I don’t want the speech to get stale,” as if that were a serious problem. It’s far more likely that it will never come to life to begin with, let alone get old, if presenters don’t rehearse the right way. Or some say, “I’ve run it through in my head,” as if that were enough.

The problem is that every communication is two conversations, a verbal one and a non-verbal one. That second conversation is just as important as the first one — in some ways more important — and you can’t, by definition, run that through in your head.

So you need to rehearse. How do you do it? As often as possible, but here are the basics.

Step 1: Rehearse the Content

The first rehearsal is for the content. The first time, just try to get the words out. Don’t worry about what actors call “blocking” — how you might move around. Just get the words out. Find out if anything needs to be changed or fixed, or if there are pronunciations you stumble over. See how long it takes, and how well the transitions work. Test it.

Step 2: The Logical Structure Rehearsal

Audiences today expect speakers to do more than simply read from a script or PowerPoint slide deck. They expect a more intimate conversation.

As a result, it pays for the speaker to know the basic logical flow of the speech — not the exact words, but the main points in order. Ideally, that’s what speakers have in their heads when they bound up on stage and begin to chat with the audience.

So rehearse that. Get the logic of the speech down in a bulleted outline, and practice that. Rehearse just running through that outline, as if it were a very brief explanation. Then embellish it by adding your supporting facts, your stories, and so on. Work your way up to the whole speech.

The result will be a clearer sense of how the speech needs to flow for the comprehension of the audience. And rather than reading the speech or slavishly following a dense series of PowerPoint slides, you can flexibly and confidently work through the outline, knowing where you’re going and where you’re taking the audience.

Step 3: Rehearse Your Non-Verbal Conversation

The third rehearsal is for the non-verbal “conversation.” Now that you’ve got your content stable, work on finding out how you’re going to stand, to move, and where during the speech you need to do what. Don’t worry so much about getting the words perfect, but do “feel” the speech as a dynamic production of your body. Ideally, you’ll have someone tape you, so you can see how you’re doing.

Many people don’t think they need to walk through a speech physically — they believe running through key points in their heads accomplishes the same purpose — but they do. I can always tell someone who hasn’t rehearsed, because sooner or later you’ll catch that deer-in-the-headlights look as the speaker thinks to himself, whoa, I didn’t see that coming.

Step 4: Rehearse the Emotions

The fourth rehearsal is for the emotional journey. A good speech takes its audience on an emotional as well as an intellectual adventure. So in this rehearsal, go “over the top” finding places to express all the emotions of the speech. You should map them out in your mind just as you map out your body’s movements. Where do you start? Where do you finish? How do you get from one to the other?

Go a little crazy here, because when you give the actual speech, you’ll retain some of the life of this rehearsal. Most people are too bland, emotionally speaking, because they’re afraid of showing their emotions when they speak. Unfortunately, that just makes them boring.

Emotion is captivating. That’s why so many of us like reality TV shows, although we are loath to admit it. We put actors on pedestals, because they are practiced emoters. We even elect former actors President, because they’re able to look authentic doing what they do best: playing a part. So if you’re the type who has a hard time expressing emotions, or if your business or professional training has put a premium on control rather than expressiveness, you’ve got yourself a challenge.

The solution is to open up a little. And the way to find your emotive chops is to rehearse, so that you don’t go to uncomfortable extremes when you’re actually live and in person in front of an audience. Charisma, after all, is the *tactful* expression of a range of emotions.

The Happy-Sad Exercise

Try the “happy-sad” exercise to work on loosening up your emotions. Here’s how it works. You start giving your speech, emoting as much happiness as you can. Not in the words (it’s cheating to say, “I’m really really happy”) but in your non-verbal cues — tone of voice, facial expression, gestures. (You do this in front of a small audience of close friends or colleagues who won’t surreptitiously tape you and put it on YouTube.)

As soon as they see and feel real happiness, they shout ‘SAD!’ and it’s your job, without changing the speech content, to start emoting as much sadness as you can. Again, it’s all about the tone of voice, the facial expressions and the gestures.

Once you’ve convinced the audience of your sadness, they shout ‘HAPPY!’ and you’re back to happy again. The idea is to be over-the-top happy and sad in turn.

The point is to help you loosen up and prepare for the real thing. If you do the happy-sad exercise a few days before the actual speech, you’ll retain some of that animation during the performance, and you’ll be more charismatic as a result.

Step 5: The Walk-Through Rehearsal

I touched on the deer-in-the-headlights phenomenon earlier, or when speakers face one too many unexpected obstacles and find themselves losing concentration and staring blankly at the source of the latest disaster wondering, “What do I do now?”

