No loss for words with these speaking tips

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Whether it's convincing a board or coaxing more productivity from workers, persuasive speech plays a pivotal role in corporate strategy.

Good speeches don't just happen. Indeed, as Mark Twain once quipped, "It usually takes more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech."

IESE's Brian O'Connor Leggett, professor in the department of Managing People in Organizations, has long been interested in the use of communication tools such as rhetoric in the management process. His paper, "Introduction to Corporate Speech Making," focuses on two types of speeches and draws out useful lessons for the tongue-tied CEO.

Although there is a third category of speech - rational speeches - Leggett leaves that for another paper. Here, he devotes his attention to emotional and visionary speeches.

The first rule of any corporate speech making is this: Know your audience. Unfortunately, this is the first thing that is usually forgotten, says Leggett. He gives the example of a software firm: only preaching the technical aspects of some revolutionary new piece of software will likely cause eyelids to droop, whereas demonstrating dollars saved and proven business results almost always gets people leaning forward to listen. Save the jargon for the techies.

"So many smooth and witty speakers set out to impress us with their cleverness and command of language, but fail hopelessly to deliver any meaningful message," Leggett says.

He goes on to exhort readers never to underestimate the context in which the speech is being given. Abraham Lincoln's famous Gettysburg Address (1863), for example, was made

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even more powerful coming as it did after a long-winded, two-hour oration by then Massachusetts governor Edward Everett. In just 10 sentences and 272 words, Lincoln masterfully used what little time he had to rally continued support for the U.S. Civil War. Later praised as "deep in feeling, compact in thought and expression, and tasteful and elegant in every word and comma," Lincoln's little two-minute speech has come to be regarded as one of the greatest in American history.

Have you heard the one about... ?

The first six or eight sentences can make or break a speech, says Leggett, acknowledging the attention-grabbing importance of an opening line. Though we have become conditioned by the familiar wedding-toast custom of kicking off with a joke, Leggett feels that going for easy laughs may not be the greatest gambit in a straight-faced corporate setting.

Instead, he recommends using other attention grabbers, such as gripping personal anecdotes or real-life business stories with which the audience can easily identity. He also suggests striking certain clichés such as "it's time for a change," which may have people jumping to their feet - only they'll probably be headed for the door.

As important as it is to establish your leadership credibility before your audience, beware of overstretching your bounds, Leggett warns. Joe Nobody pompously proclaiming, "I have a dream..." makes for a nightmare speech. Leggett advises getting around this by quoting other giants, thereby keeping the speaker on the same level with his audience, rather than attempting to rouse god-like wonder and awe in yourself.

Besides quoting others, Leggett shows a speech that draws upon Greek legends to plumb the complexities of human nature, allowing the listeners to draw meaningful conclusions for themselves. Much like parables, legends and fables are universal and usually present a certain underlying truth that does not depend on the credibility of the speaker.

What's your point?

While the structures of visionary and emotional speeches are similar, speakers have much more leeway in terms of explanation and storytelling when giving emotional addresses.

The key to writing good speeches is sticking to a single theme. Emotional speeches, in particular, depend on having a coherent thread that the audience can follow. This thread helps the audience remember the speaker's words better. Inspirational quotes, though

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common in emotional speeches, are not always necessary and should be used sparingly in ways that make sense in supporting the overall theme.

Speakers can also use "theme reinforcers" to bring the audience back to the central point of the speech. U.S. President George W. Bush often uses these, frequently repeating key words such as "terrorist" or "September 11th," to keep his central preoccupations in the fore of everyone's mind.

However, one of the best examples of an emotional speech using reiteration of this kind to drive home a point and persuade an audience is Winston Churchill's famous commencement address to Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in 1946. Highlighting serious problems that the post-war world then faced due to the spread of communism and the schism of global ideologies, Churchill emphasized again and again the need for cooperation against tyranny and war. The consequences of his speech are immeasurable, not least, say historians, in marking the beginning of the Cold War among the world's great ideologies and superpowers, which defined and shaped the last half of the 20th century.

Where is the CEO whose verbal skills can articulate that kind of far-reaching vision, power and influence today? Leggett's suggestions show the way.

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