



You're Speaking But Are You Connecting?

from Chapter 14 - Delivery problems with five pounds of ugly fat

- **Connect by asking them for help**
- **Even a heckler can help you connect**
- **Stay calm to connect**
- **Turning lemons into lemonade to connect**
- **Provide leadership**
- **Empathize to connect**
- **Summary**

Someone in the audience disagrees openly with you, you can't quite recall the correct name for something but you know every expert in your audience will, your sound system explodes just as you begin a major speech, or you respond to an audience question and then can't recall where you were in your speech. These are but a few of the bad moments speakers tell about. And it is in these bad moments where we often get our best opportunities to connect with an audience and win both their attention and their willingness to do what we ask.

I learned this lesson when I fell through a stage while delivering a major address on the topic of body language. My audience were all travel agents; we'd all traveled to Barbados for their annual meeting and they'd begun the evening before with a wild party. I was scheduled to keynote the first afternoon. The morning speaker, Jeff, talked for four hours although he was scheduled to speak for only three. He'd given them a break about ten a.m., but otherwise his audience were in their seats for the entire time. And they were cold. The audience shivered in shorts and tee-shirts because someone had maximized the air conditioning. Jeff finished just after twelve noon, but two suppliers who had sponsored the morning had been promised an opportunity to speak too. So, although it was lunchtime, and although everyone could smell the food awaiting them outside the meeting room, ninety very cold travel agents huddled politely through another half-hour of speeches.

Finally they got lunch and a welcome chance to warm up in the sun but were told to be in my session thirty minutes later because we were now behind schedule. They weren't in a pleasant mood. Furthermore, someone had complained of being cold, so during lunch the air conditioning was turned off and now the room was hot and humid. I began my speech with an audience that was hot, tired, stuffed with food they'd consumed too rapidly, and simply uncooperative. I felt sure of my opening, yet it didn't move them a bit. I knew I was dying up there in front of a critical audience, but I swear I didn't wish for the earth to open and swallow me up.

About fifteen minutes into the speech, still with very poor audience response and no sense of connecting with them, I fell through the stage. Not entirely through the stage and out of sight. That would have been preferable. No, I just put the heel of my shoe through what I'd thought was a solid piece of wood. Burlap had been used to cover two risers comprising the stage, and right there in the middle of the stage was a hidden cleft and I hit it. I knew I was now connected to the stage if not my audience. They had no idea what was going on.

I was wearing high heels and a bright yellow suit, telling my audience how they could use movement to enhance their presentations, and here I was, effectively nailed to the stage. I scrunched my toes in my shoe in an effort to leverage the heel from the stage, but it didn't budge. I tried lifting my heel from the shoe and dragging my foot forward, but the burlap prevented lateral movement along the cleft. Nothing worked.

I knew I should try to make a joke about the situation, but your mind plays terrible tricks on you when you're faced with a crisis. The only joke that came to my mind was the Mommy-Mommy type. You might remember these jokes from your own childhood. They were gross tales told by pre-adolescents in an effort to disgust adults. I could hardly use that sort of material with a business audience, could I?

In desperation I excused myself, removed my shoe, bent over, and wrenched my pump from the cleft in the stage, and for the first time got a visibly positive response from my audience. I had no idea they'd enjoy my predicament, but clearly they did. I told them what had happened and they practically howled. I was standing on stage in only one high heel and moving as if I had a major limp, and they were loving it.

My instinct told me they'd laugh at anything about now, so I told them that pre-adolescent joke, "Mommy-Mommy, I'm tired of going in circles. Shut-up dear, or I'll nail your other foot to the floor." They roared. Since the speech was already interrupted, I asked if someone could turn on a small amount of air conditioning so I wouldn't have to remove my clothes as well as my shoes. That too got an appreciative cheer. After that their response to my speech was positive and at times greatly exceeded my expectations.

My worst moment had given me the opportunity to connect with a very difficult audience. As I worked with them in smaller groups over the next few days and enjoyed them, I realized how fortunate the shoe incident was. It had connected us in the way any disaster unites the survivors.

As a speaker you will have some bad moments; in fact, the more you speak, the more you'll have. These bad moments will also become some of your most treasured speaking memories as you turn your calamities into connections. In addition to the stage incident I mentioned, I've forgotten a key word at a critical moment, had an overhead projector catch on fire as I spoke, and discovered a naked child parading behind me as I presented. Perhaps the most distressing disasters are when someone in your audience says or implies they don't respect you. In all these situations, asking your audience for help is the best way to deal with the crisis.

