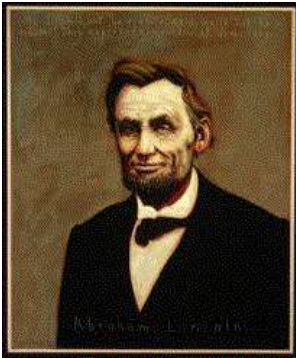




Leadership: The Power of Extemporaneous Speaking

By Gene Griessman, Ph.D.



Abraham Lincoln wrote: "Extemporaneous speaking should be practiced and cultivated; it is the lawyer's avenue to the public. However able and faithful he may be in other respects, people are slow to bring him business, if he cannot make a speech."

When Lincoln spoke of extemporaneous speaking, he did not mean making totally unprepared speeches--"winging it" we might call it today. Few speakers can trust the moment or raw talent for a good speech. Very, very few.

Years ago I knew a woman who had a brief career as a keynote speaker. Several times she boasted to me that she never gave a prepared speech. She told me the audience deserved something new every time. She liked to believe that it was a good thing that her every utterance was something new, something never heard before, never thought of before. It occurred to me that she herself may never have thought of some of the things that she said. Many of her thoughts were new to her, too.

For a while she was in demand because she was a high-energy speaker, witty and intelligent, and well informed about corporate life.

But she relied entirely on her wits, and the moment. Clients never knew what kind of speech they would get. Sometimes her presentation would be brilliant. Other times embarrassing.

Today she is out of the speaking business.

I know another speaker who took a different path. He is witty and intelligent and well informed too, but he prepares carefully every time--even when he makes an announcement at a local meeting or introduces a relatively unknown guest speaker.

"You never know who's forming an opinion of you," he once told me. "I never have been able to understand how a professional speaker could even think about getting up to speak without preparing." Neither can I. Not surprisingly, this speaker is in demand year after year.

In case you'd like to acquire the reputation for giving great extemporaneous speeches, here's a checklist of what to do if you are called upon to make a short presentation. (A keynote presentation has additional rules, but adheres follows these basic principles, too.)

One. Know what your opening sentence will be. If this opening sentence can be witty and short and safe, good. If not witty, then short and safe. By "safe," I mean something that you know will work, not something that might ricochet.

Two. Create a script, if not on paper at least in your head. Know the main points that you need to cover—when, where, and why if an announcement. If an introduction, who the speaker is, what are his/her credentials, and why his/her message is worth hearing. If you are called upon to acknowledge or recognize a number of people, for god's sake, prepare a list in advance. You will almost certainly omit someone important if you don't.

Three. Know how you will conclude. When you are getting up to speak, have in mind how you will end. For the short presentation, the close generally is more important than the beginning. Don't just trail off or abandon control with Q & A. If you do Q & A, keep back something strong for your conclusion-- a thought-out sentence or quote or a very short and apt story to illustrate your point.

Lincoln knew and observed those rules. We know because some of his notes that he used in the courtroom have been preserved. Lincoln would prepare a rough script--how he would open, the illustrations he would use, the points he would make, and how he would conclude.

Moreover, Lincoln spent a lifetime acquiring material that he could plug into his speeches--ready-made modules to fit the moment. He memorized poems and Bible passages. He immersed himself in newspapers and books and written sermons. He knew thousands of jokes and humorous stories and even carried a joke book with him so that he could adapt traditional stories to local situations.

Lincoln spent a lot of time preparing for his extemporaneous presentations.

It's a mistake to sound too slick, too smooth, too over-rehearsed; but it's a greater mistake to sound unprepared, inept, and unprofessional. Let all speakers who 'wing it' prepare for painful crashes. There are more winds that hurt speeches than help them.

About the author:

Gene Griessman is a professional speaker, executive coach, and author of *The Words Lincoln Lived By* and co-author of *Lincoln Speaks To Leaders: 20 Powerful Lessons From America's 16th President*, with Pat Williams and Peggy Matthews Rose. Griessman's website is <http://www.presidentlincoln.com>.

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