

# ***The Good, the Bad and the Mediocre***

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## **I would like to pose a question which has been bugging me for some time now.**

Why is it that so many people go on presentation courses but still end up not being able to present well? Because they don't have the experience? Ah, but then why are there so many experienced presenters who don't present well? Or let me rephrase that - Why are there so many experienced presenters around who think they present well but when push comes to shove, they just don't enthuse, there is no spark, nothing special. Not so easy to answer huh? Well let's face it, there are some boring subjects around and you can't expect everybody to be interested in what is being said. There again, think about how you feel when you are listening to a boring presentation. You start out wanting to listen and then you just start feeling 'uninterested'. Why? Maybe it's in the training. Maybe the delegates are not being challenged enough. It might be because most people like to be given little packets of information. 'Little packets' that if they follow them to the letter, will make them 'good presenters'. Of course it may also be because some trainers like to give set courses. Courses which follow set patterns, because those patterns not only give the trainer security but also the trainee. Nice safe and secure courses. This means that some delegates end up on an inappropriate course, although they wouldn't necessarily know it. So what do you end up with? Mediocre presentations given by mediocre presenters.

Am I being fair? No, probably not. There are quite a few good trainers and quite a few good presenters around. Many of those presenters are 'naturals', they just have a flair for it, a gift, they are at one with presenting. So if they can do it, why can't everyone else. Why are they naturals? How do they do it? Or maybe, more importantly, what do they do? This may seem a simple question but is it? If it were so simple why aren't we overrun with 'natural' presenters. Probably because 'being natural' is not as easy as it looks and, in a way, that's why it looks so good.

What are natural presenters doing? Being natural, being themselves. Now that is interesting, they are being themselves. They are using a part of their personality, the natural, engaging part, to pass on the information within their presentation. So what is everyone else doing? To answer this question, I think we have to take a quick look at the society we live and work in.

Our society is fast moving. It is a society in which change is becoming increasingly important. More and more we are finding that our job security is becoming more and more fragile. For some people, responsibilities which they took for granted have been taken away, for others, responsibilities which they never thought they would have are being thrust upon them. This is an exciting time for some but for others it is a frightening one.

So what? Isn't this all part of life's rich pageant? Well, whether you are excited or frightened, or even somewhere in the middle, it puts pressure on you and when someone is under pressure they resort to standard procedures to get them by. Let's look at this another way. Why do we work? For money. And what does money give us? Food, clothes, a home, a car, a holiday, a decent stereo.... all these things (for those that earn enough), but what do they *signify*? Security. We like to feel secure. So, therefore we work for our security. So if we have a nice job and that gives us enough money for a nice home, a nice car and all the other nice things, then we feel secure, and when we feel secure our egos are more satisfied, we feel content. Then change rears its ugly head and all this security, fine as long as the equilibrium was maintained, is suddenly disrupted. The equilibrium is upset and our security threatened. What sort of things upset the equilibrium? Things like **presentations**.

Most people can present, if they are forced to, but do they really want to present, and how do they get round the fact that they don't really want to present, when they are effectively forced to? What do they do? They hide. What do I mean by this? Well, I don't mean they go and find a quiet corner somewhere and pull the covers over, but I do mean that they hide part of their personality. If they have to go up there and make a fool of themselves then they are not going to show the real "me" when they do it. They hide by putting on their "presentation hat". They talk differently, they walk differently, they use different gestures. They just look plain different.

So what can they do about it? Go on another course? It depends on the course. If it's just a rehash of what they have gone through before there will be very little for them to gain by going on one. To put it another way, will it be cost effective? Will the course increase and refine their skills as well as just consolidating them?

This then begs the question "what should someone get out of a presentation course?" Generally they should get what they need or require, as opposed to what some courses want to give them. What I mean by this is that we must not forget that trainers have to make a living and "Giving people what they want" (or even "need"), is not always cost effective to a training provider. Remember, on a lot of courses (both in-house and open) there will be delegates of differing levels of ability and not all delegates are aware what they need to achieve or are capable of achieving. This means each delegate on a course may need to get something different from it. How do the trainers deal with this problem? Well, some of them don't. This, in effect, passes the problem back to the delegates.

