



# WANT TO BE A GREAT SPEAKER? THEN KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT

**By Karen Lisko.** I know what you're thinking. Actually, I don't. And what may surprise you is that—at least if I was your partner or employee—knowing what you think would not be a top priority for me. As your colleague or subordinate, my top priority is what *I'm* thinking. As managing partner, it's your job to figure that out if you want to be great at giving presentations and delivering your message to the firm's constituents.

There. I just saved you years of study and training in how to reach audiences. The key to motivating those with whom you speak is knowing that the filter through which your audience receives what you're saying is what's on their worry list *du jour*.

That knowledge demands that you keep your mouth shut more than it's open. In preparation for your speech,

listen. During your speech, listen. And after your speech, listen some more. We all tend to think we listen pretty well already. Do you really? Ask yourself if you do the following well.

## **In Preparation For Your Speech**

■ **LISTEN WITH YOUR FEET.** Walk your mouth to the offices of those who will be in your next audience or to the

nearest telephone that reaches them. Use e-mail as your third alternative. There is no substitute for live contact with a few to several human beings in your audience. Start asking questions. What do they want to learn from your upcoming speech? What do they worry about? What do they believe to be the current priorities in the firm? Where do they see themselves assisting with those plans?

## Want to Be a Great Speaker?

Now, at this stage, I really *do* know what you're thinking. You don't have time to go chasing around in preparation for a small speech, let alone a big one. Let me suggest that you don't have time not to. While listening with your feet is an important way to get pointed material for your presentation, it is also a way to secure commitment from the person with whom you're speaking. In these uncertain times, many of your partners and employees are concerned about whether they're wanted in their roles. Some may even be priming to jump to where they're wanted more. When you seek advice from those around you, you convey a powerful message that they are wanted for their wisdom. Who doesn't appreciate and respond to that?

### ■ LISTEN WITH YOUR EARS.

Practice being a silent partner. Sitting in meetings doesn't count. I'm talking about those times when you are engaged in active conversation with someone. Are you asking more questions than anyone else in the conversation or are you making mini-speeches? Remember that some who spoke freely to you about concerns the day before you became managing partner may now worry about the power you have over their jobs. This makes it incumbent on *you* to draw them out. As a bonus, research finds that the more you listen, the greater intelligence your compatriot assigns you. It's true. And don't forget, the more you listen, the more material you are getting for your next speech.

### ■ LISTEN WITH YOUR HEART.

When you became managing partner, you instantly became spiritual leader. Every firm needs one—and every day—especially in uncertain times. You may presume that your main role is to manage numbers and contracts, or that the chair of the firm has the corner on

the spiritual leader market—but the people around you see things differently. As managing partner, they look to you to manage their fears. If you must, consider the economic advantage to providing reassurance in your speeches, in your conversations and in the hallways. Employees who have their fears assuaged can be more productive and less stressed. Employees who feel wanted are no longer primed to be plucked away.

### ■ LISTEN WITH YOUR FINGERS.

Use your computer keyboard to survey your upcoming audience, especially if your speech is more formal. Web sites like [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) are incredibly user-friendly in allowing you to create a survey of your audience. Then, display the key results during your speech. Audiences like nothing more than to hear about themselves. Speaking to them *about* them creates an instant connectedness to you. I routinely survey prospective audiences before I present to them, including ones I have never met. But never in my career have I received such an onslaught of quick responses to a survey than when I am asked to speak to attorneys about motivating staff. The first time I was asked to do this, I thought, "Why not ask the experts?" So I sent a survey to the law firm's staff asking them about the things that motivate them to be more productive and happy in their work. In the first hour, I had 100 responses. In the first day, that number doubled. The day of the speech, the room was standing room only. Why?

While I'd like to take full credit in thinking I'm an irresistible speaker, it boiled down to the fact that I was there to share information with the audience about them and for them. You can do the same with your speeches. The more "other-centered" you are in your speaking, the more audiences will absorb what you say. And the more

"other-centered" you are, the less nervous you will find you are when you stand up to speak. You will like that this speech is neither about you nor about how your audience feels about you. It is about them and about how you can help them. Is that not the essence of a true managing partner?

## During Your Speech

■ **SPEAK WITH CARE.** To you, this may be obvious—but enough gaffes occur with law firm management's communications that some still haven't gotten the word. The day you became managing partner is the day people in the firm began dissecting your every word or listening for meaning in things you meant to be innocuous. If you've been a managing partner for long enough, you have likely had the experience where something you said came back to you like a game of telephone, recycled and rephrased throughout the firm. Should you carry a teleprompter with you for every encounter to safeguard against misinterpretation? No. But do be aware of the power you now have. Offhand remarks you made days before you took this job are no longer seen that way.

