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HOW TO BUILD CREDIBILITY

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – IS IT REALLY WORTH THE TIME?

In the 20 years that I was a television news reporter and anchor, I never once attended a seminar to improve my skills. The television news business doesn't invest a lot of time or money in training people—you either make it or you don't. You learn your craft on the street, in the editing room and occasionally, with some pain, in the news director's office—if you don't get it right.

Everything changed when I launched a consulting business—I had the opportunity to take advantage of “professional development”—a concept most of us equate with vacations to Miami or Bermuda (or dull meetings, if you're not so lucky to find yourself in a place with palm trees). Workshops, regional meetings and annual conferences—who wants to sit through them? We book our flights and plan our time we can sneak off to the pool or the golf course.

But recently I had an experience that forever changed my view of professional development. In a three day workshop in Arizona, I realized not only that I could be better at what I do, but that I could build credibility with my clients, resulting in more revenue and greater success.

Like most people I really didn't have time to take this trip. But I also felt stuck where I was—not growing or improving as a speaker, especially when it came to storytelling. My work gives me the opportunity to coach high-level executives in media and public speaking, and I always enjoyed drawing out their stories to make speeches sparkle. But something was missing from my own talks—the stories were flat—I wanted pizzazz! I needed a coach, and in a moment of desperation, I signed up and wrote a big check.

Preparing for this session was especially challenging; you had to do homework before you arrived. I was coaching clients, publishing a new email newsletter, producing a new workshop curriculum, and launching a nationwide research project. My calendar was full. So it wasn't until I got on the plane to Phoenix, that I opened my laptop and starting tapping out stories I thought would work for speeches—based on news clippings I'd been throwing into a file for weeks. I came up with five of these vignettes and figured I was all set. Little did I know, that the way I did my work was about to drastically change.

There were only five speakers in the group, so there was nowhere to hide. Marcia Reynolds and Vickie Sullivan, outstanding instructors and inspiring storytellers, put us to work, looking at how we established credibility through the first story of a keynote speech. The story we chose must involve us, but not make us the stars—it should show our expertise, without being about us. The story needed to have conflict and resolution, it needed to carry the listener along and make them wonder how it was all going to turn out. The story had to lead directly into the keynote topic. They told us stories that were so terrific, I wondered whether I should just hop on a plane back to Boston that night.

Back in my hotel room, I worked hard to craft the story—it took hours of writing, rehearsing, editing and practicing to get it just right. I was surprised that a story even came to me, but it did, right away—even though this part of the speechwriting process had always been the most difficult for me to do for myself. There is no doubt in my mind that what had made it click, was watching the teachers in action—I was inspired. I finally understood what you can't learn in a book—the mental equivalent of watching a beautiful golf swing; you suddenly understand what you need to do.

Although I can't remember the last time I felt nervous getting up in front of any audience, the morning after my first homework assignment, my knees were shaking as I stood. I knew what I needed to do, I just didn't know whether I could pull it off. As I told the story, I could see in their eyes—that spark—they were going on the journey with me—wondering what was going to happen. This little audience in a living room in Phoenix, Arizona, provided me with one of my most valuable professional experiences. I realized that being willing to admit I didn't know everything would open up possibilities—I would be rewarded with a different kind of confidence that comes from way down deep inside.

When you honestly examine what is missing from your professional “portfolio” it may not feel good at first. The longer you have been working, the more you have learned and the more marginal professional development may seem. After years in a professional field, we may think that others don't have much to teach us. We never intend to be “just good enough,” but gradually, our schedules, our lives and our resistance to “professional development” can keep us from being at the top of our game.

A friend of mine who is a consultant recently remarked on this phenomenon. “I feel like I'm out of fresh ideas,” she said. “I'm afraid my clients will start to notice.” The value of professional development isn't the certification, diploma, or line on your resume. It's the credibility you build when you have something new and effective to offer. Building credibility has as much to do with what we learn as what we already know.