

A Good Speech

Writing for CEOs

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What is a good speech? A good speech moves an audience where a speaker wants it to go. Style is not important nor the length nor the parts of the speech, but results are. There are many kinds of speeches and many speakers, some articulate and some barely able to deliver coherent sentences. Both can deliver a good speech, as long as they focus on its purpose and strive to achieve the purpose in the minds and hearts of an audience.

One of the more effective speeches I can recall was delivered decades ago at a high school graduation. In my fading memory, the speaker was one of the wealthiest of cattlemen in South Sacramento County, California, a man who owned square miles of land on which he ran beef. This fellow came to the podium after speeches from a number of educators, politicians and the valedictorian. His remarks were along this line: *There have been plenty of speeches already. It's time to hand out diplomas.* And, that's what he did to the relief of those of us who had heard too much rhetoric already about the potential of the graduating class.

As Aristotle wrote in 350 BC,

Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion. (Book 1, Part 2).

The cattleman persuaded me that his point of view was correct as he started to call names. He understood Aristotle's idea.

How one persuades is at the core of good speeches. Aristotle was partial to a logical approach – a dialectic. He scorned sophists who believed emotional appeals were all that mattered. *The arousing of prejudice, pity, anger, and similar emotions has nothing to do with the essential facts, but is merely a personal appeal to the man who is judging the case.* (Book 1, Part 1) Aristotle would be uncomfortable with much of what passes for speaking today, as would Plato and Cicero who held the same views. To them, speaking had a moral component, a search for truth, that offsets showmanship.

They would recognize and be uncomfortable with orators who are good entertainers, but not necessarily effective speakers. The measure of a good speech is its effect on individuals comprising an audience. That is certainly true for CEOs who almost always speak for a purpose.

Harvard professor Edward T. Channing, Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory from 1819 to 1851, summed rhetoric in this way:

...a body of rules derived from experience and observation, extending to all communication by language and designed to make it efficient.

Good speeches, in other words, are efficient communications. They achieve an end with a minimum of wasted energy. Few speeches should be entertaining for the sole purpose of amusing an audience. Some are long because an audience needs to be brought step-by-step to the point of persuasion. Some are short because an audience is persuaded but needs motivation. Some are emotional like memorials, to raise the identification of an audience with a person or event. Most are a mix of logic and emotion to carry an audience with the speaker. A key skill of a speaker lies in knowing where the sentiment of individuals in an audience is at any given moment.

Content is what a speechwriter is usually concerned with when writing. But content does not exist by itself. Content exists in a relationship between audience and speaker. A hostile audience and a poor speaker are a disastrous pairing, no matter the value of content nor written expression of it. It follows then that the two most important tasks of the speechwriter, even more than creating content to be delivered, is to understand the audience and speaker.

A speechwriter should seek answers to a number of questions about the audience. *Who are these people? What do they think, if anything, about the topic to be discussed? What are their backgrounds and cultures? Why are they listening to this speech? How does one reach them effectively?* Sadly, it is often difficult, even in an internet age to get satisfactory answers, so one writes a generic speech for a generic audience. And, it sounds like it. A disciplined speechwriter interviews members of the future audience, observes earlier speeches given to the audience, listens to individuals' comments and more. When a speechwriter knows an audience, the type of speech and preparation suggest themselves.

CEO speakers run the gamut from excellent to awful. Some are comfortable in front of a crowd and others shrink in fear at the thought of standing alone in front of a sea of eyes staring at them. Some believe themselves to be good speakers when they aren't and poor speakers when they are effective. Some know what they want to say and some don't.

I recall one CEO who fancied himself a philosopher and speaker and who did not have the gift of knowing when to sit down. He was notorious for delivering lengthy speeches that were filled with references to various thinkers to prove tedious points late at night after long dinners to tired executives. Then, he wanted the speeches published somewhere. (We were never successful at this.) Another CEO was terrified for much of his career to speak in front of audiences

but was, by all accounts, compelling in one-on-one encounters. He was best at being himself and carrying on a conversation.

A CEO's conviction is as important as words the CEO articulates. An audience doesn't just listen but looks at the whole person and what that person communicates through expression, body movement and confidence – or lack of it. That is why it is important to place words in a CEO's mouth that a CEO is likely to say in a way the CEO expresses ideas. There is no cognitive dissonance for the CEO and none for the audience that observes the CEO. This, however, can lead to a condition of saying the same things repeatedly. There are CEOs who use phrases like Buddhist mantras. They say the same statements so often that one gets bored writing them and wonders whether audiences are bored hearing them. However, leaders, like parents, know humans don't hear things the first time or even the third or fourth or fifth time. One has to say the same things over and over until individuals pattern behavior after it. Variability is interesting, but it confuses audiences. CEOs know that even small changes in the way they present concepts can lead to major and unintended shifts on the part of confused employees. (Murphy's Law applies to speaking as it does to just about everything else.) While an audience dictates how one delivers a speech, a speaker sets parameters of what one can and should say to ensure an effective speech.

