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**H O W T O S E L L  
Y O U R S E L F A N D  
Y O U R I D E A S**

Christopher Witt

*with Dale Fetherling*



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## PROLOGUE

# WHY LEADERS AREN'T LIKE OTHER PEOPLE

Leaders aren't like other people—at least not when it comes to giving speeches. Other people try to get out of giving a speech any way they can. They put off preparing for it until the last minute, then fire up PowerPoint, and create slides that are just like the slides they've seen every other presenter use. They happily stand in the dark, cede center stage to a screen on which they project those slides, and more often than not, read them word for word to audiences who furtively check their phones and PDAs. Other people are relieved simply to get through a presentation without embarrassing themselves.

But if you're a leader, you must look and sound like a leader in every speech you give. There's too much riding on your performance—your prestige, your ability to command people's attention and support, the success of your project or your organization—to settle for being average.

If you're working your way up, one of the best ways to position yourself as a leader in the eyes of others is to speak like a leader. Just because everyone else shies away from giving speeches or relies too much on PowerPoint is no reason for you to. As a matter of fact, it's a good reason *not* to. You need to set yourself apart from other people.

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**REAL LEADERS DON'T DO POWERPOINT**

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Even if you aren't a leader and you harbor no strong desire to be one, you may be tired of having your ideas dismissed while other people's ideas, less compelling than yours, win a better hearing and get a more positive response. If so, you can learn from the way leaders speak and use their techniques and strategies to improve the impact of what you say.

Remember, audiences don't want leaders to speak like everyone else. They hold leaders to a higher standard, demanding more of them. And leaders expect more of themselves too, knowing that just being a good speaker isn't good enough. They want their speeches to advance their organization's success and to promote their personal status.

So whether you are a leader, an aspiring leader, or simply someone who wants to be taken more seriously, you need to speak better and more intelligently than other people. You can't jot down some talking points at the last moment—or rely on someone else to do it for you—and say whatever comes to mind. You can't trust PowerPoint to make your point. You can't just troll for stories and quotes from the Internet to sprinkle through your speech. Instead, you need to let yourself shine through. You've got to make your thoughts, your convictions, your vision, and your character manifest themselves in what you say.

Why, exactly, do leaders need to be different?

- **Leaders speak when a lot is at stake.**

In times of crisis, change, or opportunity—when expectations are high and the consequences may be momentous—that's when people turn to leaders for words of insight, reassurance, or direction. After a

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national tragedy, for instance, the country waits for the president to speak. (Reagan's speech on the evening of the space shuttle *Challenger* disaster—"We will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, as they prepared for their journey and waved goodbye and 'slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God'"—helped comfort a stunned nation.) When a company releases a new product, who better to herald it than the leader? And following an acquisition, anxious employees don't know where they stand until they hear the CEO's plans . . . from the CEO's mouth.

Leaders speak to make a difference, and unsettled times are when their words can have the greatest impact.

- **Leaders speak as representatives of their organizations.**

Here's the paradox: Leaders have to be themselves at all times and yet, when they speak, they speak not for themselves, but for their organizations. Inexperienced or ineffective leaders sometimes forget this. They make offhand remarks in public settings or spontaneous asides from the podium, and then they're surprised when people take their comments as policy. But real leaders know that audiences take their words seriously, much more seriously than they take the words of other people. And leaders *want* their words to be taken seriously.

The success of any organization—whether it's a multinational corporation, a nonprofit, a fledgling start-up, a department, a one-person operation—depends on its leader's persuasiveness. Similarly, any project—a launch, a PR campaign, an oral proposal for a large contract—is aided or hobbled by its leader's ability to make its case.



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- **Leaders speak all the time.**

Leaders give formal or informal presentations several times a week, if not more often. They speak to the board of directors, to executives, to company-wide gatherings, to the general public, to associations and service clubs, to funding sources, to major clients and potential customers. They appear on panels, on radio and television, and in print. A recent survey of 100 Fortune 1,000 companies found that their chief executives received an average of 175 invitations a year just to speak at conferences.

Aspiring leaders seek out opportunities to give speeches. They speak up at meetings. They give project updates. They participate in team presentations to prospective clients. They address service clubs and professional associations. They lead teleclasses and webinars.

- **Leaders speak because it's their job.**

Speaking is one of the most important responsibilities of a leader, and real leaders take it on as a challenge and an opportunity.