It doesn’t have to be that way. Insist upon a walk-through or technical rehearsal before any big speech you give. Get together the day before the event, or at the very latest the morning of the event, with the technical people upon whom your life will depend. Walk through the speech paying attention to all the technical aspects of the delivery. What does it feel like to be miked? Does it restrict movement? Can you be heard? How are the sound levels?

What about the lighting? Does it shine in your eyes? Get used to it. Practice not squinting, looking just below the spotlights out to the audience. Can it follow you if you move? If you’re going out to the audience, work that with the tech folks. They’ll need to have a follow spot, or be able to turn the house lights up.

What about the camera coverage? Where do you need to be? Again, if you're walking into the audience you're going to have to work that out with the techies. They're going to be inclined to say they can't manage it, but they can if they really put their minds to it. So negotiate that nicely, since their help and cooperation is essential for a successful show.

What about slides, notes, visual aids, music, sounds, video, and so on? Practice all of the above with the technical folks and have a plan B in case something goes horribly wrong and nothing works. Probably won't happen, but you want to be ready if it does. (And if you cover well, and respond heroically, you'll get a hero's reception from the audience.)

Walk the entire hall to get a sense of how big it is. Check out the sight lines, because you want to know how tiny you look from the back, or if you're blocked by something from the side. Get to know the space so you can fill it with your presence. The bigger the hall, the more energy is required. If you can, watch tape of Mick Jagger of the *Rolling Stones* to see how much energy is required to fill a big stadium.

Step 6: The Opening Rehearsal

The openings of speeches are incredibly important for setting the mood, the audience expectations, and the energy level in the house. Openings are also the time when presenters are most nervous or tentative.

There's nothing natural about this state. But it's important to remember that presenting isn't about being yourself. It's about forcing yourself to walk — or bound — out on stage with focus, with energy, already thinking that the audience is comprised of some very close friends you're really glad to see.

So a little self-hypnosis or self-talk is in order. Go watch actors backstage during a show. You'll see them all getting into what they call the "offstage beat." That means they don't walk on stage and then think about delivering a line. They come from somewhere, already in a mood, already heading somewhere with something on their minds, already busy doing something.

The Off-Stage Beat Exercise

You need an offstage beat. Get into a frame of mind, such as I'm-about-to-see-a-close-friend-that-I-haven't-seen-in-years-that-I'm-going-to-hug. Or something similar that floats your psychic boat. But make it positive, friendly, and all about connecting with someone.

Go offstage, get psyched, and then come charging on mentally hugging everyone in the audience and deliver your first line. Or better yet, your first story.

By the way, spending the first few minutes saying "hi" and "how's everyone in Topeka?" is amateur stuff. Don't waste that opening opportunity to grab your audience and never let go. Start with something vivid, interesting, dramatic, or exciting. Jump right in and tell us the best story you know. Or ask the audience an interesting question they haven't thought about. Or interact with them in a more compelling way. Get some of them up on stage, or go into the audience and start conversing with them. You get the idea.

Rehearse the opening. Get an offstage beat. Don't waste the moment of maximum interest. Start with a bang. You can't repair the damage done by a wasted opening.

Step 7: The Dress Rehearsal

The last full rehearsal you do should take place the day before -- or two days before -- the actual event. It should take place in the hall itself, it should involve the full technical panoply of video, music, slides and so on that you're using, and you should go the whole distance. By that I mean, don't skip chunks; do the whole speech so that you get a good feel for how long it will take.

Dress rehearsals should follow the script just as if they were the real thing. You should throw yourself into them with all you've got. Don't hold back just because it's only practice. If you don't practice the real thing,

how will you know what it's like?

Don't worry about getting stale. It will be sufficiently different with an audience so that it will feel fresh on the big day itself. And that's all that matters.

The less-well-understood point of rehearsing is to get a feel for the physicality of the speech — the non-verbal aspects — which are so important to the way the audience decodes your messages. Every speech is two conversations, the verbal and the non-verbal, and you need to be in control of both. When they are aligned, you can be persuasive. When they're not aligned, the audience believes the non-verbal every time.

Preparing a speech means preparing both conversations. And the only way to find out what that second conversation looks like is to rehearse.

About the author:

Nick Morgan is one of America's top communication theorists and coaches. Nick's methods, which are well-known for challenging conventional thinking, have been published worldwide. His latest book is *Trust Me: Four Steps to Authenticity and Charisma*, published in December 2008 by Jossey-Bass.

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