

Step into the Spotlight

Present with impact, inspire
confidence and get results

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For Andrew

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Introduction

Congratulations on deciding to step into the spotlight and become a more confident, persuasive and compelling presenter. If you work in a business or organisation and are looking for a straightforward method to ensure you can craft and deliver impactful presentations, in-person and virtually, that inform, motivate and inspire, then this book is for you.

Let's kick things off with two undeniable (and potentially uncomfortable) facts.

It is the communication and execution of great ideas that propel our businesses and organisations forward. But oddly, we pay more attention and give more credence to those who project confidence – regardless of the quality of their ideas.

The result? Far too many promising careers stall, and great ideas fail to connect because of poor presentation skills. What's more, far too many bad ideas get adopted (and narcissistic leaders get promoted) because of our bias toward displays of confidence. The science is clear – we readily mistake confidence for competence. Yet, there is scant evidence to show that high confidence correlates to great leadership. In fact, the opposite may be true.¹

Here's the thing. If you believe your ideas are of value – speak up! You have a duty to those ideas, your organisation, and possibly the world to ensure your ideas are heard.

This book is designed to help you do just that.

And yes, you can learn – but you better believe it!

I've been privileged to work in many organisations across New Zealand and Australia for more than fifteen years, helping thousands of people become better presenters. Whether in a sprawling government ministry, a large multi-national, a glass-towered professional services firm or a hip young start-up, the simple factor that differentiates presenters who consistently improve from those who struggle is the underlying belief that they can.

Stanford University Professor and motivation research pioneer Carol Dweck calls this a growth mindset – believing you can develop your skills and talents through hard work and feedback. The opposite of growth is a fixed mindset – believing your skills are innate and unchangeable.² Presenters who manage to master their challenges and consistently improve have a growth mindset. They understand that their skills are like muscles that become stronger if trained and developed. They also understand that *how* you train matters.

Focus on the core

A personal trainer at any good gym will tell you that real strength always starts with the core – neglect it at your peril. The same is true for presentations. Everything should begin with a clear and relevant core message. Get that right, and confidence in delivery will often take care of itself.

But if you think that all you need for impact are powerful delivery skills and inherent charisma, you're mistaken. Your manager may even reinforce this myth by telling you to 'Be more confident' or 'Just own the room.'

You wouldn't believe the number of phone calls I get from worried team leads that go something like this:

'We need you to come in and work with [insert name] on their presenting skills. They're really struggling to make an impact. The issue's not with

their content – that's sorted – it's more to do with their delivery. We just need them not to suck.'

In the majority of cases, the issue is *always* content related. Content that's irrelevant, too dense, has too many slides, is unfamiliar, or all the above. Once that's sorted – boom, they're away!

I'm not saying delivery skills aren't essential. They are. (And don't worry, we'll talk about good delivery in later chapters.) But obsessing over them will distract you from where your real power comes from – your authenticity and your relevance. You do not need to be a performer or even an extrovert to be a great presenter, and anyone who tells you so is giving misguided advice. You are not there to entertain. Your purpose is to be of value to your audience, not to be evaluated by them.

In my experience, the most interesting and persuasive presenters deliver their message in a way that feels like a conversation they're having *with* me rather than a performance *for* me. Sure, they may inhabit a heightened version of themselves, with energy appropriate for their presentation context, but they are themselves, nonetheless. They own who they are. They seem comfortable in their skin. And the best part? Their message resonates and lingers in my mind long after the encounter because it's relevant to me. So, here's your first tip – start with something worth saying.

You might ask, 'Do I need to put myself out there? I just present marketing reports!'

YES! We need you. And we need your ideas to be communicated well – regardless of how mundane they may seem. If you're into a higher sense of purpose, let me share mine with you. Bear with me. I may get a bit ranty.

Things are out of whack

Look around. If you haven't noticed, the world is in a perilous state. Sure, it's 'the age of ideas', but there is a real risk that the weight of those ideas will favour the loudest rather than the best. Tectonic shifts are happening in the way we work. Big data, automation, machine learning, and artificial intelligence are creating massive labour market disruption. Vast, powerful digital communication platforms sold on the promise of connection with our fellow humans are doing the exact opposite. Despite their undeniable benefits, they've become algorithmic amplifiers of our own bias and outrage, fuelling the spread of disinformation and fear.

Meanwhile, global trust in business, government and science is collapsing. Add COVID-19, inequality, and the climate crisis into the mix and stir it all up with a rapid news, or rather, *entertainment* cycle that champions celebrity and opinion over considered, balanced debate and the world quickly begins to look decidedly precarious.

