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Meet the MasterMinds: Nick Morgan on the Secrets of Powerful Speaking

Nick Morgan is the founder Public Words, a communications coaching company, and the author of ***Working the Room: How to Move People to Action through Audience-Centered Speaking***, published by Harvard Business School Press. He coaches executives and organizations on communications issues, and leads seminars on communications skills for corporations, professional groups and universities.

MCNews talked to Morgan about ***Working the Room*** to find out why Kim Campbell, former Prime Minister of Canada, said, "This book is a must for any serious communicator."

MCNews: What led you to write *Working the Room*?

Morgan: Two things: first of all, in seventeen years of coaching people, I've seen the same issues come up repeatedly and I wanted to put some of the stories down on record. And, I wanted to express the ideas I developed working with clients.

MCNews: What are some of those issues you've seen over and over again?

Morgan: Many speeches, especially in the business world, are important for the speaker but end up boring the audience. So one issue is how does the speaker break through that mediocrity of connection and take full advantage of a speaking opportunity?

Another issue, of course, is just fear. Everybody has nervousness associated with public speaking. Traditional speech coaching involves tricks like physical relaxation and visual imaging, and there's nothing wrong with those techniques. If you have powerful abilities to visualize, that's one of the best ways to get over the fear.

But what I have found is that when you have great content, a lot of the nervousness goes away. What we tend to think of as a performance question really has more to do with the preparation you do beforehand.

MCNews: Part of that preparation is to figure out what audiences really want when they listen to a speech. So what do audiences want?

Morgan: Well, the wonderful thing about audiences is that they want to be enthralled and moved. They come in with a positive attitude in spite of the fact that they have been disappointed so many times. **Audiences want you to succeed.**

That support is yours to squander. If you fail to connect, midway through your speech the audience will no longer be on your side—they will be looking for the exits.

Keep in mind that audiences vote with their feet when they come to listen to you. They give you provisional authority over them for an hour or ninety minutes, and they want you to do something for them.

MCNews: How do you know when you have made that connection to the audience?

Morgan: A successful speech takes your audience on a journey from why to how. Audiences come in asking why—Why am I here? Why is this important to me? They want the answer to be that this is going to be good for them in some way. If you succeed, by the end of your speech they will be asking how—How do I do what you are talking about? How do I get to work on this? That's when you know you have gotten your message across.

MCNews: So how do you go about preparing a speech that accomplishes that?

Morgan: It always begins with the audience. You need to sit down and think, not about yourself and the information you want to convey, but about the audience. Who are they? What do they care about? What do they fear? What is going to move that audience? Then there are the practical questions—What time of the day is the speech going to be? How many people will be in the room? After you have thought through all that, then you can start to think about how the information you have will connect with the audience.

I can always tell watching a speech the difference between somebody who has thought about the audience and somebody who hasn't. And it's more than just saying, "Anybody here from Dubuque?"

A lot of professional speakers are adept at putting in little touches that give the appearance of connecting with audiences. But there is a difference between that and truly understanding what makes an audience tick and why you are the right person at the right moment for that audience.

MCNews: For many business speakers, stories are a lead-in or an afterthought. Do you think stories have a legitimate part to play in a good speech?

Morgan: Stories are essential for the simple reason that the mind works in stories. Neurological research has shown that is how we construct the world from the time we are babies. Take this scenario: a baby in a highchair spills a glass of milk. A parent comes running, cleans it up and makes all kinds of noises. That's pretty exciting.

What you have there is an agent, the baby, an action, pushing over the milk, and an object or result, the milk goes on the floor—a little story. At the simplest level that's what stories are: agents, actions and objects. That's how our minds work and how we absorb information.

Too many speeches just dump facts on the audience. We don't retain things that way. Stories help us retain information because they respect the way the mind works.

MCNews: Do you connect the information you want to impart to the imagery of the story?

Morgan: Yes. And there are two levels of stories where you need to do that. You have the little anecdote that begins a speech, or a story that you tell midway through to illustrate a point. Those stories are helpful in getting the audience's attention or making a point memorable by underlining something you want the audience to remember.

