

Don't be 'PowerPoint-less'

That's the advice of Judith Humphrey '70 (MA), who counsels executives on how to bring authority, urgency, clarity—and even a bit of literature—to their speaking.

Interview by Karen McCally '02 (PhD)

One of my formative experiences happened at Rochester. I was writing a speech for a doctor at Strong Memorial Hospital. He had approached the English department to see if a graduate student could help him prepare an address he was to give for the opening of a school in Africa. I jumped at the chance. What a great opportunity to use my writing skills and earn a few hundred dollars! I advised him to have a message, develop it with key arguments—and apply the rules of Greek rhetoric. Somehow the speech came together, he loved it, and I found my passion. I have spent most of my career advising executives on how to speak.

I founded The Humphrey Group 24 years ago, with an actor, over lunch, on the back of a napkin. I was with Marshall Bell. I said to him, "If we could combine our skills—mine as a speechwriter and yours as a performer—we could create an amazing business." And we did. He was my first partner. Today, there are 27 of us—writers, actors, and others—and we have offices in Toronto and Vancouver.

I never would have guessed that studying Medieval literature would have produced great ideas for speeches. But during the time in the 1980s when the big banks were seeking repayment for their Third


World loans, I wrote a speech for a banking executive that began with the words from Chaucer's *Complaint to His Purse*: "I am sorry now that ye be so light . . . For which unto your mercy thus I cry,/ Be heavy again, or elles must I die!" Today's bankers could draw from the same poem.

People deliver far too much information without a point of view. Hence the overloaded, mind-numbing PowerPoint presentations we often see. True leaders have to inspire and create believers, whether they are making a point at a meeting or giving a speech. And they have to do so whether the audience is one or 1,000.

True charisma doesn't lie in a flashy style, but instead from having our hearts, minds, and body fully present and aligned. It comes from speaking with deep conviction, bringing our ideas to life through clear arguments and simple language, and being fully present physical—through voice, energy, pace, and gestures. When our

heart, mind, and body are *present* together in this way, we can inspire an audience. Great speakers—like Margaret Thatcher, Bill Clinton, or Martin Luther King—show these qualities. But so can everyday leaders like a doctor talking to a patient, a young person being interviewed for a job, or an executive making a speech.

I emphasize different things for men and women. For men, this means learning to listen more and use inclusive language. For women it means using stronger language and projecting more confidence in their voices and body language.

Speaking as a leader means being authentic and showing emotion. Courage, conviction, and empathy are always qualities for a leader to show. Conveying anger can be effective if it's expressed as deep concern. Emotions, properly channeled, play an important role in great speaking. They connect our audience to us. 

Judith Humphrey '70 (MA)

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