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Make Your Next School Board Presentation a Winner

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Make Your Next School Board Presentation a Winner!

Does this sound familiar? You're standing before your school board, about to make a presentation. You have bad news to share and you know they don't want to hear it. As you stand there, your heart is pounding, your mouth is dry (unlike your underarms)—and you haven't even started yet!

Don't feel bad. You're not alone. Presentations in general give lots of people fits. But school board presentations can be especially challenging. For one thing, no two boards—or board *members*, for that matter—are alike. Everyone will have their own expectations, interests, even agendas, which can get very complicated to sort out. My suggestion is, rather than driving yourself crazy trying to shape your message for each board member individually, speak in a way that works with all of them, no matter their differences. Here's how.

Don't tell them stuff. Connect with them.

First, always keep in mind that the most important part of your presentation is not the information you're sharing, but HOW you're sharing it. That's hard to remember when you're in the hot seat, but it's true, and very important. The worst thing you can do is get up there, bury your face in your notes and start reading. For one thing, it's boring. "Blah blah blah." More important, it comes off as weak and lacking in confidence, which are exactly the wrong impressions to give.

More than anything else, board members need to feel that you're someone they can count on and trust, that you know what you're doing, and understand their needs. The more they think that of you, the more likely they are to hear what you have to say. So, rather than reading from your notes, just talk to them. Stand up straight, look them in the eye. Smile. Speak up. Speak clearly.

You want to come off as confident, open, relaxed, and trustworthy as possible. Anything that supports those impressions helps you. Anything that undercuts them, hurts. Reading from a prepared statement definitely hurts.

NOT Just the Facts.

Style is one thing. What about substance? How should you share the information itself? First, it's a given that it has to be shared completely, no matter what. You would obviously never want to change the facts of a presentation to please an audience. But

the words you use to share those facts can definitely change how they are received. Consider these two examples:

A) “The numbers are ____.”

B) “This next number is one I’m afraid you’re not going to be happy about. The truth is, I’m not happy about it either. I know this is something you feel strongly about and that it’s frustrating for you. I apologize for that, and understand that it’s our responsibility to get the job done. Honestly, we are disappointed with the numbers too. All I can say is that we’ve been working hard on it, it has our full attention, and we are making some progress, though not as much as any of us would like.”

The main objective with all your communication is to keep people from dismissing you or filtering your words so that they really hear what you’re saying. I think it’s clear that the second approach does just that. The board may not like the information, but it’s pretty hard for them to just write you off and go into reactionary mode when you’ve demonstrated such humility, candor, empathy, and accountability.

The point here is not to somehow make the news better, or even make board members *like it* better. The point is to keep the bad news from damaging the *relationship*, because the quality of the relationship is the most important factor in your success, long-term. Done well, sharing bad news not only doesn’t have to *harm* the relationship, it can actually make it *stronger*.

Planning, Feedback, and Practice

Finally, I can’t emphasize enough the importance of planning, feedback, and practice. First, plan out exactly what you want to say, taking into account all we’ve talked about with connection and the relationship. Then, run your plan by someone for feedback. This is a critical step that too many people overlook. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen someone say exactly they intended—without realizing what a bad idea it was in the first place! Before you go out and plant your foot in your mouth, get feedback! Find someone who: 1) Knows what to look for. 2) Will tell you truth. 3) Ideally, can suggest other things to say, if necessary.

Finally, practice. Practice brings confidence and helps you connect. It also sends powerful messages of respect, especially when you consider the impressions of *not* being practiced and ready. When you show up not knowing your stuff, winging it, acting

nervous and not ready to answer questions, at best it says you're incompetent. At worst, that you don't care. You simply must practice your presentation. And I don't mean just running through your presentation once the day before. I mean run through it a LOT. If you have opening and closing comments, memorize them. Practice them out loud, and standing. If you have materials, practice with them too. Make it as much like the actual presentation as possible, and you should practice the whole presentation until you are comfortable with all of it and have the opening and closing memorized.

There are plenty of other things to say about effective presentations, too. But if you take these few suggestions to heart you'll go a long ways to making your next board presentation the best one yet!

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David Levin is the author of *Don't Just Talk, Be Heard! Closing the Gap Between What You Say and What People Hear*, and the co-author, with John Miller, of three books, including the bestselling *QBQ! The Question Behind the Question*. David works to help people communicate better, so they can live their full potential—at work and at home. He is also a professional member of the National Speakers Association, and his flagship presentation is titled, "The 10 Biggest Communication Mistakes - and How To Avoid Them!" More information available at <http://www.JustBeHeard.com>