I most frequently get asked to work with leaders for two reasons. Usually, it's when leaders have a major speech coming up with a lot riding on it, and they have to ace it. But more and more often, I get asked to coach rising stars—people who are being groomed for a promotion, say—because the powers-that-be are dissatisfied with their speaking skills. “We’d like to move our senior scientist into more of a leadership position,” they’ll say, “but he speaks, no matter what the occasion, like he’s giving a technical briefing.” Or they’ll say, “She’s the next CEO we’re looking for, but she just doesn’t come across to large groups with any kind of charisma.”

I also get called in to work with senior researchers, scientists, and

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engineers, when the people they report to are frustrated by their poor presentation skills. “My people are some of the brightest in the industry,” the director of R&D at a high-tech company once told me, “but all their knowledge isn’t worth a cent to the company if they can’t share it with others.” So I tell these “subject matter experts” that in spite of what they may think, knowledge isn’t power; communicating knowledge *is*. I tell them that the facts don’t speak for themselves; people gather the facts, evaluate them, make sense of them, and speak on their behalf. And I tell them that giving presentations may not be in their job descriptions, but it should be. Their value to the organization isn’t in what they know; it’s in their ability to present what they know to people in a variety of fields in a way that can be understood and acted upon.

Speaking is one of the best ways for people to position themselves as leaders and to communicate what they know in a way that gets a favorable response.

- **Leaders speak to influence and inspire.**

I always ask my clients to describe the most powerful speech they can remember hearing from a leader. What did the leader do, I ask, that made that speech so impressive? Their answers vary, although they inevitably touch upon similar elements: the leader’s sense of presence, conviction, passion, quick wit or ready humor, ability to reach out and touch the audience, masterful delivery, and—most of all—an engaging and memorable message. In all the times I’ve asked the question, never once has anyone answered, “I liked how the speaker used PowerPoint.”

And there’s a reason for that.

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Professionals and academicians often debate the merits of PowerPoint. Both sides of the argument have one thing in common: They assume its purpose is to transmit information. And that's precisely why leaders—real leaders—want little to do with it. Because they aren't primarily concerned with communicating information. They speak to promote a vision, a direction, or a passion. They're seeking to influence and inspire. And no one thinks PowerPoint is the way to do that.

True, if you're making a report, conducting a training session, or leading a seminar, communicating information becomes more critical. But it should never be the sole or even the primary reason you're speaking. Speak like a leader and you'll present information not for its own sake, but in a way that shapes how the audience thinks about it and influences how they act on it.

## THE FOUR ELEMENTS

Almost 2,500 years ago Demosthenes, the father of Greek oratory, cited four elements of a great speech: (1) a great person, (2) a noteworthy event, (3) a compelling message, and (4) a masterful delivery. Those four elements are as pertinent today as they were in ancient Greece. And this book is divided into those four main parts.

To be *a great person* you don't have to be the president of the United States or even the president of your company. You might be a department head interested in building a cohesive team, focused on a shared goal. Or a self-employed consultant, coach, architect, or financial planner building your practice by speaking to select audiences. Or a sales rep

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tired of sounding like—and being treated like—every other sales rep. Or a community leader with a cause or a candidate you want to promote. Or a technical expert working your way out of the laboratory. It doesn't matter. You have to be the best *you* you can be. So let your experience, passion, character, and even your sense of humor show up in every word you say and how you say it.

Similarly, you should only be involved with *noteworthy events*. Sometimes that means turning down speaking opportunities that aren't worth your time or that would cheapen people's perception of your authority. And sometimes that means working with the people responsible for the event to refine its purpose, schedule, and setting.

A *compelling message* is nothing more—and nothing less—than an idea with the power to change people's lives, if only in a small way, expressed in the clearest, most compelling words. It takes diligent preparation. There's no shortcut. Leaders who stand in front of an audience and wing it don't get respect and don't deserve it.

Doc Pomus—the legendary songwriter who created “A Teenager in Love,” “Suspicion,” and “Save the Last Dance for Me”—was once asked how to write a hit song. He answered, “Find the shortest distance between your insides and a pencil.” He could have said the same thing about creating a compelling message. Leaders find the shortest distance between their insides and an audience's ears.

A *masterful delivery* depends on any number of elements, such as planting your feet, making eye contact, and projecting your voice. But it's so much more than technique. It's really about projecting yourself—your authentic self—in the most powerful way possible.