On the second level, I think your whole speech should mirror one of the great stories of our culture. The quest, or journey, is the primary story mode and then there are four others—stranger in a strange land, revenge, rags to riches and boy meets girl. You should try to frame your information in one of those story types.

It's not easy to do but if you can deliver your speech overall as a quest story, for example, then you will connect powerfully with stories that audiences have deep in their psyches. We all relate to such stories instantly.

MCNews: Is there a risk that your speech might fall flat if you end up the hero of a quest or journey story?

Morgan: Yes, that has to be handled carefully. But people do love underdog stories. For example, the classic tale of the person who came from the school of hard knocks, had to overcome many obstacles and is now a success. That genre of story can be powerful for an audience if it is told with genuine humility and honest attention to the mistakes made along the way. The audience members have to see enough of themselves in the story that they think they could do that too.

The humanity of the speaker has to come across for that kind of story to work. It leaves you cold is when it's all about glorifying the speaker. Then it's repellant because the speaker leaves the audience out of the circle of glory.

MCNews: Let's talk about rehearsal. What are your thoughts on how much and what to rehearse?

Morgan: The quick answer is that the vast majority of business speakers under rehearse woefully. Typically, they don't rehearse at all. CEO's and senior level people will rehearse a big speech once the night before, or read over the notes and think they can wing it. How many times do you see people creating PowerPoint slides on the plane or train on the way to a meeting?

That is a disaster. I say that as someone who in a former career was an actor. A stage actor doesn't think about getting on stage in front of an audience until he/she has rehearsed for six weeks beforehand, going over and over again every move, every gesture.

You can tell when the typical business speech with its PowerPoint slide deck has not been rehearsed. Usually the person is capable of reading the slides, but the transitions between the slides are awkward—the connections are missing. A speaker will say, "okay this slide is saying X," and will proceed to talk about that slide. Then he/she will switch to the next slide and, after a slight pause, will say, "Okay this slide says Y."

The speaker who does that is not telling us a story and hasn't had the courtesy to think through the whole speech. That person has created a speech outline and just walks us through the outline. That rhythm of slide followed by slide is what they used to call in the scriptwriting business "one damn thing after another." It gets monotonous because it has no art to it. A story has a beginning, middle and end; it's not just one damn thing after another.

MCNews: Do you think you can over-rehearse a speech or presentation?

Morgan: As society gets busier and busier and moves faster and faster, too much rehearsal is so infrequently the case that it's not my major concern. Of course, you don't want to be over-rehearsed. Some people try to memorize speeches and they get sing-song. Most people are not great actors, so saying memorized lines can sound like rote and that isn't good. You want to have some spontaneity and life in the moment. **But for the vast majority of business speeches, too much rehearsal is not the problem.**

MCNews: You mentioned visual aids a minute ago. What is the most effective way to use them?

Morgan: I'm glad you asked that question because their misuse is a real pet peeve of mine. Visual aids are supposed to be just that, and they can be used effectively. For example, if you have a set of numbers and you want to show a trend, you can use a bar chart or a graph that clearly shows the trend. That's a good use of a visual because it's more effective than just reading the numbers.

In most speeches, there are only going to be three or four moments like that, and you should turn off your projector between those moments. You should use slides for the occasional illustration of a point that can be made much better visually.

But business speeches that are put together with PowerPoint or some other slide program are often just a set of speaker notes. The usual excuses are that a picture says a thousand words, or people are visual learners or it makes it more memorable. People cite a study funded by Microsoft that found people retained more with the use of PowerPoint.

What really happens is that the speaker and the audience suffer through this long outline which takes all of the spontaneity out of the speech and distracts the audience from the speaker making a connection with them. In the audience, when you see a slide with ten bullet points on it, there is no surprise what's going to happen. The speaker will read one bullet and then the next. The result is deadening and monotonous.

