

Tear Down that Wall!

REFORMING THE PROPOSAL WRITER-ORAL PRESENTER RELATIONSHIP

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Good afternoon. I am delighted so many of you, the best proposal writers in the world, are interested in seeing how you might reform the relationship between you and the orals teams which must “bring home the bacon” when your company is bidding on a contract, government or commercial.

The thrust of my presentation today is simply this: Proposal writers and oral presenters must realize that their efforts are not separate elements of the bidding process, but are instead joined at the hip. The proposal and the oral presentation are not ends in themselves but instead interdependent means to achieve the end of winning the contract, especially as the oral presentation can often be the deciding factor when the competing proposals are virtually identical in solving the Government’s problem. You can protect your investment of time and intellectual creativity best by working closely with the orals team, not treating them as distant cousins.

Although I am concentrating today on how to compete successfully for a government contract, the advice I am offering can be applied with equal validity to commercial contracts. To paraphrase Frank Sinatra, “if you can sell to the government, you can sell to anyone.”

Assumptions

Let me start by listing five assumptions which underlie my presentation:

- Government Requests for Proposals (RFP) are more like the musings of the Oracle of Delphi than examples of clear writing. They often require interpretation. Interpret correctly, you are gold; interpret incorrectly, you are dead.
- When orals are an afterthought in the bidding process, a “wall” is created between writers and presenters.
- The written proposal is the objective marshalling of a company’s capabilities which respond to the RFP-stated requirements
- The oral presentation is much more subjective, and factors such as poor speaking ability, distracting body language and repeated use of “uh’s” and “you knows” can all undercut a well-crafted and responsive written proposal.
- Government evaluators are cautious and very risk-averse. They do not want to be blamed as the group which awarded the contract to the “wrong” company.

Larry Tracy has been called one of the country’s top presentation coaches in the books The Information Please Business Almanac and Sourcebook (Houghton-Mifflin), Best of the Best, (Insight Publishing), What to Say When... You’re Dying on the Platform (McGraw-Hill). He was described by President Ronald Reagan as “An extraordinarily effective speaker” for his efforts, as an Army colonel detailed to the State Department, debating controversial policy issues before demanding, often hostile, audiences. He is author of the book The Shortcut to Persuasive Presentations, and will be the Keynote speaker at the Annual Conference of the Association of Proposal Management Professionals of the National Capital Area (APMP-NCA) on October 12, and will then speak two days later at the APMP-United Kingdom Chapter in England.

A syllogistic proof

Now, with those assumptions in mind, permit me to use the syllogism, one of the oldest methods of deductive reasoning, to make my case that writers and presenters should work hand in glove.

Major premise. Written proposals represent a costly investment of a company's financial resources and the time, intellectual energy and creativity of you, the proposal writers.

Minor premise. When competing proposals are virtually identical, the oral presentation can be the deciding factor or tiebreaker.

Conclusion. Any "wall" separating proposal writers and oral presenters must be torn down, and preparation for the orals must be an integral part of the proposal process from the outset.

Protecting your investment

Just as with siblings within a family, there can be tension between proposal writers and oral presenters. But the well being of the family--the company bidding on the contract--depends on cooperation and collaboration of its various members. Having used the family metaphor, let me assure you that my presentation today will not be an inspiring call for writers and presenters to hold hands, give group hugs and sing Kumbaya. Instead, it will be practical and tactical, providing a methodology to optimize your company's capabilities in order to increase the chances of winning federal contracts.

You, proposal managers and writers, must be a part of the oral presentation process for your own self-interest. You are the creators of the intellectual project known as the proposal. You have burned the midnight oil; you have written under deadline pressure; you have had to interpret the obtuse writing of the Government's RFP.

Why should you consider your job complete when the proposal goes out the door, or even celebrate when you have "made the cut," or, in the Government's arcane language, been judged to be in the "competitive range?" To protect your intellectual investment, you must be involved in the orals.

