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Meet the MasterMinds: Bert Decker On Effective Communicating

An expert in personal communication, professional speaker and coach for speakers, Bert Decker has written numerous books on the subject, including ***You've Got to Be Believed to Be Heard***, ***The Art of Communicating: Achieving Interpersonal Impact in Business***, and ***Speaking With Bold Assurance: How to Become a Persuasive Communicator***. His most recent book is ***Creating Messages That Motivate***.

He created the Decker Grid System, which has helped thousands of people hone their communication skills. He has been featured in the ***New York Times***, ***Business Week***, and on ***20/20***. He was also a commentator for NBC's ***Today*** show for the Presidential Debates.

Decker is a Certified Speaking Professional and has received the Hall of Fame award from the National Speakers Association. MCNews asked Decker to shed some light on how consultants can become persuasive speakers.

MCNews: How should consultants approach public speaking?

Decker: I like to think of it as communicating rather than speaking, and that shift alone makes for a different mindset. People think of public speaking as those few times when they are in front of a big audience. Particularly for consultants, smaller-scale communication is every bit as important as large-group events. That's true whether you are talking to one person, a group of clients, or to your staff. People don't consider smaller talks with the same mindset as big speeches, but they should. Instead, too many people think speaking to a large audience is different and scary.

The fear of large audiences is very common, of course, and you should be at your best for those more formal venues. That's where your leverage is greatest: you have 500 people at a conference listening, and you have a chance to make an impact.

MCNews: Are there good ways for speakers to get comfortable with that fear?

Decker: Fear of speaking comes from the adrenaline of the fight or flight response, and can range from absolute terror for those who seldom speak, to tension and stimulation for seasoned speakers. But, people should realize that every speaker experiences that flow of adrenaline to some degree.

It's very similar to athletic performance anxiety. An athlete in the NBA playoffs, or any championship, will tell you that there is enormous tension and pressure to perform. What they have to learn, and what speakers also need to learn, is how to take that tension and turn it into a

positive flow. The only way that happens is through practice and feedback. You need to recognize that it's just a process and everybody goes through it. [Emerson](#) said, "Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain."

Actually, small audiences can produce just as much anxiety as large ones. You might have a lot riding on a meeting with a single client, or on a job interview. It's not the size of the crowd, but the circumstances that matter. When you want to be at your best, you need confidence and certainty in yourself and in your message.

MCNews: In some cases, the preparation for a speech can be harder than the speech itself. Do you have any tips on how to prepare?

Decker: Yes, but first, it might be useful to separate two aspects of communicating: style and substance. Style is the behavioral side, all those things about how you come across, like body language and eye communication, while substance is about your content. You must prepare both aspects.

When it comes to content, too many people do the exact opposite of what they should: they write their speeches. You should never read a speech, so why write one in the first place? That's just not the best way to communicate and connect with people. Instead, we should use the best innate ability of our minds, which is to be spontaneous.

With a few simple concepts, like those we teach in the Decker Grid System, you can develop a focused, listener-based message every time. It's not that hard to do, and once you learn the system, you can be spontaneous in everything, from full-scale, formal presentations to the beginning of an important email. This works for every kind of speaker, from executives to preachers.

MCNews: Can you briefly describe the Decker Grid System?

Decker: The Grid system is a quick, easy way to create a high-impact presentation, or any communication. Once you have a subject for the communication, you identify the four cornerstones of the communication – the audience, your point of view on the subject, the action you want your audience to take and the benefits to your audience if they take that action.

Then, you brainstorm ideas to develop the key points of your communication, and cluster those ideas into natural groupings. These ideas could include personal experiences, stories and analogies that bring life to your subject. After you've clustered your ideas, you compose the communication by creating the key points, sub-points and relevant benefits. When that is done, you are ready to plan your opening, closing and the transitions between your key points.

MCNews: For additional information, click on the following link and look for the book, [Creating Messages That Motivate](#), which describes the Decker Grid System in detail.

MCNews: Should speakers rehearse? How does being spontaneous fit with rehearsal?

Decker: I do suggest rehearsal, but people tend to over-rehearse. There is nothing worse than listening to a memorized speech. And, it does not allow the muse, or spirit, help you get to some of your best thoughts. For those of us who speak a lot, those thoughts that come out of the blue in the excitement and tension of speaking are great moments, and they give you material you can use again. But, if you have a set speech, and are so rehearsed that you have to be exactly at one point or another, it doesn't allow any room for better ideas.