Connect by asking them for help

When you forget the term or word for something, simply ask the audience for help. I've done this countless times and am amazed by how helpful an audience can be. The experts in the audience get

a chance to display their talents, I get a chance to interact with them, and I prove conclusively that I'm as fallible as they are. I've asked audiences afterwards if they minded helping me with my speech, and they universally claim to not mind at all. So, if your worst disaster or worst fear is forgetfulness, let it go. Simply involve your audience in the remedy.

I was speaking at a law firm when the overhead projector began to sizzle and smoke. I always take along my own projector, but they insisted I use theirs as it was brand new and they wanted to see it used effectively. I was delighted to experiment with it because, while most overhead projectors are simple, this one had many exciting technical features.

As you probably know, many new electronic devices emit some smell when they are first being used, but this projector really was making a stench. Finally I commented on it to my audience, who had seemed a little distracted during the opening of my session. They admitted they too were concerned about the blue smoke seeping from their side of the overhead. I hit the power switch just as the first bright flame escaped from the machine. Seconds later we had it unplugged and, with much laughter and joking, retired the sizzling projector onto an adjoining concrete patio, replacing it with my trusty old low-tech portable overhead. Again, we were united by our near disaster, and when I forgot a participant's name during the session, I blamed it on smoke inhalation. Months later when I returned to the law firm a new group of seminar participants asked if I'd be performing my famous pyrotechnics.

The naked child is a far less likely disaster but certainly shows that the more speaking you do, the more opportunities you'll have for truly weird problems. I was speaking at a convention in Florida when I suddenly became aware that my audience wasn't paying attention to me. Their eyes were all focused forward as if they were seeing me, but I got the strange feeling I'd become invisible. Then there were the muffled giggles, nudging, and whispers. Finally I paused and glanced behind me; then I turned from my audience and stared. The drapes at the back of the stage, closed in every other session I'd attended, had been pulled open. Revealed was a glass partition which separated the ballroom from the narrow walkway to the pool. I don't know how many people had walked behind me as I spoke, but the cause of the laughter and whispering was a delightful little girl, perhaps two or three years old, stark naked except for her bathing suit dangling from one hand. She was obviously waiting, none too patiently, for her mother, who, seeing an entire auditorium enjoying her daughter's performance, raised her hands shoulder high in the universal signal for, "I give up!" and marched the child off her impromptu stage. An equally embarrassed hotel employee drew the drapes, and I had my audience back.

This incident presented a dilemma. I could ignore the problem and return to my planned speech, or I could enjoy the moment with my audience and the connection that child had created for us. I was caught between the two, not quite sure how to proceed. Then a fellow in the front row gave me my line, "If you'd known nudity would be so successful with this audience, I bet you'd have tried it yourself." He said it really loudly, got a great laugh, and all I had to do was pretend to take off my

jacket and then thank him. Another disaster was diverted thanks to the quick response by a clever participant, after which the audience quickly warmed to my presentation.

These examples have become useful stories and fond memories for me. I recall less fondly those few times when someone has declared or indicated, in front of my entire audience, a lack of respect for me or my material. These unpleasant situations can still provide an opportunity to connect with your audience. A couple of examples will help you if you ever face a similar situation.

Even a heckler can help you connect

I was speaking to about twenty members of the Dental Surgeons Speaker's Bureau. I'd worked with most of them before, and I already felt a comfortable rapport with them. I opened my session with a couple of anecdotes about outrunning bears. I'm sure everyone knew they were fictional, but they seemed to enjoy them. Then I asked each participant to introduce himself (they were all male) and tell us what topic he most frequently addressed as part of the speaker's bureau. The first speaker told us he was an endodontist and chiefly spoke about the role of diet in dental health, the next had a pediatric dental practice and liked to speak to expectant and new mothers about their opportunities to influence their children's dental health, and so it went.

About six speakers into the exercise, a gentleman I hadn't met before introduced himself, paused, and said, "I don't find either of your opening stories appropriate." He sat down to thunderous silence. The audience awaited my response. I felt brain dead. I knew this was a critical moment in the seminar, but I hadn't a clue how to handle the situation. This was quite early in my speaking career, and I was certain it would be my last professional speech. Then I heard myself thank the speaker for his opinion and call on the next participant. The seminar went on with the other participants rising to the occasion, each saying something more amusing than the last. They were rallying to support me.