George Clemenceau, French Prime Minister in World War I, famously commented "*War is too important to be left to Generals alone.*" As a professional presenter and coach of presenters, I say emphatically to you that the oral presentation is too important to be left to presenters alone.

You, masters of the art of writing proposals, must protect your writing investment by working closely with the engineers and technical experts who will comprise the orals team. If you are not involved in the entire process, you are shooting yourselves in the foot. No matter how well written the proposal, a lost contract is a lost contract.

Are presentation skills important?

A fundamental question for many of you is "Are Presentation skills important? You may believe that a well-written proposal that "answers the mail" of an RFP is sufficient, and an oral presentation merely a formality. I would recommend you heed the words of a former executive of the world's most successful strategic consulting firm, McKinsey & Co. That company has made the final presentation to its clients a vital part of its highly-profitable business model. Robert Garda, now a professor at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, was quoted in the book The McKinsey Mind as saying

"I've put half-baked ideas into great presentations and seen them soar, and I've put great ideas into poor presentations, and watched them die."

I imagine that some of you may have said something similar after your company has lost a contract. You believe you have written a brilliant proposal, filled with “great ideas.” Isn’t it frustrating for you to expend all that intellectual energy and creativity, then see it wasted because of a “poor presentation” by the orals team? Doubly frustrating, perhaps, when you know your proposal was superior, but the winning company had a better-prepared orals team. I find it inconceivable why you would not want to make sure your proposal received the high quality oral presentation it deserved.

Two parallel objectives

I have two parallel objectives to accomplish today. The first is to develop a track which shows you how to deliver presentations that cause audience members to “buy-in” to what you are advocating. You may ask, “Why do I need to improve my presentation skills? I’m a writer.”

My response is that you must present to senior executives to “sell” your ideas, to potential teaming partners to get them to join you in a bid, to Government Contracting Officers, especially in the pre-RFP period. Chances are the person who presents his/her case best wins the day.

My other objective is to get you, proposal writers and managers, to “buy-in” to a four-phase approach to the challenge of winning government contracts through the mutual support between proposal writers and oral presenters. It is my contention that any wall separating these two groups must be torn down so they can work in tandem.

I use the term “parallel objectives” for a very real reason. As I am outlining the methodology to make you better speakers, I want you to think how these techniques can be used to improve the speaking skills of the orals team. When I move to the track of preparing the orals team, I hope you will see how these techniques can help you as well as these presenters. I will try to avoid excessive redundancy, although some will creep into my presentation due to the similar nature of the two tracks.

THE FIRST OBJECTIVE: BECOMING A BETTER SPEAKER

Now let’s show you how to develop and deliver presentations which cause your audience, one or many, to buy-in to what you are advocating. Although the title of my book is The Shortcut to Persuasive Presentations, I am using the phrase “buy-in” more frequently now, because I recognize that persuasion is a means, and buy-in the goal. You can be very persuasive in your presentation of the facts, but unless audience members conclude that what you are advocating is in their best interest and buy-in to what you are saying, you will not persuade.

What do I mean by buy-in? First, as I said, it is the goal of the persuasion process, and the answer to the listener’s question of “What’s in it for me?” It occurs when the listener concludes that what is being proposed by the speaker is actually in the listener’s best interest. We might think of buy-in as taking place when the presenter’s argument is perceived by the listener as a solution to that listener’s problem.

The S3P3 System

From my own speaking experience, as an Army colonel detailed to the State Department to debate controversial policies before hundreds of demanding audiences, I developed a methodology for achieving buy-in that I call the S3P3 System, which you might visualize as a pyramid supported by three pillars. These three pillars are Substance (the knowledge the speaker holds on the issue), Structure (the logical means by which this knowledge is presented to the audience), and Style (the use of rhetorical devices, the arrangement and choice of words, vocal quality, facial expression, gestures and other non-verbal communication). These pillars support a pyramid of Planning, Practicing, and Presenting.

