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IT'S TIME TO JAZZ UP YOUR SPEECHES

CEOs give speeches. It doesn't mean they like it. Many experienced speakers don't enjoy it. However, giving a good speech can make it a lot more fun.

Stories: A great beginning (and middle and end)

You must begin well. One of the best ways to start a speech is a story. The story should introduce a pivotal theme of your speech. It isn't enough to tell just any funny or interesting story – it should be relevant to the main theme. The story can have suspense, conflict and/or humor, and it should introduce your topic. The story should be something that your audience will understand. You also may want to put yourself into the story, although you should not be the focus of the story.

By putting yourself in the story, as an observer or player, people learn something about you. When they learn something about you, they become more interested in you. Whatever your topic, audiences want to know about you; vignettes help them understand where you're coming from and why you are there. There is only one caution: avoid making yourself the central character of the first story. That can come across as arrogant or self-centered. Speaker, author and storyteller Marcia Reynolds taught me, "In the beginning of your speech, you have not yet earned the right to focus on yourself."

Original stories always work best with an audience. Repeating other speaker's stories is risky. Your audience may already have heard them. Audiences want to know your point of view, what you have seen, or how you see the world. Original stories don't have to be about you, but they can be about people, places and events you have witnessed or heard about. Your stories are authentic and more interesting. It's worth taking time to come up with original stories.

Finding your own stories isn't as hard as it sounds. Look at your everyday life—events, challenges, conflicts, surprises, and learning experiences. As you do so, start to keep a journal, either a notebook or a computer file. When something interesting happens, even if it's just the kernel of an idea, jot it down. It may take a few weeks or even months to fully develop the story. But by keeping a journal, you kick your brain into gear.

In my view, a good story has two elements: conflict, and a few well-placed details. Conflict carries people along, keeps them in suspense and makes them wonder what's going to happen. Detail makes it real; the audience is able to see how it looked or hear how it sounded. Descriptions of people or places, dates, times, visuals, sounds, nicknames—a few of these go along way. Don't go overboard with detail; provide just enough to make it real.

Once you have a good story, keep it. The same story can make a lot of different points. You'll want to start a journal to keep track of your best stories. Larry Lucchino, CEO of the Boston Red Sox, has a personal journal, *The Brockett Book*, put together by his mentor Bill Brockett, a colleague from Yale Law School. When Brockett died, Lucchino kept the journal and added his own stories, famous quotes, funny lines, anecdotes and words of wisdom. The Brockett book—which rivals the New York Yellow Pages in length—is an amazing resource, and it keeps growing. Lucchino explains, “If I see a newspaper article, I put it in. It's alphabetized so you can find everything from funny lines on economics and law to serious quotes from Emerson and Oscar Wilde.”