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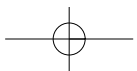
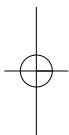
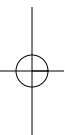
Other people may settle for, say, two out of the four elements and think they're doing pretty well. But not you. You're a leader or aspire to be one. And you know that being a good-enough speaker doesn't cut it. You want to be exceptional. That drive is what has gotten you where you are today . . . and will take you where you want to go.

And if you take this book's advice to heart, you are likely to get there faster by being a more confident, more commanding, more compelling speaker.

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PART ONE

[ A GREAT  
PERSON ]



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## YOU ARE THE MESSAGE

Who you are is inseparable from what you communicate. I don't just mean that your actions speak louder than your words. Of course they do. I mean that your character—who you are, what you've done, what you value—shapes the message your listeners hear.

Take Donald Trump. What do we know about him? That he's a domineering alpha male with a bad haircut and an outsized ego who's in headlong pursuit of riches and fame no matter what the consequences. If he gave a talk about altruism or touchy-feely customer service, would you believe him?

On the other hand, consider Herb Kelleher, the cofounder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines. Eccentric and fun-loving, he was known for sometimes loading luggage or taking tickets at the gate, for putting employees first, customers second, and his board of directors third. Can you imagine him giving Trump's speech . . . or Trump giving his?

If Trump told a gathering of his employees that he loves them, they'd throw up. Kelleher, on the other hand, used what he called the "L word" all the time, and his employees once took out a full-page ad to tell him how much they adored him. Both have been successful in business. But neither could give the other's speech with any integrity.



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Mary Kay Ash, the founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics, could have spoken about women helping women succeed in business, but not about being a stay-at-home mom. Bill Gates could talk about the future of the Internet or even philanthropy, but could never give a speech titled “Small Is Beautiful.”

That’s because speakers are only credible when what they say is in sync with who they are.

When your message is at odds with who you are—or, at least, with who the audience perceives you to be—two problems arise. First, you’ll have trouble delivering your message. You’ll feel, at best, like an actor playing a part or, at worst, like a fraud. You’ll lose your spontaneity, confidence, and authenticity. And second, your audience won’t believe it. They’ll doubt what you say and, even more damning, they’ll doubt *you*.

A client of mine—let’s call her Jenny—is president of a consulting firm she built from a one-person shop to a million-dollar business. She marketed her services by speaking to targeted audiences, establishing herself as an authority in the eyes of prospective clients. She described herself as dynamic, driven, and straitlaced. A colleague called her “Martha Stewart with a sense of humor.”

She had previously worked with physicians who wanted to build their practices. Now she wanted to attract more clients by working with chiropractors as well. Her research gave her confidence that the same strategies that helped physicians would help chiropractors. It also taught her she’d have to tweak her message, making it more suited to her new audience.

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But after giving a number of talks to chiropractors, she was disappointed with the response. “If I were talking to physicians,” she said, “I’d be getting a lot more prospective clients wanting appointments to talk with me.” She hired me to sit in on her next presentation and give her feedback.

I’d already seen her speak to physicians, so I could understand why they responded so well to her. She took the stage with confidence, projected an upbeat attitude, and spoke engagingly without notes. She poked fun at doctors in a way that got them laughing at themselves. And they *loved* her.

When she talked one-on-one with the chiropractors before her speech, I could see they were equally impressed by her. But once she began her talk, she seemed less sure of herself. She anchored herself behind the lectern and kept referring to her notes. And she was entirely humorless. The audience applauded politely when she finished, but almost no one went up to talk to her.

Afterward, I asked her why she had taken that approach. “Chiropractors tend to be looser, more right-brained, less uptight types of people than physicians,” she said. “So I want to project a warmer, less in-your-face image.”

It wasn’t working, I told her. And I advised her to speak the same way she always did. “You can adapt your message—within limits—to suit a different audience,” I said. “But you can’t change *you*.”

The next time she spoke she strode out to center stage, looked her listeners straight in the eye, and laid out her program with an unassuming air of authority. Admitting she was more accustomed to talking to physicians, she made a quip about the difference between the two professions,

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ribbing chiropractors for their image. They laughed. And afterward many of them clustered around to speak with her.

Leaders adapt what they say—changing emphasis here and there, substituting examples or stories when appropriate—to better address the needs and concerns of different audiences. But they shouldn't change themselves or try to become someone else.