Planning

In this initial step of planning your presentation, you must develop a concrete objective, aimed at solving the problems, needs, wants and concerns of your audience. This is always important, but especially so when facing a demanding audience. Know specifically what you wish to have this audience do with the information you are providing. It is here where you draft your presentation, and this can best be done by following my 3-1-2 method. While this “backward planning” drafting technique is counterintuitive, it facilitates having both focus and theme, vital for an oral presentation.

The 3-1-2 method

Take a stack of 3x5 cards. Mark one with a “3,” and place on it the “bottom line” message you wish to impart to your audience. In front of these words, put “In summary,” “In conclusion,” or some other phrase signaling the end of your presentation. You now have your conclusion, as well as a mini-presentation, especially beneficial when making a business or sales presentation when time for the presentation can be reduced at the last minute. Take another card, mark it with “1,” and use it to tell the audience where you are taking them on this oratorical journey.

Next, place the supporting points that flow from “1” to “3” on a series of cards marked “2A,” “2B,” “2C,” etc. Using the 3-1-2 method will enable you to present maximum relevant content within the limited amount of time your audience may have to listen to you. You’ll have more focus, because you will know when you start drafting where you are going with the presentation. Most importantly, audience members will see a logical structure to your argument. Using this “backward planning” method is far more effective than the traditional 1-2-3 method-Introduction, Body, Conclusion which we all first learned in elementary school. Just remember: You draft 3-1-2, but you deliver 1-2-3.

Practicing

As we reach practicing, the second level of the pyramid, I want to share with you an observation Abraham Lincoln made about getting ready for a presentation. He said, “*If I had eight hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend six hours sharpening my axe.*” The Gettysburg Address was an example of such diligence. Don’t believe the nonsense that he wrote the speech on the back of an envelope on the train to Gettysburg. Lincoln scholars have uncovered numerous drafts he wrote, and he undoubtedly practiced for this masterpiece of brevity, 264 words delivered in less than three minutes. He sharpened his axe repeatedly, and the result was the greatest political speech in our history. We who tend to be somewhat wordy in our presentations can learn much from this great President.

The practice three step

There are three steps to “practicing smart.”

Step one is practicing solo, with a tape recorder and/or video camera. No one nearby. After a few sessions, listen/watch yourself. Watch your mannerisms; listen for the “uh’s” and “you knows.” Do it again, making corrections.

Step two is with a colleague, friend, or spouse as your audience. Ask for constructive criticism. A spouse is especially valuable, for he or she has a vested economic interest in seeing you succeed.

The Murder Board

Step three is a “murder board.” Yes, the term sounds like something Tony Soprano might convene, but it has nothing to do with a criminal act and everything to do with helping people become better and more persuasive speakers. For those not familiar with the term, it has its origins

in the U.S. military as a means to prepare for high-level briefings. Simply stated, it is the presenter's version of the actor's dress rehearsal, what lawyers do in preparing a witness to face cross-examination in a trial, and what the flight simulator is to the pilot. Just as with the actor, the witness, and the pilot, this simulation permits presenters to learn from their mistakes, so that the actual presentation is (1) more responsive to the informational needs of the audience, (2) answers are developed for likely questions to be asked, and (3) overall speaking confidence and competence are enhanced.

Presenting

The apex of the pyramid is when you actually present, and by necessity we must discuss how the audience sees and hears you. Negative non-verbal communication can seriously impact how an audience receives your information. Think of speaking as algebra, with the difference between positive equations and negative equations determining the value of the proposition. If you reduce the negative equations you increase the value of the proposition. If you reduce speaking negatives, you automatically become a better speaker.