Arming the resistance

To navigate this chaos, we desperately need to hear every voice, not just the loudest. Too often, the charismatics, the bombastics, the braggadocios, the narcissists, the spin doctors, the loudmouths, the demagogues, the tricksters, and the flat-out liars dominate the conversation.

They've given the art of speaking a bad name – shifting it toward force and manipulation – and they've been celebrated and even worshipped for displays of brutal confidence over quiet competence. To restore balance, we need the quiet, the considered, the ethical, the authentic, the thoughtful and the kind amongst you to step forward in your businesses and organisations; competent and persuasive, equipped with the ability to communicate ideas that inspire us

with a sense of meaning, belonging and purpose. Don't wait for a sympathetic ear. We need you right now. This is your time to step out of the shadows, into the spotlight and shine. Everything that we do at The Pickering Group supports people to do just that.

Ok, rant over.

If you're looking for motivation to improve that's a little more Jeremy Clarkson than Greta Thunberg, how about this: Get good at presenting and you'll likely earn more money, get promoted, and won't lose your job to a machine.

The reality

Good presenting skills are a critical part of leadership, whatever your level. They underpin your ability to communicate effectively, which in turn drives up team engagement and, ultimately, organisational performance. It is a skill that is increasingly critical in today's knowledge economy – consequently, those who demonstrate good persuasive speaking skills are generally more recognised and rewarded within an organisation.³

As an example, take a computer engineer in New Zealand's growing tech industry who only has technical coding skills. Their salary might start around \$60,000. That same engineer who can confidently present to clients, sell their ideas to management and motivate their team to action can command upwards of \$120,000.

According to recent research from persuasion and communication expert Carmine Gallo, your ability to *change minds* is the single greatest skill that will set you apart in the coming decade.⁴

Recent data from LinkedIn reinforces this trend showing persuasion as the second most in-demand soft-skill in 2019 and 2020.⁵ In late 2018, LinkedIn CEO Jeff Weiner shared research from their comprehensive

study of skills gaps in the workforce. It showed that the number one skills gap was soft skills. Of the 1.6 million people surveyed who lacked in this area, sixty-two per cent required oral communication skills. Weiner further concluded that people with strong communication skills are at far less risk of being replaced by emerging technology such as artificial intelligence.⁶ As Gallo notes, it's clear that presenting skills should no longer be called 'soft' – they're fundamental.⁷

Dealing with Donald

For some of you, the idea of presenting persuasively may have an 'ick' factor to it.

Recently I was talking with a long-standing client who is a senior partner in a professional services firm. Her leadership team were struggling to pull themselves out of the detail, simplify their messaging and sell their ideas with conviction, but there was pushback when they heard she was about to put them through my advanced presenting programme. They recognised they weren't doing well, but were wary of the perceived sliminess of persuasive speaking skills. They were genuinely worried they would turn from considered, evidence-based experts into Donald Trump!

To be fair, they're right to be a little cautious. The line between persuasion and manipulation can be blurry. However, my response was this: Presenting persuasively need not come at the sacrifice of your authenticity or credibility. Rather, it should be strengthened by it. If you whole-heartedly believe that what you're communicating is of real value to your audience (and if you don't, then that should be ethically troubling), why wouldn't you want to be more effective? Wouldn't it be selfish to keep your ideas indecipherable?

Right then, let's crack into it.

What we'll cover

This book is a practical how-to guide to crafting and delivering impactful presentations and it's written in four parts.

Part One is all about context. In this section, I'll outline some of the unique challenges you face when presenting within organisations. I'll introduce the Archetypes of Organisational Speakers and the Three Practices of Presenting – Planning, Messaging and Delivery. These practices are the key to the spotlight and form the core of this book.

Parts Two, Three and Four unpack the Three Practices in turn. By the end, you will have a straightforward, efficient process that will ensure all your presentations (in-person and virtual) are relevant, compelling, and inspire confidence.

How to read this book

My advice? Read the whole book through first. It's a quick and easy read. Then, when your next presentation is approaching, allow yourself plenty of time to download the presentation canvas and structure template from our website www.thepickeringgroup.com/stepintothespotlight

Open this book at Chapter Four and follow the Quick Tips summarised in the yellow box at the end of each chapter. You can delve into each chapter for more detailed advice and examples, should you need them. Why not commit right now to doing this for your next presentation? You'll be amazed at the result. Do it often enough, and the process will become second nature. At that point, you won't need this book so pass it onto somebody who does. Or better yet, buy them their own copy!

Let's begin

I have one last piece of advice before we continue. Great presenting is not about you or your ego. It is selfless and an act of service. At its simplest, it's about respect – for an idea *and* an audience. You are merely the intermediary that connects them. Hold onto that idea of being of service. It will release you from anxiety and give you the freedom to explore.

So, draw on your courage and let's find your spotlight.