You also get what I call the PowerPoint choreography of death. Let's say a speaker has a computer set up in the front of the room with a projector and a screen facing the audience. The speaker, the computer and the screen form a triangle and as the speaker starts to circulate either physically with his feet or by head motions, the audience realizes this is not about the speaker connecting with them; it's about him connecting with his slide on the screen. That distances the audience from the speech and the speaker.

MCNews: Many slide presentations do include bullet points. Is there a good way to use bullets?

Morgan: There is absolutely nothing visual about bullets, and they don't help retention. If you must use bullets, there are some rules. Sometimes there are short lists that can be useful takeaways for the audience. But don't use more than about four bullets, four lines. If you use more, the type will be too small for the typical audience member to read. Bullets should be brief lists of words, not complete sentences. It's a sign that your bullets are too long if they word-wrap; that's not a bullet—it's a paragraph. That shows you are lazy and have not thought enough about what's really important to the audience.

MCNews: When you start to work with someone to put a speech together what do you see as the most common area of improvement?

Morgan: The classic mistake people make is to dump a ton of information on the audience. So **the most common improvement is to simplify the message.** Figure out what the single, unique message is that you want to get across to the audience, hang the information on that simple point and eliminate everything that doesn't reinforce it.

MCNews: Who are your favorite speakers?

Morgan: Good speakers do two things well: they let their own personality come through, and they have a wide range of emotional expressiveness.

That's what charisma is—emotional expressiveness, the ability to show a range of genuine emotions. But I don't mean weeping or losing your temper. Rather, you need to let an audience know how you feel about what is important to you, when you are excited about something and when you are displeased with something.

Jesse Jackson is a good example. Some people hate him, some people love him, but they watch him because he is so expressive. People in the business world think it's embarrassing or weak to show emotion. Instead, they want to make it all about the intellect, but that's not what moves people to action.

Gary Hamel is a very effective business speaker. He leads the audience on a real journey and it's an emotional one. He strikes fear into the hearts of audiences and then leads them out of the valley of despair. I love watching him.

MCNews: I'd like to go through four short questions on issues that come up often about speaking.

First, should you write out the complete text of a speech beforehand, or just outline it?

Morgan: That depends on how experienced a speaker you are and how comfortable you are with the subject. For instance, I give talks about public speaking often and I know the topic well. I outline the main points I want to cover and give the speech from that.

If you are speaking on a topic for the first time or you are not an experienced speaker, it's a very good idea to write out the complete text of the speech. Now, you shouldn't give the speech using that complete text, but you should think through what you are going to say moment to moment and figure out the transitions and connections that I talked about earlier. Then cut that text back to outline form so if you suddenly go blank up there, you can look down and find your place.

MCNews: Is it better to distribute handouts before a speech or afterwards?

Morgan: No question on this one—you should give them out afterwards. If you give them out beforehand, the type-A people in the audience will think, okay I don't have to listen to this and they will either leave or they will pay more attention to the notes than to you.

There are always nervous people in the audience who ask if you have notes. Tell the audience at the beginning that notes will be available at the end of the talk so they can relax and enjoy the ride.

MCNews: Should a speaker take questions during a speech, ask people to hold questions until the end or some combination of both?

Morgan: I prefer speakers that take questions throughout their presentations, but you have to know your material very well to do that. Otherwise, you can get derailed or side-tracked by a question. If you are confident enough in your material, you know how to take a question, answer it quickly and get back on topic, I prefer speakers to do that. It's more interesting for the audience because they can actively participate in the speech. But if you are afraid questions will get you off track, ask audiences to hold their questions until the end.

MCNews: Should you end a speech with questions and answers, or take questions and then do a closing or summary wrap up?

Morgan: I advocate having a closing statement after Q&A. The last thing you do with an audience is the most important and what they will remember the best. Q&A is open-ended and not in your control. A great speech can be undermined by a hostile or stupid question at the end. So save the last three minutes for a knock-them-dead wrap up that sends the audience on its way with jaws agape.

MCNews: Thanks for some great tips.

Visit www.publicwords.com to find out more about Nick Morgan, his book and services.