Shortcuts to eloquence

Positive speaking "equations" are what I call "Shortcuts to eloquence." These include the "Rhythmic Triple," expressing your thoughts in punchy cadences of three. Sir Winston Churchill used this technique when he articulated the thought that the people of England owed a great debt to the pilots of the Royal Air Force in the Battle of Britain. Instead of using a mundane declarative sentence, Churchill said, "*Never in the field of human conflict have so many owed so much to so few.*" See how you can convert important thoughts into such "triples."

Analogies and metaphors are useful means to help audience members learn something new by comparing it to something well known to them. These rhetorical devices can be an excellent bridge from the known to the unknown, but be careful of excessive use of sports metaphors.

The rhetorical question can be employed to "bring back" audience members who have perhaps dozed off or are daydreaming. Move close to that person, do not look at him or her, pose a question, and then pause. Your presence and resulting increased volume will awaken the daydreamer/dozer, who will have no idea of the answer due to their comatose state. When you provide the answer, they are now wide-awake, and grateful to you for not embarrassing them.

The final arrow

We are conditioned to end our presentation when the senior recipient says "Thank you." If you do end then, however, you lose an important opportunity to drive home your buy-in message. So consider using what I call "the final arrow." Think of your presentation as a quiver of arrows. You fire the first one to motivate the audience to listen because you are going to provide information to solve their problem. That's the "1" of the 3-1-2 method. Then fire your various "2" arrows which provide the substance of your argument. You then end with your "3" conclusion, and you answer questions.

You still have a small arrow in your quiver, which is a reduced version of your "3." When the recipient says "thank you," look directly at that senior person, say "*Thank you and I would like to reiterate...*" while you are closing your laptop or gathering your notes. Condense this message into no more than 15 seconds. Be careful to lead in with "reiterate," "say again," "repeat," or some other word or short phrase that shows you know your time is up, and you are just repeating information already presented while you are preparing to leave. This is the last message the recipient and others will hear, and it may just "stick." It is similar to the "closing argument" of the trial lawyer who hopes the jury retains this message as they decide the fate of the defendant. However, if you think

the senior person and others are a bit impatient and are looking at their watches, don't fire that arrow. You may just irritate them, and undo all the good you have achieved

Avoiding "death by PowerPoint"

Finally in this presentations primer, let us address how to use PowerPoint, or, more correctly, how to avoid "death by PowerPoint." The program has so many capabilities that it tempts users to employ far too many. I frequently receive brochures advertising courses which promise to turn attendees into spellbinding speakers by mastering PowerPoint. I consider that a contradiction in terms. My recommendation is to be a minimalist, not one who uses so many "bells and whistles" that the audience is distracted from the substance of your remarks.

Here are two pointers on how to use PowerPoint so it can reinforce your message through the visual avenue to the brain. First, bring the bullets onto the screen one at a time. If you have, say, five bullets, and they come onto the screen at the same time, audience members will scan down, perhaps being attracted to one of them, and therefore not listening as you address the first bullet. By bringing the bullets on one at a time, you focus the audience eyes and ears at the same place.

Second, it is not necessary to have words or graphics on the screen continually. When you want to give the audience a break, hit the "B" key, and the screen goes black. Hit it again, and the slide comes back on. If you want to jump forward to a slide, or backward to review one already shown, hit the slide number, then enter, and the desired slide appears on the screen. This means, of course, you must have a numbered list of the slides.

THE SECOND OBJECTIVE: PREPARING THE ORALS TEAM

Now that you have mastered all the techniques to become spellbinding speakers, let me turn to achieving that second objective, assuring that you and the orals team who must carry the company's water work in concert to win the contract.

First, some general advice on orals. First, make sure that the winning theme you developed in writing the proposal is not lost in the oral presentation. The technical experts who comprise the orals team may have the tendency to get bogged down in details, describing the trees rather than the forest. Second, if you are teaming with other companies as your sub-contractors, gain the ironclad commitment of senior management of these companies that their designated presenters will be available. Third, address the evaluation criteria with as much specificity as time permits.