There is a saying I remember from first aid training that, roughly goes, "...at least do no harm." It's a good rule for speakers faced with an awkward moment because there is potential to do harm. If I'd invited discussion with this prickly personality, I'd likely have heard more damaging information. Had he become more outspoken, I might have slipped to his level of behaviour and would certainly have felt worse about myself. If I'd argued with him or ridiculed his lack of social skills, there is a chance the audience would have rallied behind him. The secret to connecting when one person attacks is to keep the rest of the audience on your side.

Following that seminar, no less than six of the twenty participants came to me separately to tell me how much they appreciated my response. Apparently this dentist was well known for his outspoken comments, and some of them had felt the sting of his comments during previous association meetings and other speaker's bureau events. As further proof that my problem was successfully handled, the group invited me back to speak and asked me to give advice on how to handle difficult audience members.

Stay calm to connect

Another memorable challenge occurred when I was teaching a two-day presentation skills course for administrative staff at a university. I had phoned each participant before the course, so I knew that half of the participants were working primarily as teaching assistants (T.A.'s) and were volunteer facilitators for an on-campus program designed to assist new T.A.'s in the art of instructional facilitation. Most participants wanted to be better presenters, but two were self-described experts looking to see if someone from outside the university (me) had anything new to offer. Although skilled and experienced, they also both assured me they wanted to learn from my session and would contribute their own expertise in any way they could.

The first day of the course was enjoyable. My two experts, although very good friends, sat across the room from each other and made positive contributions. Early on during the second day, each participant was asked to make a short presentation as part of a session on vocal improvement. They were to express strong emotion, so I recommended they tell us about something that made them annoyed, frustrated, angry, or perhaps even joyful. One of my experts volunteered to go first. She rose, looked at me, and using exceptional vocal variety said, "I hate it when people assume I'm heterosexual." As with the dentist I mentioned in my last example, this brief comment was a show-stopper. There was dead silence and I knew I was being tested.

What went through my mind was all sorts of self-recriminations. What had I done to create this situation? Was I guilty as charged? Was she really talking about me or had something else happened in the room, something I wasn't aware of? I'm not inclined to pay attention to a participant's sexual preference, but being heterosexual I could certainly have unwittingly made some comment that made her uncomfortable. And, on this particular university campus, there was certainly a group of women who wanted the rest of us sensitized to the topic.

Guilt was decidedly fogging my brain, and so I was once again surprised to hear myself say, "Excellent vocal variety. Next —" and see myself indicating the next participant. I have no idea what the next few participants said, but somehow we got through that tough moment. At the next break I was approached by two participants who apologized for their co-worker's behaviour and thanked me for the way I handled it. I never did feel a strong connection with the T.A. who challenged me, but the rest of the group rallied to my support and gave me strong reviews afterwards.

This incident reminded me of a couple of key points: no matter how long you have been a speaker or presenter, you will still face challenges, and those challenges will give you an opportunity to connect or bond with your audience. There isn't a right answer or correct response to this kind of situation, but you owe it to your audience to behave with dignity and take the leadership role. If you lead, they will follow and follow gratefully because you've provided a simple effective pathway for them.

Turning lemons into lemonade to connect

I've given you some examples from my own experience, but I've also seen how other speakers have broken through the barriers with an audience and truly connected when something went wrong. With close to a thousand in his audience, a keynote speaker was interrupted when his sound system exploded. The hotel crew worked as rapidly as possible to replace the unit, but the speaker was left for nearly twenty minutes without amplification. With nothing but body language to work with, he gave the performance of a lifetime. He demonstrated, he had us demonstrate, he got people at the front to run to the back relaying his message, he had us laughing, clapping, and cheering. He finished his ninety-minute session to a standing ovation and the admiration of that enormous audience. He could have been forgiven for abandoning the speech, but he chose instead to turn the problem into an opportunity.

Provide leadership

I've heard speakers worry that they might die as they give a speech, but another professional speaker tells of actually having a man die during his speech. This speaker took control, had someone call 911, and united the audience in silent prayer while the elderly gentleman received first aid and was removed from the room. Although the group wasn't there because of religious affiliation, after the man was taken from the room they continued to pray together. Someone who knew the man then said a few words about him and assured the group that his friend would want them to continue their program. True, the atmosphere was subdued, but a bond developed in that group because they'd weathered this event together. When bad things happen, they tend to forge a natural connection, and as speakers, we have only to provide appropriate leadership.

