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## How Presenting Makes Careers **Present Your Way To The Top**

By  
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### **Why presenting has power**

It's easy to understand why so many otherwise capable people are distressed, anxiety-ridden, and almost paralyzed if they're called upon to make a presentation—even a friendly audience of three—let alone 300. They often reveal how they feel by starting out with “I only wish I had more time to prepare” or “I'm not really good at public speaking.” Unfortunately, what follows proves it.

It isn't surprising that with successful presenters the story is different. We view them as possessing leadership capabilities, as well as being committed, competent, and rising stars. As more than one person has said after a presentation by such a person, “That's my future boss” or “She's going to run the place.”

What is it that separates capable presenters from those who struggle? Why do some presentations elicit enthusiastic responses, while others are, frankly, dismal failures? Is it the content, the preparation, the person, or something else?

Research by Caroline J. Wesson, Ph.D., at the University of Wolverhampton in the UK, may help to understand the issue: The perceived confidence that listeners have in a speaker determines how they regard the person's “accuracy, competence, and knowledge level.” Then, Dr. Wesson adds, “The more confidently expressed that information is, the more likely it is to be followed.”

Is it possible that the primary difference between a highly-regarded presentation and one that gets low ratings is the speaker's confidence? Is it possible that a superbly prepared presentation can fall flat because of the presenter's lack of confidence?

By all measures, Jack Welch, the former GE CEO and Chairman, was not just brilliant but an exceptional business leader. Although he gave hundreds of speeches and presentations during his career, he didn't take chances on how they would be received. For example, when he was getting ready to speak on the occasion of his retirement, he engaged a well-known former radio and TV news correspondent to coach him.

For Jack Welch, every presentation made a difference. He understood that his legacy depended on more than his words. As a child, he stuttered, but he learned from his mother that confidence could help him overcome his limitations.

Why is confidence so formidable and influential in presenting? We can find the answer in what presentations are meant to accomplish. Whatever else they may do, their goal is to *persuade*. Listeners throw down the gauntlet. They challenge presenters to convince, sway, and motivate them. They want to know why they should buy what you're selling. They want to know why they should join your cause or accept your proposal. In other words, listeners want to know what to do. Logic alone doesn't do it; it requires confidence.

Why should you take presenting seriously? Why is it worth your time and effort to send the message that you will do what others fear. Why is it one of the most valued skillsets in business? It demonstrates that you have the ability—the skill—to influence others—and opens the doors to advancement.

### **Rules for building confidence**

Just saying that confidence is needed isn't enough. Here are rules that help achieve the confidence goal.

**Rule #1. Prepare properly.** Creating an outline doesn't do it, and neither does “having in mind” what you want to say. Proper preparation means writing out every word you're going to say. This is how to shape and focus your message—and get rid of what's useless or irrelevant. *Every presenter is nervous—but knowing what you're going to say creates confidence.*

**Rule #2. Control the situation.** Presenters are actors—and they're also directors. It's their job to set the stage—to take control. A wealth management firm engaged a well-known business school professor to speak at a client event. When more guests than expected showed up, the speaker was put in an untenable position of standing by himself in the middle of the room, surrounded by the guests. No one could succeed in such conditions, and he didn't. *Experienced speakers make their expectations known so they can be successful.*

**Rule #3. Never apologize.** Avoid such statements as “I'm not a speaker” or “I only wish I had more time to prepare” or “My grandmother's cat died.” What they do is broadcast your lack of self-confidence. Those listening may still be sitting there, but they're gone, never to return. *Presenting isn't about you, so don't let yourself down.*

**Rule #4. Break the PowerPoint habit.** Dependence slides is an addiction, and once it has you in its grasp, it won't let loose. Use slides and other props, such as videos and graphics, sparingly to support your presentation. *Never read from the screen; keep the focus on you and what you're saying.*

**Rule #5. Start strong.** Demonstrate confidence from the get-go. Drop the “warm up” stuff and stay away from jokes, unless you’re an experienced stand-up comic. What works may be telling a story about how your product or service helps customers and how it can benefit them. *Don’t waste time; get to why you’re there and why it’s in the best interest of your listeners to hear what you have to say.*

**Rule #6. Give them a roadmap.** Don’t let listeners get lost in a swamp, make a wrong turn, or be distracted by other sights along the way. To keep listeners focused on what you’re saying, let them know where you’re going. Example: “Here’s where we are today. We have three choices. Only one of them will get us where we want to be.” *The roadmap enhances confidence.*

**Rule #7. Compelling close.** Never leave listeners confused or up in the air. That only shatters their confidence in you and your message. *The closing task is to reaffirm why your proposal, plan, concept, or initiative is correct, and most importantly, what can be lost if it isn’t approved or adopted.*

Why is presenting a skill that’s key to career advancement? It demonstrates all the right qualities—the ability to analyze issues, leadership, and most of all instill confidence.

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