The discomfort-comfort continuum

Human beings live on a continuum of discomfort and comfort zones. Oral presentation teams at the outset are on the discomfort end, due to the pressure they feel to make a contract-winning presentation. Government evaluators likewise are at the discomfort level, for they feel the pressure of making the right decision for the government.

As the team progresses through several practice sessions, team member's confidence will increase, apprehension will decrease, and the team will move closer to the comfort end of the continuum. It is imperative to move the government evaluators towards the comfort end by assuaging their concerns and increasing their confidence that the presenting company represents the best value for the government.

THE FOUR PHASE APPROACH FOR WRITER-PRESENTER COOPERATION

Now, let's turn to that four phase approach aimed at having you and the orals team play well together: Phase One is the writing of the proposal, Phase Two the drafting of the orals by the presenting team, Phase Three is composed of a series of simulated oral presentations or Murder Boards. Finally, Phase Four is "show time," the oral presentation.

PHASE ONE: Drafting the written proposal

In Phase One, I will, understandably, not be so presumptuous as to tell you how to write. Although a writer myself, I claim no expertise in the difficult task of writing a proposal. But, to start the process of fusing the talents of writers and presenters, I urge you to invite those who will be making the oral presentation to participate with you from the outset. They can, in effect, “look over your shoulders” as you start writing, extracting “nuggets” of information, which can be the building blocks for their own initial draft.

They will learn the discriminators your are building into the proposal so they can verbalize these important distinctions. Having the presenters involved from the outset will facilitate having a consistency between written proposal and oral presentation. These technical experts can also alert you what is not technically feasible, thereby reducing the modifications and “re-writes” to the proposal.

As proposal managers and writers, you are accustomed to being “king of the hill.” You may not like these engineers “looking over your shoulders.” But remember, the worm will soon turn, with primacy shifting to the orals team. So my advice is to practice the “Golden Rule:” Treat them as members of the corporate team, not as interlopers. This will assure you are treated the same way when the oral team is “King of the hill.”

PHASE TWO: Drafting the oral presentation

Now to Phase Two. While you are putting the finishing touches on the proposal, the engineers/technical experts of the orals team can start to develop their presentation simultaneously. They will have seen the approach you are taking, and have probably contributed to it in Phase One. Having observed you develop the theme of the proposal will assist the oral team to follow the same path as they develop their initial draft. They will now expand on the “nuggets” they extracted while observing the proposal-in-process, especially the all-important discriminators separating your company from the competition. The conversion of the detailed graphics of the proposal into the more easily grasped visuals of the oral presentation begins here as well.

In Phase Two, the team must develop an opening and close which serve as “bookends” to the presentation. Remember the 3-1-2 method I described a few minutes ago? It provides the model for developing these “bookends.” Begin by drafting the concluding remarks, the “3,” which will be delivered by the project manager, showing why your company provides the best value for the government.

This is where the key discriminators are enumerated (and make sure they are in fact advantages which no competitor has!). After developing this close, draft the “1” opening statement, also to be delivered by the project manager, which is an overview of the company’s capabilities, past performance with similar projects, and a brief introduction of the members of the team. The objective of this opening is to “shake hands” with the evaluators and increase their confidence that your company can do the job better than your competitors. The “2” is the technical narratives by the respective team members addressing the Selection Criteria of the RFP.

Who should be the project manager/lead presenter?

The final selection of members of the orals team will be taking place during this phase, presenting a dilemma for many companies. The RFP may say that the lead presenter is to be the project manager for the project. Let us say your company has two potential project managers. One has an excellent past performance record, but is a terrible speaker. The other is an excellent speaker, but has a less-than-sterling record with similar projects. Who get the nod?

My recommendation, if you have sufficient time, is to go with the excellent project manager with less-than-eloquent speaking talent, and get him or her “trained up” by bringing in an orals

coach early in the process. If time is short, go with the excellent presenter, and surround him or her with technical experts who can carry the load.

