

# CCYOU



## Refuse to Be Boring

How to go from  
classroom to  
boardroom  
(not bored room)  
and present like a pro.

By Barbara Rocha

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*Hey, you're up next!* Few words are as unsettling: You're giving the next presentation.

It doesn't matter how many years you've been in the classroom. Faced with having to justify training expenditures to an executive audience, for example, your knees may go weak, your mouth dry, and your voice shaky. You know how to make training fun, but can you give an interesting—and effective—presentation? Here's help. These tips can

turn you from fearful to cheerful.

It's *not* about you. It's *never* about you; it's always about helping your audience. They want or need something—information, reassurance, help with a project. Your job as a speaker is not to get in the way of the message.

We've conditioned ourselves to think we're always the center of attention. Dropping a piece of lettuce out of our mouths at lunch or stumbling on the curb, we tend to think people notice

everything we do and judge us accordingly.

People may notice, but they often don't care unless it affects them directly—when the lettuce lands on a co-worker's silk shirt or she gets knocked down when we stumble on the curb.

Test it out. When you're in the audience listening to a speaker, your first concern is probably about yourself: Is this a good use of my time? Will I learn anything that will help me with my job? When you find yourself being critical of a speaker or he's making you uncomfortable, analyze the reason. For instance, if you're bothered by a speaker's attire, it may be because he's just reading slides and you're not engaged.

**It's not about the data.** The audience needs to trust and feel comfortable with you before they can accept your message. You need to offer solid, accurate information, but if you focus only on getting the data right, you'll miss the most important part of any presentation: the connection with the audience.

Make a connection by being conversational and genuine. Focus on relating your message to your listeners, talking to them as people and showing your concern for their well-being. It's hard for an audience to resist a speaker who cares about them. When the connection happens, your listeners will be forgiving if you stumble.

**Have a conversation with your audience.** Look at them, see them, talk to them—one at a time. Notice how they're receiving your message. Be ready to clear up any confusion you read in their expressions, or to change direction or tone to squash any signs of boredom. You're not just making eye contact; you're paying attention. Consider whatever you see reflected in your audience members' faces or body language as immediate feedback, and welcome it.

**Connect your information to them.** When preparing your presentation, question everything you want to include: Will

this benefit my listeners? Will they care? If the answer is no, leave the information out. If it's yes, don't just hope they get it; make the connection for them. To do that, you need to find out as much as you can about your audience beforehand. You may need to spend as much time on that as you do on organizing your thoughts.

Who are your audience members? What do you do or know that will help them? What is the reason for the meeting? What projects are they involved in, and how will what you know intersect with those projects? What special interests do they have? What are the politics involved? The answers to those questions will help you develop a relationship with your audience.

Many people think that a business presentation means generalizing the information enough to cover every situation. But we're all drowning in information. To keep audience members engaged, use specific examples. State how your information has helped someone in a similar situation.

**Get comfortable with silence, and use it often.** Silence is a powerful tool. It gives you and your audience time to think. It highlights ideas, and it makes you credible. Notice how confident speakers who aren't rushing appear. Notice how comfortable you feel listening and how much easier it is to remember the information.

Be silent before you start speaking. Wait until the audience is ready to listen and you're ready to speak. Be silent after you say your final words, giving you and your audience time to reflect. Be silent whenever you are lost or an idea requires it.

Abraham Lincoln said, "I'd rather keep my mouth shut and be thought a fool than open it and remove all doubt." If you start before you're focused, you may feel off balance for the rest of the presentation. It only takes a moment of silence to regroup even though it may seem much longer to you.

**Stick the landing.** To get a gold medal in gymnastics, you need to stick the landing. To give a great presentation, you need to do the same. The close is the last thing your audience will hear. "Thank you" or "Are there any questions?" doesn't count. Closing sums up your points, calls the audience to action, and drives home your message. Say it, stop, be silent, and reflect. When you hurry away from your final point, either mentally or physically, you lose the emphasis of a solid landing. Stay focused on what you're saying and why it's important, and your mind and body will remain in place for the right amount of time.

**Don't be selfish.** You have information that your audience needs. Don't be reluctant to share it. Focusing on yourself and being perfect, or feeling self-conscious and ill-prepared, robs your audience of fully benefiting from what you have to give. And it makes you miserable. Instead, focus on helping.

Consider your information as a gift to your listeners. You're telling them something they need to know; you're structuring it in the most palatable way you can; and you're saving them the time and energy of digging it up for themselves. That's a gift.

Taking control of presentations and getting a favorable response is easier than you think. Study other people's presentations and incorporate my suggestions—you may never have to worry about the boardroom (or bored room) again.

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