

# Deliver speeches that inspire action

*By Geoff Kelly*

We have all attended major speeches so dull that they make a sponge sale look fascinating. And we have also been energised at least a few times by speakers who have enthralled us with their passion and vision.

The average executive speech is at best a lost opportunity to create value. Compounding this opportunity loss, an average or sub-par performance may showcase the speaker's failure in a critical test of leadership; influencing from the podium.

An effective leader sets an industry or community agenda, attracts money and volunteers for a worthy cause, or persuades staff, industry peers or other influencers to take positive action.

What should you do to effectively harness speaking as one of the most potent techniques available to inspire, lead and achieve your business results? Here are eight points to start.

## **1. Recognise that you can make an important business impact as a speaker**

Fear of failure, or simply not knowing what to do, holds many talented people back from using a leadership tool that has been a consistent winner for thousands of years.

Most executives would not be where they are if they couldn't express ideas and relate to people. If you can do that, you can learn to effectively deliver a speech.

Be confident that you can become a good speaker. You may need some coaching, you will need to practice, but it is within your grasp.

Estonian Arvi (now Sir Arvi) Parbo lost most of his family in World War 2, and migrated to Australia at the age of 23. He spoke no English, had had his education interrupted, and had little money. How he became Chairman of Australia's largest company, and respected as one of the nation's most visionary industrialists, is a story too long to recount here. The point is that Sir Arvi became an excellent speaker, and used his speeches and stories to educate, inspire and motivate diverse audiences on subjects he believed moved his companies and the nation forward. Few could aspire to his achievements. However, many could follow his example and develop their speaking skills since most executives have more English language and education assets than Sir Arvi started with.

## **2. Give it priority; oratory is hard work, or more would do it well**

Half-baked speaking is easy. Too many executives leave preparation too late, and then inflict bullet-point death on their audience with a presentation hastily thrown together by an assistant.

Make the time to thoughtfully assess the audience, decide your theme, research and structure content, and rehearse. You may take less time on a well-trodden topic. However, even the most familiar topic requires some quality thinking time to develop the fresh audience angles that make the powerful connections so important to the results you want.

A former colleague joined the executive committee of a large company. He was new to both his function and the company when the CEO asked him to address a major internal management conference in two months. He used those two months to craft both a strategy and presentation to shift mind-sets towards the vision that he and his CEO had for the company. He periodically rehearsed with internal direct reports and external consultants until he was happy with the content and tone. His presentation on the day marked a turning point for the company, and it had a defining impact on both his career and the organisation.

## **3. See speaking as an experience, rather than an information channel**

Many executives believe in the information myth...that the act of providing people with information somehow aligns them with and motivates them to a course of action.

It is doubtful that information alone ever motivated people to direct action. However, in this already information overloaded society a leader gets at best a marginal return for only bestowing yet more information on those he or she wants to influence.

Just as live theatre has a distinct and powerful chemistry when compared to audience responses to cinema, public speaking is a contact and relationship experience, not an information transaction.

Your passion, commitment and ability to personalise your speaking performance are what give your content its memorability and impact. The real power comes from you, and how you connect your content to the audience, not your content of itself.

Words were important to speakers such as former US Presidents Bill Clinton and Ronald Reagan. However, they knew that connecting with people was what gave their words resonance and impact. Similarly, former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke became known as a man of the people for his knock-about style. Although a Rhodes scholar, he never forgot his trade union roots and the lesson that personality beats information in every contest.

#### **4. Integrate your personal themes with your business mission**

Reflect on and develop your personal convictions and values so that you can meld them into your speeches. These will come through consciously and unconsciously to make your performances authentic and unique.

Audiences judge speakers more on chemistry and authenticity than on content, so your personal themes are an important element in developing credibility with the audience. Even when they don't agree with you, most will respect your sincerity if you allow your personal themes to come through.

Sincerity is your greatest asset in a persuasive speech. You must really believe, and be seen to believe, in your core theme.

Hugh Morgan, long time CEO of WMC Resources Ltd, passionately believes in the free market and the folly of global and local regulatory actions that increasingly penalise production and trade in minerals products. His speeches on issues such as the environment, indigenous land rights, and the proper role of Government have drawn controversy, but also have influenced a number of debates important to his industry and company.

#### **5. Deal with important content**

Leaders have important things to say.

Develop a theme and support elements around something important to your organisation, industry or society in general. Explain what it is, and why it is crucial. And show why it is important to the audience.

By integrating this important issue with current trends and your personal values, and considering your organisation's strategic position on the subject, you can develop a strong and unique perspective.

After September 11, 2001, US President George Bush said that his response to this attack and terrorism generally would define his Presidency. Since then, almost all his major speeches have focused on this issue, making it a big and important global theme. Together with his actions, these speeches have positioned George Bush as a more effective leader than many initially believed, and positioned the USA and its allies with a unified and determined purpose.

## **6. Point the way forward**

Suggest a vision for the organisation, industry or society. Discuss what you personally are doing or will do with regard to the issue, and suggest possible next steps for members of the audience to take in addressing the challenge.

In December 1979, British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in one of her most influential speeches framed the approaching 1980s as “the dangerous decade”. As Iran continued to hold US hostages, she outlined the growing dangers to complacent Western democracies. She called for economic reform, increased defense, and strategic resource conservation (particularly oil). The Prime Minister reinforced the need for continued vigilance concerning the Soviet Union, but importantly signaled that the West also had to pay attention to emerging problems in the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere.

## **7. Bring your speech to life with stories, examples, metaphors and quotations**

Conquer the lifeless abstract with refreshing and specific detail, brought to life with stories and examples that illustrate your central meaning. Use metaphors and other stylistic elements to add clarity, not just colour.

When you give these elements a real job to do, and don't just treat them as flashy ornaments, they add force and memorability to your argument. Two powerful examples are former British Prime Minister Sir Winston Churchill's 1946 description of the Soviet Union's annexure of Eastern Europe as the descent of an “iron curtain,” reinforced in 1983 by US President Ronald Reagan's “evil empire”. Both metaphors exerted strong influence over public perceptions.

Relate at least one personal story to illustrate your main theme. This sets a distinctive tone, is highly memorable, and builds strong audience rapport. Professional speaker Tony Robbins builds rapport when he weaves powerful personal stories of his youth and early years in business into his presentations.

## **8. Reinforce your message with the audience and extend your reach to wider groups**

Your speech must go beyond its set time and place to have its full impact.

For your audience, consider developing a handout of the key points, perhaps with some supporting material and a transcript of the full text.

For wider audiences that may also be important in this context, consider issuing a media release with an abstract of your speech. If so, you should allow time for potential interviews. Direct mail to important groups and individuals, your organisation's web site, staff media and other channels are all available depending on the relevance of your theme.

Jan Carlzon, then President of Scandinavian Airlines, traveled the world in the 1980s speaking about leadership and customer service strategies. He used these speeches as platforms for media interviews and articles, and became known as a leader in customer service. This was a major support to the customer service positioning of the airline.

*Geoff Kelly works with leaders to win the hearts and minds of those they need to support their business strategies. He helps them earn trust and credibility, communicate with fidelity and impact, and motivate others to support their cause.*

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