Whichever one of these project managers is selected, have some sympathy for him or her because “public speaking,” in survey after survey, is viewed as one of the leading phobias in the United States. The best known of these surveys listed “speaking before groups” as the number one fear, ahead of even “death.”

This led Jerry Seinfeld, in the opening of one of his television programs, to quip that this meant that most people would prefer to be in the coffin than required to deliver the eulogy. When millions, perhaps billions, of dollars are on the line, this “fear of speaking” of the project manager will be exacerbated.

PHASE THREE: Simulating with a series of intense murder boards.

A few minutes ago, I told you that the murder board permits presenters to be (1) more responsive to the informational needs of the audience, (2) develop answers for likely questions to be asked, and (3) gain confidence in their speaking ability.

You, the writers, are the experts on the proposal. No one knows its strengths and potential vulnerabilities better. You should role-play the government’s evaluators, who will have read your proposal in detail. You can anticipate objections they may have, and you can help the presenters address these in the murder boards, thereby possibly preempting any questions that might be in the minds of the evaluators as they listen to the oral presentation.

What inquiring evaluators want to know.

Evaluators from the government have a responsibility to get the “best buy” for the taxpayer’s dollar, and may, at least subconsciously, see a correlation between the effectiveness of the team’s presentation and how the company will accomplish the requirements stipulated in the RFP. They may view a disjointed and unclear presentation as an indicator that this team will be unable to perform the terms of the contract.

Observe the orals team through the eyes of the evaluators, who want to know:

- What is the chemistry between and among team members?
- Does the team have a clear vision of what the Government wants accomplished, or does the presentation suggest the team is still trying to figure out what is required by the RFP?
- Do the skills of the different companies and individuals complement or clash?
- Is the prime contractor really in charge, or do there appear to be some Prima Donnas among the sub-contractors, suggesting later friction?
- Does the presentation demonstrate that the consortium has the experience to accomplish the project required by the RFP?
- Is there a willingness of team members to accept Government oversight, or an attitude of “give us the contract, then get out of the way?”
- Does the company seem genuinely interested in, and demonstrate proven capability to solve, the Government’s RFP-expressed problem?

The question and answer sessions

The RFP will generally call for a separate Q&A session for clarification purposes after the formal presentation. Consequently, separate murder boards should be conducted with you, the creators of the proposal, again playing the role of the evaluators, and asking questions you believe will be asked. The project manager should quarterback this session, directing questions to team members according to their respective expertise. The stress level will probably be less on presenters during the actual Q&A session because it will take place within the more familiar conversational

context. But remind them that in the “real thing” they will still be “on stage,” so they should not be lulled into a false sense of comfort.

Additionally, there are certain answers/remarks which should also be avoided such as:

- “Yes, but.... The use of “but” might be considered confrontational (Instead, the presenter can say “Yes, and I can see why you would ask that question...)
- “Let me be perfectly honest with you...” (What does this imply about the foregoing remarks?)
- And the mother of all responses to shun—“With all due respect....”

The orals coach

Keep in mind that the purpose of the Government’s emphasis on oral presentations is to have the people with in-depth knowledge make the presentation, not polished speakers who possess less-detailed knowledge of the RFP requirements. Still, the team of experts making the clearest and most professional presentation certainly increases its prospects of winning the contract. An outside orals coach should be brought in to show the technical experts how to make a coherent and effective presentation that focuses on the Government’s needs.

He or she should certainly use a video camera so you have “game films” of the various practice sessions. In the first session, however, the coach should not use video. There will be understandable nervousness on the part of the presenters, and the presence of cameras will just add to their “performance anxiety.” In subsequent murder boards, two cameras should be used: One to record each individual presentation, thus permitting presenters to review and improve their “performance” privately; the second camera should record the entire presentation to see how the various presenters “fit” together, and how the team presentation will appear to the evaluators. Having a video of the entire presentation will also aid in staying within the RFP-imposed time limit.