One can media train CEOs to help their delivery. It assists some in getting over nerves. It improves the mechanics of others, but the make-up of some CEOs resists anything related to effectiveness. With these CEOs, one wishes for adequacy, not mastery. Still, it is better to work with CEOs who know they are bad speakers when they are willing to work on delivery. They are open-minded and less caught up in themselves and their work.

A speechwriter learns a CEO intimately and studies a CEO's delivery and mannerisms. Are there words and concepts the CEO dislikes? Are there sounds the CEO cannot pronounce well? (The current President Bush is vocally challenged by his West Texas accent and often ridiculed.) A speechwriter writes for positive aspects of a person's speaking style and around elements likely to create problems.

Fantasies of developing ringing mnemonic phrases that crystallize a CEO's thoughts may be just that. Some CEOs have no gift for delivering mnemonic phrases and their plodding delivery all but ruins intent and effect. If a CEO is comfortable with a pedestrian style, that is what a speechwriter should provide – as long as the CEO keeps the audience in tow. Such speeches might not look good in a portfolio, but the key is whether they were effective.

In my own speechwriting, I follow one rule. Keep it short. Expose an idea, defend it and motivate the audience quickly, then get off the stage. However, this rule has limits. For CEOs who can indeed charm audiences, asking them to

leave the stage quickly is a disservice to the CEOs and their audiences. Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan had an orator's gift, and they often wrote their own speeches because they knew what worked for them. So too did Cicero, one of the greatest orators of ancient times. (The idea that a speaker has a writer to assist him would have horrified Cicero.)

Few CEOs are gifted writers and fewer still have time to pen speeches. Warren Buffet of Berkshire Hathaway Inc. is one of the most widely quoted of CEOs for his blunt but humorous style. More, however, are like a CEO I once served. He fancied himself a writer, but he couldn't get past commas and semicolons to the intent of the text. He would agonize over words and sentence parts to the distraction of his staff and those trying to get a project done. The majority of CEOs, however, are likely to take what is given to them, make a few tweaks and deliver the speech without thinking much about it. To use a management term, they *satisfice*. They have better things to do than discuss subtleties of communications with a speechwriter. It is up to the speechwriter to take care of fine points before a CEO ever sees a speech.

The importance of a speech dictates preparation. Not all speeches are equal. A CEO might need to give a ceremonial talk to a group of employees who have just reached five years service then deliver a justification for a business strategy to directors and shareholders. While one speech can be impromptu, jocular and homey, the other had better be buttressed with evidence. A speechwriter may supply material for both speeches. In the former case, the speechwriter might list a few bullet points on an index card for the CEO. In the latter case, the speechwriter might work for days with the CFO, the strategic planner and others to fine-tune a document. For a busy speechwriter, it is a question of time management, especially if the writer is serving more executives than the CEO.

How does a CEO, or speechwriter, know if a speech has hit its mark? Surprisingly, this is not easy. Most of the time one has to listen to the audience surreptitiously to gauge how a speech has been received. Asking an audience to fill out surveys is practical only in a few cases. More than likely, one won't know whether a speech has been well received until days later. Early opinions are often kind but not truthful. Realistic assessments filter in. In ancient times, the result of a speech was a vote for or against the speaker or his proposal. Feedback was instantaneous. Today, a speech is one communication among others: It rarely decides the fate of anything. It is part of a larger act of persuasion. One looks for feedback that indicates a positive regard for what a CEO had to say, if not a change in behavior. Positive regard is a first step in changing behavior.

There are rules for how to structure a good speech, but rules bend to an audience because an audience and the final state of mind of its individuals are what one is attempting to influence. A CEO can speak daringly to some audiences but not to others. A CEO can be informal with some individuals but

must be conservative with others. There is a time for ringing phrases, a time for blunt language, a time for humor and a time for audience interaction.

There are guidelines one should consider when writing a speech. The first is to talk to an audience's level. For an audience that understands a topic well, starting *in media res* is OK. For an audience that doesn't understand an issue, the old rule of "Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them," is effective. For all audiences, showing is better than telling because eyes have primacy over ears, but numerous and tedious PowerPoint slides are tiring and defeat the purpose of what one is trying to do.

Showing can be telling when one writes for the ear and paints a picture of what one is trying to say. However, this can be deadly if a speaker does not have the skill or energy to deliver such a speech well. Studying ancient rhetoric is useful in learning options one has in presenting and illustrating ideas, but using rhetorical principles without judgment is dangerous. As Aristotle said, one must have the "*faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion.*" The speechwriter who is unable to do that is of little value to a CEO.

Good speeches are never written in vacuums. They fit a place, time, a speaker and audience. Few speeches or speakers ever rise above audiences they persuade at a given moment in time. Speechwriting, therefore, is mostly a practical craft and not one of poetry or expression. Only a few speakers are remembered from any generation for their ability to rise above place and time and to speak across them both. Rarely are CEOs ever called upon to do that.

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