Sometimes something bad happens beyond the scope of the assembly, but it affects your audience and so it affects you as a speaker. I was in Palm Springs, California, when Congressman Sonny Bono died in a ski accident. At a luncheon meeting the next day, there was pall over the group. Several speakers mentioned the death but did nothing to raise our spirits. Then Paul Sickler spoke up and said he felt particularly badly about Bono's death because he had published an article the previous week in which he criticized an aspect of Bono's congressional record. He said he'd known Sonny for many years and admired him greatly, so he regretted the critical piece he'd last written. Paul then went on to say that this situation reminded him of how we never know how long we have with anyone and how important it is to let others know they are respected, loved, and appreciated. Paul did two things for me in the way he spoke about the tragedy: he lifted my spirits by giving the event some useful meaning, and he made me want to walk over and introduce myself. He connected where other speakers did not because he showed leadership in handling the events of the day.

Empathize to connect

Another problem turned into an opportunity for me when I was to address an early morning program for the cashiers of a retail chain. These were all fairly young women from small towns and cities, many from rural areas. They were unsophisticated and somewhat shy, yet excited about the

opportunity to spend time in a large city. Each cashier there had been chosen by her peers to represent them at this program, and they considered it both an honour and a responsibility to attend every event. I'd spoken at this program before and knew how seriously they regarded it.

I arrived a little later than I'd have liked and took a few minutes to check out the room where I'd be speaking before joining the group for breakfast. By the time I got to the breakfast, they were all standing around their tables, many with their heads bowed or eyes cast down as a distinguished looking older gentleman spoke at the microphone. I didn't immediately hear what he was saying, but as the president of this retail chain is known to have a strong Christian affiliation, I assumed he was offering a blessing.

But the blessing went on and on, and although I stayed just outside the meeting room, I noticed one of the few men in the room beckoning me to join them at his table. I wouldn't normally walk into a room during an invocation, so I hesitated and gave my attention to the speaker. His head reverently bowed over his notes, I heard him say, "...and for your lighter days, ladies, we have...." It took me a few seconds to realize the speaker represented a supplier of what is delicately referred to as feminine hygiene products. The sign behind his head proclaimed his company as the breakfast sponsor, and he had not-so-delicately chosen this opportunity to advertise its products to these captive young women.

By the time I crossed the room, I'd become aware of the embarrassed expressions on the women's faces and the equally uncomfortable expressions on the faces of the male managers serving as hosts at each table. These were not people accustomed to discussing feminine hygiene concerns publicly over coffee and eggs. Suppressed giggles, chortles of laughter, and finally generalized mirth broke out before the speaker had the good sense to stop talking. The folks at my table then told me the rest of the story. Mr. Hygiene, as they had now nicknamed him, had apparently arrived with a huge box full of samples, and as each woman arrived he had attempted to provide a sample. Many had declined his offer, so he'd also circulated the room and offered the samples again once the women were seated. Laughter was the only appropriate response.

I left the breakfast before my audience did in order to make a final check of my room, so I missed the next chapter in their misery. With samples still remaining, he tried to give delegates another package as they left the breakfast room, and then moved his box to the door of my room for one last attempt. By the time they got to my meeting space, they hardly knew which way to look. Some were enjoying the humour, but a great many were embarrassed and humiliated. They were in no mood for my speech, and I knew I had to do something to help them get past the breakfast assault.

Humour, the topic of my next chapter, is definitely a powerful tool in such situations, but as I began speaking, I couldn't think of anything amusing to say without being rude to Mr. Hygiene, who was, after all, just doing his job. I opened to a reserved reception and quite rapidly moved into a preview of my keynote and a section I call housekeeping items. I told them when their next break would

occur, invited questions anytime, explained the use of the notebook, and then said, “...and in my session, I think you will be relieved to know, there will be no free samples.” A standing ovation is a great compliment from any audience, but when they rose from their seats cheering and clapping, I knew I’d connected and in so doing had provided the leadership necessary to get us past something negative that had happened beyond the scope of my presentation.

Summary: Use bad moments to connect

- Welcome the gifts of the moment — they’re often more valuable than anything you could have planned.
- Let your audience help you — they’ll love the opportunity to contribute.
- Humour is powerful — laugh at yourself, or at the moment if you can.
- Don’t pick on anyone — it’s the quickest way to lose audience support.
- Don’t criticize or condemn anyone else’s behaviour.
- Provide leadership — lead your audience to higher ground.

