

## Six Steps to Speaking as an Authentic Leader

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Every day in corporate board rooms this scene is repeated over and over again. A manager or executive walks to the front of room, turns on the overhead projector, and begins a narrative that bores both speaker and audience. As the founder of The Humphrey Group, a firm that provides speech coaching and communications seminars, I and my colleagues have seen many business leaders who feel uneasy or frustrated by their lack of impact in such formal situations and even in informal meetings. What's the problem? It is the fact that when leaders speak they often surrender themselves to corporate protocols and behaviours that make them sound wooden, insincere, or just plain dull—and they lose their natural, vibrant authenticity. The following six steps will enable you to regain your authentic leadership presence every time you speak.

### STEP 1: Begin with commitment

A speaker to come across as authentic must begin with a commitment. No speech, presentation, or meeting comment will engage the audience unless the speaker is fully committed. How can you achieve that goal?

- Accept speaking engagements only when you think you can make a difference. You have to feel a sense of purpose, of urgency, a sense of wanting to connect with that audience. Don't give the speech just because someone asks you to. And if it is a command performance—search within yourself to find a motive.
- Write the speech or presentation yourself. If you simply wait until you are handed a "deck" by one of your writers or subject matter specialists, you'll likely find that it does not reflect your thinking. It's often too late to fix it.
- If you don't have time to write an entire text or deck, prepare the outline and give it to your writer to "flesh out". To speak authentically, you must be in the talk.

### STEP 2: Know your audience

The second step in speaking authentically is to have a strong sense of your audience. If you don't know who you are speaking to—or don't take time to understand them—you will lose your natural conversational style and you may come across as wooden or detached. I'm amazed at how often speakers concentrate so fully on their own "agenda" that they forget the audience's perspective.

The best speakers tailor their remarks for the individuals they will address. They mentally switch places with their listeners, and ask themselves, "What do I want to hear from this speaker?" Or "What will it take for me to be convinced?" Good speakers find out as much as they can about their audience and incorporate that material into their remarks—creating a virtual dialogue. If you take time to "read" your audience, you will be less likely to sound "canned" and more likely to sound real, genuine, and engaged in reaching your audience.

### STEP 3: Develop a clear message

Authentic speakers share their ideas! And that means whether you are speaking formally, informally, or off-the-cuff, make sure you have a strong, clearly-defined message—not just any message, but one that you truly own. Too many corporate speakers ramble on, lacking coherence or direction and they come across as having nothing – or, paradoxically, too many things – to say. They don't sound committed to a point of view.

What you need is a genuinely felt message. Your message should appear very near the beginning of your remarks, and it should resonate with conviction. Begin your message with "I believe that..." Or "I am convinced that..." Or "Here's how I see it..." Own the message. Also make sure your message is specific. A message that's too general will sound flat—as though you don't really believe it. Instead of saying "We had a great year," say: "I am convinced that this was a stellar year because you all worked as a team to attain unprecedented results."

A message is important even in the most informal talks. If you are speaking for four minutes, addressing an informal luncheon, or handling questions and answers, you should have a message that you own.

#### **STEP 4: Use real language**

To project authentic leadership choose words that are natural to you.

- Be genuine. So many speakers fail to inspire their audiences because they speak in an artificial language. Avoid jargon.
- Eliminate "filler." Too many speakers fill their talks with unnecessary clutter – often to buy time while they're thinking. Expressions such as "to be honest," "I have to admit that," you know," or "um," are verbal junk.
- Show confidence. This will inspire your audience to see you as an authentic leader—not as an imposter or a reluctant leader. To show this confidence, be very sparing in your use of qualifiers such as "I think," "I guess," or "hopefully." If you have to guess or you're just hoping, you're not a leader.
- Be conversational. To sound authentic, use everyday language. Short words are best. For example, say "but" rather than "nevertheless." Say "to" instead of "in order to." Formal language can sound insincere.
- Be warm. Your language should convey your feelings—feelings of excitement, enthusiasm, pride, commitment, as well as concern, and even disappointment.

Your words can say a lot about you if you speak with authentic language.

#### **STEP 5: Be the visual, not the aid**

To come across as an authentic leader, use visuals as little as possible. Powerpoint is the bane of corporate speaking. Visuals are uninspiring, and too often dull, cluttered and difficult to decipher. More significantly, they upstage the speaker and make that individual appear to be less real. If you want to come across as an authentic leader, think of yourself as the best visual. Have your audience focus on you – your energy, your conviction, your inspirational qualities. Don't confine yourself to the sidelines. Be the focus of the audience's attention.

Of course some corporate cultures insist on visuals – at least in presentations. If you must use them, avoid word slides. You want your audience listening to you, not reading while you're talking. Project a simple corporate logo if you need an image. Some material – an organization chart, a network diagram – can be presented visually. But remember: the more you put on visuals, the less your audience will see (or hear) you. So, become the visual, and make sure the audience sees you as the speaker, not the aid.

#### **STEP 6: Let your delivery style be authentic**

Sixth, and finally, your delivery style should affirm your authentic leadership, not undercut it. Here are some guidelines.

- Use natural gestures. When people speak in front of an audience, they often go into "high gear" with their gestures—flapping away and distracting their audience. Or they do the opposite: fold their arms and hands so that there is no energy at all. If you want to be authentic in front of an audience, do what we do in everyday conversation: keep your arms loose at your sides, and make them available for gestures when you want to accent an idea.
- Stand tall. Leadership is best expressed by a tall, aligned body, with feet squarely planted on the floor. Whatever your height or sex, imagine yourself on a string (hung from the ceiling), and lift your body accordingly.
- Look at people. It's amazing how often speakers look away from their audience. Many look above the heads of the audience, others gaze into the room with their eyes, and still others bury their eyes in their speech or visual aids. Remember, people listen with their eyes. They may hear the words with their ears, but they think about what you're saying when your eyes are locked with theirs. So, look at the audience when you are about to say something, and when you complete your thought. This is what we typically do in conversation.
- Pace yourself. Speak with lots of pauses. We do that in conversation, and you will sound more authentic if you slow down. Too many people rush. Why do we pace ourselves more slowly in conversation? Because we need the pauses to think ahead to our next idea...and our audience needs the pauses to absorb what we just said.

If there are no pauses, they won't think. They won't be moved. They won't act upon what you say.

- Watch your tone: think of the energy and passion you bring to everyday conversations. Even though you may have read your presentation 10 times, rewritten it that many times, and feel you simply want to get it over with – you need to muster the same passion you had for it when you created it.

These are the six steps to authentic speaking. This ability to move the hearts and minds of employees, customers, and other stakeholders is the primary role of a leader. And you will only do so if you project authentic leadership when you speak.