The one thing which, from my experience, has been common to all delegates, yet by its own nature is different in each, is that nearly all needed to 'be themselves'. And this is where we come back to the crux of this article. They need to dispense with their "presentation hat" and show the audience their real personality - it is invariably more interesting than what they usually show.

How can someone dispense with their "presentation hat"? The problem is that this attitude is directly connected to our need for security and to keep our egos intact. What is this attitude? It is linked to competition and the type of pressure which makes us fear failure. Let's face it, most of us like to have a go at things but few people are prepared to take risks which will possibly end in failure, even when they are rehearsing a presentation (those that do). This creates a massive barrier to learning.

**Exaggeration** - "I always get that bit wrong!"

**Preconception** - "I don't think they will like me."

**Avoidance** - "I should be in different job." or "I should delegate this presentation to....."

**Unrealistic** - "I must make this one the best anyone's ever seen."

**Absolutes** - "I am awful/brilliant at presentation."

The first hurdle in beating this problem is to recognise this dialogue and its negative effect on your confidence. The next is to challenge the content - are you really that bad? Did it really go wrong? Did the audience notice? If we did but know it, most audiences don't notice those glaring mistakes which we see ourselves making. The thing to remember is that although you know what can go wrong, the audience, usually, have few preconceptions about your presentation abilities and no knowledge whatsoever of how your presentation runs. The next area to address is the content of the presentation. You know what it says but are you fully clear on what it is about. Are you clear on your objective? The objective behind a presentation is probably the most important area, at whatever level of expertise. If you don't clearly know why you are telling this audience this information, then they won't be clear why they should listen. This may all sound obvious but it is surprising how many people don't take much notice of this area.

So, you have sorted out your negative thinking and you are clear on your objective, what happens next. Earlier I mentioned how some presenters become different. How they talk, walk and speak differently. If they have been presenting this way for any period of time, all those fears centred on our need for security will have manifested themselves in the way we walk, talk and speak. Gestures become small and inhibited, the voice loses colour and inflection, some presenters won't move from one spot from beginning to end of their presentation. Why? Tension. All this fear transfers itself from the mind to the muscles, locking up the movement, including the voice (don't forget, the voice is controlled by muscles and is affected by tension just like any other part of the body). So how do we get rid of this tension? How do you get rid of any tension? Relaxation! Does this mean you have to lie down to give a presentation. No. There is a much simpler method and it is all centred around the breath. Breathing is probably the most underrated method of relaxation known. You don't need any equipment, you don't need to use soothing music, you don't need to frequent massage parlours. All you need to do is some simple exercises and breathe. Every time you feel the panic rising, take a long, deep breath and exhale slowly and evenly. Every time you hear your mouth running away with your words, take a long, deep breath and exhale slowly and evenly. Every time you make a mistake during a presentation, take a long, deep breath and exhale slowly and evenly. Try it and see.

OK, so now you may be feeling a bit more comfortable up there, but what about all those habits? All those inhibited gestures are still hanging around, there's still a fair amount of tension in the body which won't go away. Will it ever go away - no, not completely, if we were always totally relaxed we'd just be a blob on the floor. What is needed is to feel relaxed when you present, to get rid of this "presentation persona" hanging around making you look "different". Maybe the first thing to explore is what it looks like, what effect it has on the audience.

Think of the feelings you have when you 'know' someone is being economical with the truth. When someone is stringing you along. Remember all those bad salesmen

who try to sell you something you don't want to buy. Truth. It all has something to do with truth. We have all lied at some point in our lives, small lies, big lies, white lies, and if we are found out they invariably make us look bad, less believable. And that is a very important point, the liar isn't quite believable. Of course, there are some people who can lie convincingly, but what is it they do which the others can't? Body language and Non-Verbal Communication (those ums and errs). Most people are unaware of just how much information they take in through other people's body language. Think how much easier it is to lie on the phone. When a person's body language is not making the same statement as their voice then there is a contradiction coming into play. This is called incongruent body language and, nine times out of ten, that is what happens when someone puts on their "presentation hat". They are not communicating the same information with their body as they are with their voice. Hence they are not 'being themselves'. They are not necessarily telling an untruth, they may be totally sincere about the content of their presentation, they just can't show that part of themselves which is really 'them', that engaging part of their personality.

How can you find a way of being that truthful? Well, read this article again! Because all the areas I have discussed affect the truth of a presentation. Of course there is one other thing you could do. Go on a course!