In addition to providing knowledge of the speaking art, this coach can be much more frank in providing constructive criticism to presenters than will co-workers, who, wanting to maintain positive working relationships, may be “kinder and gentler” in their critiques of presentations. The coach’s role is to blend the techniques of effective presentation skills with the expertise of the presenters. The fusion of these two elements produces contract-winning presentations. The coach should concentrate on developing the delivery skills of the presenters, and helping them overcome obstacles to good delivery.

Permit me to offer a word of caution on orals coaches. Beware of those who attempt to convert engineers into actors by emphasizing the importance of non-verbal communications over content. They will normally cite “studies” that show that substance counts for only 7%, body language 55%, and voice 38%. Those figures come from a single study by Dr. Albert Mehrabian of UCLA. Dr. Mehrabian, however, has said in an email to a friend of mine in England, a renowned speech coach, Professor Max Atkinson, that

“I am obviously uncomfortable about misquotes of my work. From the very beginning, I have tried to give people the correct limitations of my findings. Unfortunately, the field of self-styled ‘corporate image consultants’ or ‘leadership consultants’ has numerous practitioners with very little psychological expertise.”

As Max points out in his excellent book, Lend Me Your Ears,

“If the biggest of all claims about the dominance of non-verbal over verbal has been so exaggerated and distorted in its transmission from

the original to the training rooms of the world, the question arises as to the reliability of other 'facts' that make up the received wisdom about body language and non-verbal communication."

So, if you hear your orals coach using the 7-55-38 formula, show him or her the door.

Obstacles to effective oral presentations

Having said all that, there is no doubt negative non-verbal communication can be an obstacle to effective presentations. Let's look at some of these obstacles. First, the boring monotone of most men--which I blame on fictional Sergeant Joe Friday of the old TV program "Dragnet." A generation of men learned to speak that way, and fathers passed this habit on to sons. A few minutes of a monotonic presentation is a cure for insomnia. The orals coach can help those afflicted with the monotone to place emphasis on verbs and other words that connote action and movement. They must then listen to themselves on a tape recorder, seeking to put inflection in their voices at appropriate times. I note many women in the audience smiling and nodding. Not so fast, ladies. I am an equal opportunity offender, and now it is your turn.

Women, while having a natural inflection, sometimes speak at too high a pitch. For women with this problem, my advice is to practice, again with a tape recorder, lowering your pitch. Three role models to emulate are the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, the late UN ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick, my former professor and a friend for 30 years, and, of course the "Voice"—Maya Angelou. All three of these women spoke with a lower than normal pitch, but retained their essential femininity.

What are some other vocal distractions? Again, as I said in the beginning of my presentation, the most egregious fault is repeated use of the fillers "Uh" and "You know." Speakers improve in direct proportion to the reduction of these abominations of the English language. In my workshops--and you and the orals coach can do this in working with the presenters--I conduct a drill that normally proves effective in reducing this tendency. Speakers are greeted with a chorus of high decibel "Uh's" from their colleagues when making that sound, and equally loud "No, we don't" when they say "You know." Such behavior-modifying sessions will reduce the use of these fillers.

Some body language obstacles are poor posture, hands in the pocket or in the "fig leaf" position (I refer to those who move and back and forth to that position as "flashing fig leafers."). A slouching posture suggests indifference, and robs a presenter of projecting an image of enthusiasm and really caring about winning the contract. (Remember those concerns of evaluators I mentioned a few minutes ago.) A passion for the company's capability can be conveyed not just by words, but how presenters look and sound saying them.

One of the greatest speaking errors of people not accustomed to presenting is to read from a script or from the PowerPoint slides on the screen. Little eye contact is made with the evaluators, and the chance of reverting to the dreaded monotone is increased. Note cards--3x5 cards are best because their size precludes writing too much--with memory joggers can certainly be used, but speakers should show they "own" the material.

