Published in the *Management Consultancy*

*Most of us have sat through more awful training events and presentations than we care to remember. **Tony Scott** offers a design model which can help to create something better: a monologue that feels, to the audience, like a conversation.*

No such thing as a good 'presentation'

I was hammered the first time I ran a presentation skills course. 'Arrogant... insensitive... abrasive' were some of the milder words the audience wrote on their feedback sheets at the end. Not surprising, really, though I didn't realise it at the time. I'd blown myself away in the first couple of minutes - by focusing on my concerns instead of theirs.

Their concerns were written all over their faces and in their nervous laughter before we started. They were personnel executives, used to highly structured roles in departments with predictable workloads, who had never been on any management development course before. They had no idea what was going to happen to them, except that they were going to have to rehearse real upcoming speeches to an audience of their peers.

They were terrified. Naturally.

What they wanted - desperately and right at the start - was comfort that the way ahead was clear and under control. What I gave them was something along these lines: 'Welcome. This is the first time we've run a course like this for a group like you. So it's something of a pilot event for us all, and my colleagues and I have very little idea at this stage about how it will work out in detail....'

From my point of view, the approach made perfect sense: create a feeling of togetherness, a joint exploration. The approach would have appealed to me. But within a few sentences, I'd waggled every raw nerve they had, magnifying their fears and outraging their instinctive expectations. They hated it. And they took it out on me. Quite right, too.

Being on your feet in front of an audience is a powerful place to be. It is also a very naked place. Focusing on your concerns rather than the audience's, however subtly, has about as much chance of passing unnoticed as the Reverend Ian Paisley at a Sinn Fein meeting.

So, since the word 'presentation' itself suggests a one-way street - the speaker presenting his or her ideas to a passive audience - I'd like to suggest another word which seems to me to capture more of the two-way flavour of what good speakers and trainers actually do.

The word is conversation, and it applies whether we're talking about a 20-minute after-dinner speech, a two-hour high-tech extravaganza, or a two-day seminar. Three examples of good speakers come to mind: David Attenborough, Tom Peters, and Alastair Cooke. All share this ability to hold a conversation with an audience - to talk to you not at you.

I have two reactions whenever I listen to them or any other good communicator. First, it feels all the time as though they're talking to me, about things that matter

to me. Second, any time I have a question in response to what they say, they answer it - even when I haven't spoken out loud.

Sitting in the audience, this feels uncanny - as though somehow the speaker can read your mind. Which is partly why we feel so personally engaged by their performances.

Yet, from the stage, it is perfectly possible to predict the questions an audience will have during a speech. At a micro level, this helps you, as speaker, to devise an order to your ideas which will make them seem effortlessly comprehensible.

If, for instance, you say 'There are five key points in all this,' the audience will naturally ask itself 'What are they?'

If you say 'My recommendation is that you fire your Sales Director at once,' the audience will ask 'Why?'

If you say 'To save 20 per cent of your unit costs, you're going to have to double your staff's productivity,' the audience will ask 'How?'

All you have to do to keep the audience with you is make sure that you keep answering these natural questions as they arise in the audience's mind.

The same principle works at a macro level: the whole structure of the speech. In the context, for example, of someone standing up as a potential adviser in front of a high-level group for the first time - perhaps the most familiar examples for consultants are taking part in a beauty parade, presenting a report or running a workshop - you can predict that six macro-level questions will surface in the minds of most of the listeners, in roughly this order:

1. Who is this person?
2. Is he or she worth listening to?
3. Why is what he's saying of interest to me?
4. Where does he think we should be heading?
5. That sounds fine, but what makes him think it's going to work?
6. Okay, what's the next step?

With that sequence in mind, most speeches or seminars fall into six main blocks. Some blocks will be much longer than others, and each will benefit from the inclusion of a variety of visual aids and exercises.

What follows here is one example of how using the model as a design tool can work out in practice (in this case for part of a management seminar on change in professional partnerships, with an audience of partners and managers - consultants, lawyers and accountants):

1. *(Who is this?)* A brisk introduction of you, the speaker - focusing on the parts of your background which are directly relevant to the audience.