Thus, it's critical to know yourself and, more important, to know how you are perceived. Be yourself, because you can't be anyone else anyway. And let your true self come through in what you talk about and in how you talk about it.

General George S. Patton, for example, honed a theatrical image. He wore a highly polished helmet, riding breeches, and knee-high cavalry boots. He sported ivory-handled, nickel-plated revolvers. His aggressive warrior image totally aligned with his actions on the battlefield.

He riddled his tough-talking speeches with irreverence and profanity as a way to bond with and inspire his troops. You may remember the speech delivered by actor George C. Scott at the beginning of the film *Patton*. A sanitized version of the real thing, it began, "Now, I want you to remember that no bastard ever won a war by dying for his country. He won it by making the other poor dumb bastard die for his country." He continued:

Now, there's one thing that you men will be able to say when you get back home, and you may thank God for it. Thirty years from now when you're sitting around your fireside with your grandson on your knee, and he asks you, "What did you do in the great

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World War Two?” You won’t have to say, “Well, I shoveled shit in Louisiana.” All right now, you sons of bitches, you know how I feel. I will be proud to lead you wonderful guys into battle anytime, anywhere. That’s all.

The harsh way Patton spoke mirrored the way he was known for leading his troops. He successfully matched his image to his message, and his message to his audience. In fact, upon his death, more than 20,000 soldiers reportedly volunteered to be his pallbearers.

Contrast that with another famous general, George Washington. In 1783, officers of the bedraggled revolutionary army were hatching a plot. They’d heard that the fledgling government was broke and unable to pay them.

Washington knew, no matter how legitimate their grievances, that their insurrection would mean the end of the republic. He walked uninvited into their angry gathering and for nearly half an hour argued for their loyalty with little success.

At the end of his speech, he opened a letter from a member of Congress, which detailed the earnest efforts being made to pay the young nation’s debts. Washington squinted, held the letter at arm’s length, and then fell silent. The officers looked at one another, puzzled.

Finally, the general reached into his coat and took out a pair of glasses. The officers had never seen their physically formidable commander with glasses. “Gentlemen,” he apologized, “you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for I have not only grown gray but almost blind in the service of my country.”

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His humbling admission achieved what his rhetoric had not. Some of the officers wept, and in the words of his biographer, “from behind the shining drops, their heads looked with love at the commander who had led them all so far and long.” Talk of rebellion ended on the spot, because Washington had dared to reveal his true self, a self very different from Patton’s but equally powerful in its much less dramatic way.

### MATCHING YOUR MESSAGE TO YOUR REPUTATION

First, you have to know what your reputation is. That’s harder to discern than you’d think. The problem is, the higher you rise in an organization, the less willing people are to tell you what they really think of you. So you’re better off asking your peers, leaders like yourself who have little to gain by pulling their punches. Or hire an executive coach, someone whose job it is to be honest. Or if all else fails, ask your kids.

Second, you have to know what image you project when you speak. Every time you speak you tell the audience who you are. And not just by the words you choose but by all the other signals you send out: your facial expressions, your eyes, your posture, your voice, your intensity, your sense of humor, your choice of anecdotes, how you treat your listeners, and many other intangibles. You may think you’re projecting yourself in a particular way. But how do you really know? The best—and most humbling—way to find out is to watch a video of yourself. First time through, turn down the volume and look only at your face and your eyes—they communicate almost 80 percent of how you come across. Then watch it again, this time on fast-forward. Doing so will highlight your

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movements and gestures—the remaining 20 percent of your nonverbal communication.

And the last thing you must do is to stop doing certain things. Stop imitating any other speaker, even someone you greatly admire. Stop sounding like a corporate clone. (Using words or phrases like *best of breed*, *change agent*, *impactful*, *results-driven*, *going forward*, *paradigm shift*, *mission critical*, or *value-added* is a sure way to kill your authenticity.) And stop saying what other people think. Take a contrarian position. Argue against the conventional wisdom of the day. Stake out a new position and defend it with all you've got. When you stop trying to look or sound or think like everyone else and start just being yourself, your reputation and your image will take care of themselves.

Bombarded with signals, your listeners make judgments about what you stand for and what, really, your message is. The words themselves are meaningless unless the rest of you backs them up. So the first rule of public speaking is this: You are a walking, talking message. Everything about you and everything the audience knows about you supports—or refutes—what you say.

So before you take to the platform, make sure that what you want to say and how you say it resonate with who you are. And remember: you're not just the messenger, you're the message.