Glancing at the slides on the screen is certainly permissible, but remember that the evaluators are literate and do not need you to read the words to them. Few things alienate people more in any audience than to have the speaker read verbatim the words on the visuals. Reducing to a minimum the text on the visuals during the various murder boards will help presenters avoid the "reading from the screen" trap. If possible, presenters should place their laptop in such a position that they can glance at the visuals on its screen, then to the evaluators, avoiding turning to the large screen.

PHASE FOUR: The oral presentation

So now we come to Phase Four--the oral presentation to government evaluators. You will not have a direct part in this, but how you have interacted with the presenters in the various murder boards will have a vital impact on how they present. Lockheed Martin had a commercial on television a few years ago that showed two fighter jets maneuvering, with a dramatic voice intoning, *“If you train the way you’ll fight, you’ll fight the way you trained.”*

That is solid advice for presenters—practice the way you will present, and you will present the way you practiced. You will have played a vital role in prepping the orals team for the big day. Now, as you are anxious to see the orals team faithfully reflect your brilliant proposal, here is some final advice to give to the team as they go out the door.

- Stay at a hotel the night before the presentation. Why run the risk of a traffic delay, or arriving tense from a rush hour drive?
- Perform a reconnaissance of the room in which they will present, checking the location of electrical outlets, seating arrangements, etc. If the room has a fixed screen, which may be washed out by sunlight, advise the team to bring its own screen.
- Arrive as early as the government will permit to set up, and have backup laptops, bulbs, and extension cords. Being so attentive to detail sends a psychological message that the team has its “act together.”
- Emphasize to the team the importance of pointing out clearly the key discriminators which separate your company from competing firms. Perhaps you have proprietary software or some other unique capability or expertise which will greatly enhance accomplishing the requirements of the RFP. The presenting team must convey the message “if you don’t give us the contract, the government will not have access to this capability.” This message, of course, must be done in a subtle, non-threatening way.
- Advise the team to conduct an immediate “post-presentation analysis,” focusing on the reactions of the evaluators and their questions in the Q&A session. This can set the stage for the next proposal/orals the company will make.
- The company, win or lose, should seek a debriefing. You will gain “intelligence” which will improve your next proposal and oral presentation.

Some final thoughts

As I move towards ending this presentation, I want to leave you with some observations on the power of the spoken word. This power was expressed well by that great orator and statesman of the 19th Century, Daniel Webster, who said,

“If, through some inscrutable act of providence, all my faculties were taken from me, and I had the choice of keeping but one, I would unhesitatingly ask to be allowed to keep the power of speaking, for through it I would quickly recover all the rest.”

The leading industrialist of the latter part of the 20th century, Lee Iacocca, wrote something similar in his 1984 autobiography,

“ I’ve known a lot of engineers with terrific ideas who had trouble explaining them to others. It’s always a shame when a guy with great talent can’t tell the board or committee what’s in his head.”

Have you perhaps had that same reaction when “terrific ideas” in your proposal have been poorly presented by an inept orals team? Perhaps you would not have had that sinking feeling if you had worked closely with the orals team from the outset!

Let me close with an observation on what is the end result of any oral presentation. It comes to us from the land where the oral presentation originated--Ancient Athens. Demosthenes was the greatest speaker of his time, and people would come from miles around to listen to his speeches. They marveled at his stentorian voice, his dramatic gestures, his unique turn of phrase, and his overall presence. But 60 years earlier, there lived another great orator, Pericles. He was a magnificent speaker and a great leader. So the people of Athens, in comparing these two remarkable “oral presenters,” said

“When Demosthenes speaks, people say ‘How well he speaks,’ but when Pericles spoke, people said, ‘Let us march!’ ”

My advice to you, proposal managers and writers, is to tear down any walls separating you and the orals team, so that, when the team completes its presentation, the evaluators will say, *“Let us march with this company!”*

Thank you.