2. *(Worth hearing?)* Some illuminating thoughts on issues facing the audience, which ideally the speaker will have discovered beforehand through conversations or research. One general topic is an account of the debate I call the amoeba versus the pyramid.

   Traditional management theory holds that organisations should be shaped like a pyramid (taller or flatter, depending on the degree of central command and control required). That model works fine for armies and industry, although it depends absolutely on the right decisions being made at the top, especially in a changing environment. But partnerships tend not to work that way.

   In partnerships, with their greater degree of autonomy, partners can and

in partnerships, with their greater degree of autonomy, partners can and do move tentatively into new markets and services all the time. If the move fails, the partner may either retreat or - if he or she has moved too far - become separated from the main partnership body. If the move succeeds, the partner shifts more of the organisation's people and resources into the new area and goes on expanding.

The whole process is much more like an amoeba than a pyramid. And, because the organisation's resources always flow towards success and retreat from failure, it is an extremely successful survival mechanism. Managing such an organisation is then a very different proposition from managing the straight-line structure of a pyramid - much less akin to the military model, much more like the political process of managing the House of Commons.

3. *(Relevant to me?)* A description of the management stresses and strains that occur naturally in partnerships, along with anecdotal examples of them. The stories will generate chuckles of recognition, and will reassure listeners that, since other firms have similar troubles, they need not be alarmed by the problems they face.

4. *(Whither the firm?)* A rumination on four models of partnership (any of which can work successfully, depending on the size and skills of the group of partners involved):

   o The **sole practitioner** model, where each partner effectively works alone but shares physical facilities.

   o The **franchisee** model, where partners benefit from the brand name and from centralised technical and marketing support.

   o The **collegiate** model, where individual activity is strengthened by mutual support - complementing each other's strengths, consulting each other on tricky issues without embarrassment, and cross-selling. At this stage the desirability of teamwork begins to emerge.

   o **The corporate** model - where you get more division of labour and the development of product and market experts, and where the partners sacrifice some individual freedom and accept central direction in return for the ability to invest in developing new markets and services. By this stage, teamwork has become an essential ingredient.

Part of the sub-text here will be a recognition that not everybody wants to become a corporate man - that is, after all, why some people opt for partnerships. But the model helps to provoke more open debate (at the seminar and later) on how the partners see their firms' future.

5. *(Will it work?)*An explicit acknowledgment that no solution to any set of business problems can exist independently of the organisation which is to put it into practice. That detailed vision of a firm's future must emerge, gradually and iteratively, from the partnership itself. What a consultant can contribute is a knowledge of what has and has not worked elsewhere, and an understanding of the change processes necessary to turn the vision into reality.

6. *(What are the next steps?)*How a consultant can help the audience's firm (or firms) move forward. The main roles in an assignment involving management change might be:

   o **Acting** as adviser and sounding board for whatever strategic thinking has already been done in the organisation.

- **Helping** the partners to agree on the form and style of management that will best help the firm to reach its strategic goals - plus how to manage the transitional period, and setting up an internal team to drive the changes.

- **Cascading** the new thinking and the relevant skills out through the firm in such a way as to build the momentum for change and encourage partners to develop local initiatives in support of them.

- **Coaching** individuals and groups within the firm to do things in the new ways. This implementation stage is the biggest single hurdle in any organisational change, and the place at which programmes most often fail. Techniques such as beach-heading - coaching an operational group through a live project, and thereby building the group's enthusiasm for the new approach - are needed to break through the barriers.

All this is merely one example of how to apply the six-questions model in practice. Unlimited numbers of other ways exist. At the heart of all the most engaging ways, though, is... **a speaker whose primary concern is to respond to the audience's spoken and unspoken questions - not to display.**

As the man who invented the Fog Factor, American communication guru Robert Gunning, put it: 'Aim to express, not to impress.' Because, if you do that, you impress anyway.

Jo Oliver
020-8883-3937
07940-717-589

Tony Scott
020-8444-8800
07973-829-209

info@
oliverscottconsulting.com