I'm not saying you should not prepare. Inexperienced speakers especially should rehearse a lot in front of a video, not to get the content down but to observe their behavior and watch how they handle the content. The more experience you get, the less rehearsal time you will need.

MCNews: Do you think content becomes second nature for experienced speakers so they have more mental bandwidth to come up with new ideas as they are talking?

Decker: That's a good way to put it. I also think the degree of tension or fear you feel will determine the bandwidth you have left for other thoughts. For example, speakers who are comfortable and confident are able to follow about four mental tracks at a time as they talk. Those with less experience and a higher fear level find that their emotions flood those tracks, so they might be limited to only two tracks of thought at a time. This explains why people can go blank when speaking, because emotions block the mind.

MCNews: You have written that, for speakers to be heard, they must be believed. How do you suggest speakers make sure they are believed and heard?

Decker: You are believed when you are confident and certain of your message, and it shows. Most people either have habits they don't know about, or they get nervous and new mannerisms pop up that reflect lack of confidence and lack of certainty. So, whether it's in front of a large audience or in the conference room, good feedback is essential. Of the three types of feedback—from people, audio and video—the most powerful is video feedback.

It's not expensive to videotape your practices or meetings and speeches, but most people don't bother with it, which I believe is a mistake. It's extra work, but it has such a high payoff that I've become a nag on the subject.

MCNews: Do people resist because watching your faults on video gets so personal?

Decker: That's what communication is, a highly personal connection. When you see yourself on video, you perceive the disparity between what you think is coming across and what others are really getting. That disparity gets smaller and smaller the more you use video feedback. And, the more you do it, the less the personal aspects bother you; it becomes a positive experience when you see improvements.

The first time I saw my golf swing on video, I thought it was so terrible that I would never play golf again. But then, you get more objective, and see things you can fix or change. What turns it into a positive force is that you know your performance will improve. So, I urge speakers to get feedback, especially from video, and to use feedback constantly to improve how they project confidence in their core message.

MCNews: You've coached a lot of diverse people over the years. What's the most common area for improvement you usually identify?

Decker: A lot of business leaders are engaging and interesting in small groups, but when they get on stage they are stilted because they hold themselves back; they are completely different people up there. You don't have to jump up and down, but you do have to connect with people through your personal energy. That energy is expressed through eye communication, gestures, pauses and the use of your voice. Your enthusiasm and excitement show people what you are talking about, and that energy is what will be believed.

People have this notion that if they say the words, their listeners will understand. That's why so many speakers write and read their speeches; it's not as threatening, and they don't have to worry about skipping over something in the presentation. In fact, you can have the greatest

message in the world, but if you don't connect with people it doesn't matter how great the message, people won't hear it.

Speakers need to communicate their energy to their listeners. And, you don't really change much whether you are communicating to five people or 5000, in person or on the telephone. You adjust the range of your energy level and your emotions to fit the situation, but you still want the same authenticity. Confidence and certainty breed authenticity, and authenticity leads to believability.

MCNews: Last question – who are your favorite speakers and why?

Decker: One of the top speakers I know is a preacher/pastor, [Dr. Bruce Wilkinson](#), who is not only authentic, but a phenomenal communicator. He has also written several books, including *The Prayer of Jabez*.

Bill Clinton is a master communicator. Whatever we may think of his character or politics, he connects with people; he has energy and passion, and doesn't have any nervous tics of any kind. John Chambers, over at CISCO, is very effective even though he's soft-spoken. Steve Jobs, of course, is a classic speaker.

George Bush has become an effective communicator since he took office. I often use a clip of him from 9/11 that shows his firmness, and that the tics and telltale patterns he used to have are gone. He spoke to the nation with a confidence and certainty that he didn't have before, and that's when he became President. That's a good example of how important style and confidence are for a leader.

What all these speakers have in common is confidence, certainty, focus and a passion that is readily apparent. Management consultants need those skills in ways that go beyond public speaking. They must be confident leaders, yet listen and show they care. They must solve problems and look for new business at the same time, which is an exciting balance. To be perceived as real, your passion for a client's success must be real.

MCNews: Thanks for a great interview.

You can learn more about Bert Decker, his books, consulting, coaching and other services at <http://www.VisionVideos.com> and <http://www.boldassurance.com>.