



DON SHULA:

Command the Room as He Commanded the Football Field

by Suzanne Bates

When you're asked to give a keynote speech, it doesn't hurt to be the most winning coach in the history of the NFL. I mean, everybody wants to know the secrets to winning, if it's coming from a real winner; the legendary former Miami Dolphins coach Don Shula! The guy was a head coach in the National Football League for 33 years; he took six teams to the Super Bowl and won 347 games in his career.

So I was looking forward to hearing Coach Shula speak at a conference a month ago. What I didn't expect was how even today he would be able to command the room, the way he once commanded the football field. He really engaged the audience with some self-deprecating humor and great stories from "the day."

After the speech, I was inspired to share four strategies that I think anyone could use to really engage the audience and be more memorable.

Tell stories about OTHER people.

The coach told a great story about quarterback Dan Marino. Together, they won more games than any other combination coach and quarterback. Shula never mentioned how he COACHED Marino. Instead he took a page out of the book of leadership and talked about all the great things his quarterback did. Apparently Marino was never satisfied with a completed pass—he wanted every pass to be perfect—landing right- square in the arms of the receiver, effortlessly, so that the receiver could then pick up a few more yards and possibly get into the end zone. Through the coach's story about another winner, the audience discovered one of the secrets to greatness.

Imagine how you might use the same technique to win over your audience. Talk about your employees like stars, and imagine the impact it would have. Not only do you show them you know what's going on in the organization, telling their stories is one of the most effective ways to drive positive behaviors down through the organization. People appreciate it, remember you, and want to be the subject of your next presentation. If you frame it as something you've learned from them, all the better.



Look for Ways to Have a Laugh at Your Own Expense

Coach Shula recalled a vacation in Maine when he was “hiding out” from fans. He went to town with his family wearing a baseball cap down low over his eyes. Despite the effort to go unrecognized, he was applauded as he entered a small town movie theatre. He reluctantly but graciously went down to shake hands. One Mainer, looking puzzled, said, “I don’t know who you are. We’re just happy enough people showed up to run the movie tonight.” The coach got a good laugh and made a great point about the importance of humility in a leader.

Why go to the trouble to find the laugh line in stories about yourself? In business, if you have a title in front of your name, you had better work twice as hard to relate to people. They don’t know you think of yourself as a “regular person.” Show some self-awareness and have a little fun talking about yourself. No one will arrest you for deviating from the typical boring speech. Add a dose of levity and you’ll be warmly received.

Make it Easy to Follow and Remember Your Points

There are tried and true techniques for making memorable points, and people still use them because they work. Coach Shula took the word COACH and turned each letter of the word into another word he wanted his audience to know about winning.

COACH stands for:

- **C**: Conviction driven; if you don’t stand for something you’ll fall for anything
- **O**: Over-learn: get into a state of unconscious competence. When you know it that well you can perform without thinking about it.
- **A**: Audible ready; in football you call an audible when you need to change on a dime. When you’re audible ready you can change when the playing field changes.
- **C**: Consistency coupled with intensity. While Shula may have been faulted for his intensity, every player mentioned consistency as a hallmark of his leadership.
- **H**: Honesty; the coach said you have to care more about earning respect than being popular.

Think about how easy it would be to use a device like this when you’re speaking. One of the most important thing leaders do is make their messages memorable and repeatable. Take a word in your world that’s commonly used and play around with the letters. You may find that they match up quite well with your mission statement or corporate values, or the important



behaviors you're trying to encourage. You'll know your message has been received when after the speech, you see it in the company newsletter, hear your team talking about it with their teams and even overhear someone at the company lunch table mentioning it.

Get Away From Text and Use Video and Sound to Deliver Your Message

To break up his talk and allow others to remind us of some of the accomplishments that highlighted his career, Coach Shula punctuated his own comments with video clips of players and coaches talking about his winning years with the Baltimore Colts and the Miami Dolphins. Through their eyes we heard why it worked, and what they thought made him a winner.

What about you? Could you use video to break away from the PowerPoint, and engage your audience with pictures and sound? Think about featuring customers, employees or famous movie scenes to both entertain and be more memorable. Video punctuates what you're saying, brings in a different voice to underscore your point and breaks things up. When the clip ends the audience is ready to hear what you have to say next.

Lessons Learned

One sign of a successful speech is when you see people get out pads of paper and pens while you're speaking and begin to take notes. There is no better confirmation that people are hearing the message loud and clear. You don't have to be a celebrity coach to adopt a winning strategy toward giving presentations. As a leader, remember, people have to work for you, but they don't have to listen to you. That's why it's more fun when you incorporate these tips and begin to command a room.

As Coach Shula says, leadership is about credibility and communication.