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HOW MUCH DIFFERENCE CAN ONE SPEECH MAKE?

By Suzanne Bates

How much difference can one speech make? In my own career, I've learned that you never know. One presentation can create huge opportunities. Problem is – you never know which ones! I have learned over the years that you have to approach every speaking opportunity as if it's the most important one you've ever made – because it might be.

I was reminded of this while talking to a friend of mine – a long-time education professional – who has earned a great position and the respect of people inside and outside his industry. After 25 years at a major university, you might not think he had much to prove, yet one speech took his career to a whole new level.

Chris was asked by a group of senior leaders in his organization to give a presentation on a new marketing initiative. Yes, they could have asked the new marketing guy on the team to make this presentation. Problem was – this guy was too new. Deep down, the senior team probably didn't have faith this new guy could pull it off. They asked Chris and the new guy to make a joint presentation.

Chris knew that a "canned" presentation already existed. It had been prepared and delivered to external audiences. But that presentation wouldn't cut it for the skeptical, inside crowd. It wouldn't address the real issues on people's minds: why do we need to change? This crowd needed to be convinced. They had been doing things one way for a long time. It would take a thoughtful approach.

So Chris decided to take the time to put together an original presentation. He didn't really have time for this. Technically it wasn't his job. He wasn't on the marketing team. But he cared about it. He understood the issues. He was very familiar with his audience. Thinking about how to do this the right way actually energized him.

Knowing this audience was smart and expected more, Chris realized he had to start with a bang. He opened with humor – to warm things up. He also knew he'd have to get their

objections addressed up front, so he wrote down every possible issue. He anticipated their questions, and provided a well constructed rationale for the change, complete with a timeline for the project that insiders would need if they were going to participate.

He also made it fun. He included photos of the team members who had worked on the project. He used some insider lingo and got some more laughs.

In addition, even though Chris felt comfortable with this group, he practiced, several times. He wanted to get it right. Would these people who knew him and liked him let him get by with a less-than-perfect presentation? Probably! But this was important.

The day of the presentation Chris was more than ready. Meanwhile, the new guy was a no-show. He never responded to Chris's suggestion to get together and format the presentation. The new guy didn't even bother to show up just a few minutes early so they could go over the plan. Chris knew it would be on him. What he didn't know was how this guy was about to shoot himself in the foot.

When the new guy finally did arrive for the presentation he was dressed far too casually, even for an internal meeting. He had clearly not prepared. He hadn't thought about his audience. He was using the standard presentation.

During the meeting the new guy was obviously so anxious that he jumped in at an inappropriate time and made a "stupid joke," that no one got. It created a palpably awkward feeling in the room. It was obvious to everyone that he didn't know the topic, and worse, he didn't know what he didn't know.

"After the meeting people said, "Who was that guy?" says Chris. "This was his opportunity to shine, and he blew it."

"For me," he observed, "It was great. I was asked to make another presentation by myself on the same topic; and I've done several since."

What's happened since then? "My role changed – they've asked me to become deeply involved in very interesting work that highlights my expertise and experience."

What's the lesson from this tale? "Speaking internally is almost more important than externally. People get to see you in a new way. You can either gain credibility or really lose it," says my friend.

This doesn't just work in business. One speech can make a political career. Illinois Senator Barack Obama was dubbed an instant rising star in the Democratic Party on the strength of one speech to the 2004 national convention.

Obama has a powerful story and he knows the power of telling it well. At the convention he shared how his father came from Kenya, his mother from Kansas, and how this meeting of

immigrant and Middle America influenced his view of the world. The tone was upbeat, the message was hope.

While political speeches and business speeches are horses of a different color, the point is the same. One speech can catapult you into the spotlight and sprinkle fairy dust on perceptions about your future. As one reporter observed, “Obama's speech, delivered with an almost immaculate balance of passion and restraint, was a masterpiece...”

Here are a few more tips on making every presentations count:

- Look at every presentation as an opportunity at any stage in your career
- Be an original. Never use a canned presentation.
- Use stories, humor, anecdotes, photos, anything, to make it ... and you...memorable
- Inspire people with big ideas and make them feel like they are part of something important

Not every presentation will make or break your career. But some of them will. You can't guess which ones. Don't try to guess. Be your best, every time – and watch what a difference it makes.