

Ascend

Where your work meets your life.

**Harvard
Business
Review**

Public Speaking

Your In-Person Presentation Skills Need a Refresh

by Deborah Grayson Riegel

July 19, 2023



HBR Staff; Nitat Termmee/enjoynz/Getty Images

Summary. As most workplaces and institutions shift to a hybrid model, many of us are getting back to presenting in rooms where the audience is physically present. If you've also started to make this shift, here are four in-person presentation skills that could probably use... [more](#)

Three years ago, the way we shared presentations at work (and school) drastically changed. Anyone used to presenting in person had to adapt, revise, and change their public speaking strategies. Whether you were a student sharing work with your class, a sales associate pitching to prospects, a consultant advising clients, or in any other field, you likely shifted your mindset and skills to make the most of presenting virtually.

This included learning where to look (at the camera? at the little black boxes? at the deck?), how to engage an audience that may or may not be paying attention, how to create a professional background that hid a pile of laundry, and how to be resilient when the technology wouldn't cooperate — again.

Now, as most workplaces and institutions shift to a hybrid model, many of us are getting back to presenting in rooms where the audience is physically present. I can personally speak to the difficulty of this transition. Having delivered most of my keynotes and workshops virtually over the past three years, I'm now standing on stages to deliver my messages to hundreds of people.

Even though I'm a professional speaker and speaking coach, I, too, have needed to relearn how to get up and share with live audiences after a period of speaking sitting down in my sweatpants and slippers. If you've also started to make this shift, here are four in-person presentation skills that could probably use some refreshing:

1) Look at your audience to form a personal connection.

For the past few years, we've been looking at small screens and faces in boxes (or even black boxes) in lieu of having face-to-face interactions. It can feel overwhelming and intimidating to go back to presenting in a room where eye contact is expected to be the norm.

Particularly in Western cultures, studies show that eye contact is a reliable way to connect with a live audience. It can increase comprehension, build trust and rapport, signal honesty, project authority and confidence, and encourage engagement.

Even so, making eye contact can be hard to do, particularly if you're feeling nervous or intimidated, if you're trying to read your slides or look at your notes, or if you were brought up in a culture that considers assertive eye contact to be rude. Furthermore, with neurodiverse professionals — for some of whom making eye contact can feel unnatural, challenging, and even antithetical to learning — forcing it can undermine efforts to take in and deliver meaningful information.

Where there are psychosocial or cultural barriers, one option is to make “eye-adjacent” contact, where you look at someone's mouth, nose, forehead, or a spot on the horizon just past their eyes. Another option is to be upfront and honest, letting your audience know that making direct eye contact is hard for you, and why — and that you're engaged with them nonetheless.

For those who feel comfortable and want to practice improving their eye contact, start small. Aim to make brief but meaningful connections by looking at different members of your audience. While eye contact that is too fleeting can make you seem nervous, eye contact that is too intense or held for a prolonged period can signal intimacy or combat—neither of which is desirable during a

business presentation. What does “brief” mean? Sustained for three to five seconds, without dodging back and forth between people, moving your head from side to side, or staring for so long that it becomes uncomfortable.

Remember, also, to be inclusive. Don’t just look at the key decision maker, or the boss, or your best friend. Try to look at everyone in a small group, and to make eye contact with different regions of the room (as in back left, front center, middle right) in a larger setting.

2) Prepare beforehand to avoid sounding scripted.

Presenting online has given us the leisure of having a deck or script right in front of our faces to remind us of what we’re talking about and what comes next. Presenting in person typically requires more preparation. We need to learn and retain the information we’re sharing because we won’t be able to refer to notes on the side of our screens.

While most people think of preparation as getting the deck right, effective preparation requires you to have spoken your presentation out loud in advance of the real event. Practice delivering the content orally at least three times before the actual presentation, so that you have “muscle memory” of the content. That way, the content won’t sound like it’s coming as a surprise to you (which it shouldn’t be).

Another way to boost your knowledge and preparedness is to make sure your slides have headlines instead of headers. This will help you remember the main takeaway of each slide as you're presenting. What's the difference? A header is a neutral umbrella term that describes the idea being presented on the slide whereas a headline offers the key takeaway of the slide.

