

Sex, Beer, and Rock 'n Roll? The Good Opening

Too often presenters start slow and aim low in the interest of laying the groundwork for developing the topic. But this misses the point of the opening: it is not the precursor to the topic; it is the listeners' decision point for the quality of the presentation and whether it is in their interest to give it their attention. What do you want to avoid?

Stay away from clichés. If the first thing the presenter says to the audience is “Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for inviting me here this morning,” the first thing the audience thinks is, “I’ve already heard what this person has to say.”

Use the warm-up well. A former colleague used to call me to practice the jokes he used as openers. They were a problem for him. He told jokes badly, often mangling the punchline. The jokes he chose tended to be inherently offensive to a mixed audience. And they were irrelevant to his presentation. Eventually I said, “Tim, why don’t you drop the jokes? You have trouble telling them; they’re going to offend people; and they have nothing to do with what you’re talking about.” He said, “Can’t drop the joke. Gotta relax the audience.” The *audience* is not nervous. *He* is nervous. The audience is ready; they want to have a sense of you; focus on that.

Don’t rush your name. Some people say their own names at the beginning of a presentation so dismissively that they suggest this presentation isn’t worth much. If you are introducing yourself, give some distinction to your name, however much you have to practice to do it. If we’re going to listen to you for the next half hour, give us a chance to think this will be worthwhile: “Hi. I’m *Johnny Cash*.” That would be good.

Don’t describe framework. The speaker who talks about the framework of the presentation works from the premise that the presentation’s organization will be baffling if it is not previewed. But when was the last time you heard a commercial that began, “First we’ll have some music accompanied by attractive imagery, then we’ll show you the product, then we’ll place it in a context that appeals to your self-worth, and we’ll close by asking for the buy humorously” and then went on to do just that? Is it necessary? Should it be necessary? An overview opening is better than a poor opening, but not better than a good one.

A good default opening

There are many strong openings, all of which address the listeners’ question, “Why am I listening to this?” and focus on the takeaway value of the presentation. If you are unsure how to start, a good default opening tells a highly functional story—briskly. It starts where your listeners are on the topic, which is not the same as starting with a generic position on the topic and is not the same as telling people where they are. And the opening leaves the listeners with a question that sets them up for the body of the presentation:

The default opening's format

The situation/commonplace: Anchors the listener. “I’m with you on that” or “I bet that’s true.”

The complication: A problem that unsettles the situation in the story you’re telling. It’s why you’re speaking—the purpose of your presentation.

The question: This might be “Why did that happen?”, “What’s wrong with what we tried?” or “What should we do?” The question does not necessarily have to be spelled out; it may be implied.

The answer/solution: Your response to the question and your solution to the complication.

The order of Situation-Complication-Question can vary.

Example

Hard Talks in Hard Times

Last week in Chicago we had a new development in the financial crisis. Workers in a company that manufactures doors and windows took over the factory building in protest when they learned that the company was closing in three days, without regard to laws covering 60-day notice and payment due to them.

The trigger for the workers in Chicago was *how* the information was communicated. It was communicated to them by avoiding the conversation altogether. The bankers and lawyers had strategies for the company closure and bankruptcy. But who said, “Here’s what to do when you don’t speak to the workers and they take over the building—and call the press?”

Who had strategies and tactics for the person-to-person, human-to-human conversations that form all tough communication on the ground? Who thought through, “Here’s what you say first, here’s what you say second, here’s third”? Who said, “Here’s how your counterpart is likely to respond. What are you going to do then?”

We have strategies for high-level, even global, communication, but at the player-to-player level, when the going gets tough, often it’s not simply that we have poor strategies and tactics, but that we have none.

I want to take the lid off tough conversations and look at what makes them go wrong.

I want to change—unilaterally—what we’re trying to do.

I want to do this, in part, because everyone’s life, including mine, would be easier if we were all better at this.