■ **SPEAK WITH SILENCE.** There is nothing more thrilling than a speaker who takes less time than expected. You know it and I know it. Keep it brief.

■ **SPEAK WITH MNEMONICS.** In the thousands of words you hear spoken every day, how many can you recount at the end of your day? Odds are, the ones you can recount are connected to a few devices that make them stand out.

One terrific mnemonic is to enumerate. Just by saying, "There are *three* things I want to say about that" rather than "There are *several* things I want to say about that," you instantly get a 'hup-to' from your audience. We all remember our school days when

anything the teacher enumerated was certain to be on the test. We knew to take notes. I have seen jurors pick up their pencils to take notes when an attorney or witness uses a number. You also get the added benefit of keeping the floor until all three of your points are made (so make them succinctly)!

My third and fourth favorite mnemonics are to convey a tone and theme that persist repeatedly throughout your speech. Let me repeat myself. Your tone, if humorous at the beginning of your presentation, should remain humorous throughout. There's no worse letdown than hearing a great opening joke followed by serious boredom. This does not mean you have to be Robin Williams. You do need to pepper humor throughout, however, if that is the tone you have chosen.

In terms of theme, winnow it down to a repeatable sentence. If you're especially on top of your theme, it can double as your structure. For example, the theme "tough times and tougher professionals" would allow you to speak to the first piece (tough times) for the first part of your speech and then to inspire your colleagues (tougher professionals) for the second part. Inspiration comes from being challenged to something greater by the end of any speech. That's my second favorite mnemonic. (Had you noticed I skipped one?) Too few managing partners urge their colleagues and subordinates to actively participate in a solution in an inspiring way. Know how you want them to participate in the plan and invite them to brainstorm with you. If you want them to participate by tightening the belt, then what better way to get them to tighten it if they feel they get to help choose the color and size?

As you pose the challenge to them, ask yourself how many times you say the word "you" (instead of "I") in

your speech. The pronoun "you" in any speech or conversation should outnumber the pronoun "I" tenfold.

■ **SPEAK WITH ELOQUENT BLUNTNES.** Do not sugarcoat bad news. Good managers know they must be trusted above being liked. Inspiring leaders know how to accomplish *both* at the same time. The corniness of "bread/bologna/bread" does work. Bread represents the positive message or sincere compliment. Bologna represents the meat of the tough reality you must address with your audience.

■ **LISTEN WITH YOUR EYES.** Watch your audience closely as you speak—but, first, a caveat. Do not be discouraged by a passive-looking audience. They may actually be fully engaged. (I'd wager that you appear generally passive when you are an audience member as well.) However, if there are changes in the audience according to your topic, you might make adjustments. For example, give nondefensive explanations if the audience appears to be confused or frustrated by something you just said.

■ **LISTEN WITH YOUR MOUTH.** How many speeches have you given or attended where the instruction at the beginning was, "Please interrupt with questions," or where the opportunity for questions only came at the very end when no time remained on the clock for questions to be answered? Both are formulas for stifled questions. Do not rely on your audience to generate questions. Create opportunities for questions and comments by building in intermittent questions that you ask the audience throughout your speech. And don't give up when you are met with that inevitable awkward silence that feels like forever after you pose your first question. Silence to a speaker invariably feels longer than it does to the audience. While you're

waiting, they're busy thinking. Also, you need to convey to your audience that you *mean* it when you ask them to participate, so wait expectantly for the first volunteer so they can learn that you mean to focus on them.

Even formal speeches to an audience of hundreds can use this questioning technique. (You'll need microphones in the audience, of course.) You can get creative with this, too. One managing partner displayed questions during his speech that were videotaped in advance among members of the firm. The video clips inserted variety (and comic relief at times) into a formal presentation, drawing positive response and greater attentiveness from the audience.

## After Your Speech

■ **LISTEN WITH YOUR FINGERS (AGAIN).** Seek feedback from your audience. If it was a large group, turn back to the keyboard and run a survey. When possible, have someone conduct in-person debriefings about your message and delivery. If you are the one seeking in-person feedback, go to those who will be honest with you rather than to those who will tell you what you want to hear. We often seek out the advice of those whom we know will support our position and won't push us to think too hard about opposing views. Go to those whom you know may be on the other side of your message, especially if you have had to deliver bad news.

At the end of the day, the better speaker is the one who can listen with her mind, continually ask "How does that issue affect my audience?" and overtly address that for the listener on the spot. **LP**

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