



## DEALING WITH EMOTION

Study after study has shown that no one is ever convinced to change the way he thinks or acts by rational argument alone. Leaders who want to inspire or motivate have no choice but to touch the emotional core of their issue. This means aiming your speech not at the head, but at the heart—by translating policy discussions into visceral human terms. Audiences want to know how all this affects real people like you and me. The best way to answer this crucial question is to tell stories—preferably personal accounts of people you’ve known and loved, events that have changed your life, even seemingly insignificant incidents that have taught you a meaningful lesson at some basic gut level.

But as we all know, there’s danger in dealing with emotion. You might lose control or, at the other end of the spectrum, give the impression that you’re manipulating your listeners’ feelings by flaunting some personal experience for purely rhetorical purposes. Al Gore’s story in his 1996 Convention speech of his sister’s death from lung cancer was one such example. Unless emotion is injected with great delicacy and authenticity, it will engender automatic mistrust in a large percentage of your audience. So it’s vitally important that your heartfelt stories be absolutely genuine, obviously relevant, and carefully edited to illustrate the key points of your argument. And even more than most speeches, they need to be rehearsed, to avoid the unexpected loss of control that so many of us fear above all.

The structure of your talk should provide a frame that gives your stories meaning and balances them with the rational arguments—the numbers, the studies, the pros and cons—that no speaker can afford to ignore. The poet Wordsworth defined poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility,” and the best speeches aspire to poetic effect—but only if the feelings are tempered with calm, thoughtful exposition or even justified indignation. The Earl of Spencer’s eloquent eulogy for his sister Diana was a powerful example of focused emotion. He channeled his feelings and used them as ammunition against relentless *paparazzi* and the rigidity of British royal tradition. Here are some suggestions for dealing with emotion:

- *Determine when it’s appropriate to use emotion and when it’s not*
- *Focus first on your most important emotion—your caring concern for your audience*
- *Introduce your story with some hint of its emotional significance*
- *Keep a file of short narratives that make your best ideas come alive*
- *Use names and visual details to help your audience see and feel your stories*
- *Consider alternating portions of your story with explanations of its significance*
- *Leave out all narrative details that aren’t directly relevant to your point*
- *Always tell your stories spontaneously—without reading*
- *Make sure you explain how your story can be meaningful to your particular audience*
- *Use emotion **only** to bring you closer to your audience—**never** to make yourself “holier than thou”*
- *Practice your story to minimize the possibility of losing emotional control*
- *If you do lose control, acknowledge your depth of feeling and move on*
- *Never, but **never**, force an emotion that you don’t truly feel*

[Marie Danziger](#)

Lecturer in Public Policy

[marie\\_danziger@harvard.edu](mailto:marie_danziger@harvard.edu)

617-495-2686

**HKS Communications Program**

[www.hkscommunicationsprogram.org](http://www.hkscommunicationsprogram.org)

Twitter: @hkscommprog