For example, headers such as "Sales Report" or "Audience Engagement Update" require you to read through an entire slide to get to the point. In contrast, headlines such as "Third Quarter Sales Exceed Expectations" or "Audience Engagement Increased by 20% MoM" leave you free to tell the story of the slide, rather than reading through it like a script.

3) Use prompts and pauses to engage your audience.

You've likely experienced this scenario: You present a great deck on Zoom but nobody participates in the discussion or chat box. It's discouraging, disappointing, and disengaging, especially because it's so hard to read the room.

It's extra challenging to engage online audiences because there are so many other things competing for their attention. They can more easily "hide" behind their screens and there are often technology challenges like lag time, poor video/audio quality, or connectivity issues that make it difficult to seamlessly interact.

That doesn't mean that in-person engagement is simple — but, in some cases, it can be comparatively easier. Intentionally engaging your audience in person can build connection, facilitate learning and understanding, give participants opportunities to ask questions, and makes you come across as a more confident, competent presenter. It also gives you a chance to read and respond to the room, which can help your message resonate more widely and clearly.

Some ideas for engaging your audience include:

- Do a “round-robin” discussion, where everyone gets three to five minutes to share an insight or experience they've had around the presentation topic.
- Break people into pairs or small groups for discussions or another activity (this works especially well during brainstorms).
- Take a poll in the room by a show of hands.
- Watch a video clip together and ask audience members to share their thoughts.
- Ask each participant to pose a question to the rest of the group.

- Pause a few times during your presentation to give audience members a chance to reflect on their learning, and ask clarifying questions.

4) Pay extra attention to your body language.

Finally, when engaging an audience in person, you shouldn't minimize the impact of body language. Most of us have only moved our heads and necks while presenting over the past three years, anchored to our desks and screens. We may have spent more time and energy worrying about whether people could actually see us ("is my camera on?") rather than what they actually saw us doing.

Using facial expressions, hand gestures, and moving around the space you're presenting in (if you are able and open to doing so) can increase the energy of the room, help people feel more involved or included, and even make you more interesting to watch and listen to.

If you have the ability to move around while delivering your presentation, it can be helpful to move a few feet to the left or right when transitioning between ideas to connect with different parts of the audience. If you're standing, try to avoid shifting your weight from side to side, swaying, locking your knees, or wandering aimlessly — as these movement may be more distracting than engaging. And if moving your body isn't an

option for you, due to an ability difference, specific AV requirements, or other cultural considerations, you can use your face and voice to engage the audience in similar ways.

Effective facial expressions might include a welcoming smile (assuming you're not delivering dire news, like layoffs). Your tone should match the verbal messaging of your presentation. For example, if you're sharing a positive update about sales growth, speaking at a slightly faster pace and louder volume than normal to convey happiness (with some variability in pitch) may elicit feelings of excitement among audience members. Hand gestures should be above the waist to bring energy up, and use open palms, which signals openness and trust.

All of these things increase understanding — it's written into our biology. In fact, research shows that use of gestures and facial expressions in communication is stronger in countries with heterogenous populations. Because people didn't speak the same language, adding visual communication elements has historically aided comprehension.

...

While virtual and hybrid presentations aren't going away, in-person presentations are making a rapid comeback. Be prepared to adapt once again for this (old) new way of presenting. Give yourself some practice and patience. Remember that your in-person audience needs some practice and patience, too.

Deborah Grayson Riegel is a professional speaker and facilitator, as well as a communication and presentation skills coach. She teaches leadership communication at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business and has taught for Wharton Business School, Columbia Business School's Women in Leadership Program, and Peking University's International MBA Program. She is the author of *Overcoming Overthinking: 36 Ways to Tame Anxiety for Work, School, and Life* and the best-selling *Go To Help: 31 Strategies to Offer, Ask for, and Accept Help*.

Recommended For You

The New Reality of Digital Nomads



PODCAST

Attend Women at Work Live May 16



How to Run a Great Virtual Meeting



The Discipline of Teams

