Presentation Skills – Use Humor & Stories in Technical Presentations?

You’ve got to be kidding!

It was June 16, 1978, I was 18 years old, and summer had finally arrived in Ireland. The warm sunshine was piercing the shadow of our garden trees and shining brightly on the grass. Lying on the ground was my 16 year old brother Nigel. He was the picture of peacefulness as he dozed in the early afternoon. A wicked smile came to my face as I formulated a plan to destroy the pristine setting. The boredom of my day was going to explode into action.

I tiptoed to the side of the house where a garden hose was kept and gently uncoiled it. My heart beat loudly as I quietly pulled the hose toward my brother. I was practically beaming as I envisioned the outcome of my brilliant plan. Being a mischievous teenager was so much fun!

With hose in hand, I stooped down to where the lower leg seam of my brother’s shorts was exposed and inserted the hose a few inches without touching his skin.

Back at the side wall of the house, I opened the tap with one swift move. The hose snorted as the water cascaded through. I gazed around the corner to get a view of the mayhem about to unfold. Suddenly my brother’s shorts exploded into a tsunami of chilly water. His body first appeared to levitate horizontally. With a confused look on his face, his sleepy brain tried to work out what was happening. As he stood up, the hose fell from the leg of his shorts and he then noticed my grinning face peering from around the corner. He screamed hysterically, shouted, clenched his fists, and started running after me. This was not to have a happy ending.

I am now over 50 years old. I still have a strong sense of humor and mischief; however, I have grown to understand that there is a line of acceptable behavior. This also translates into using humor in presentations. I coach people to analyze the audience they will be presenting to and make sure that the humor is appropriate for the occasion and the audience. I use humor in nearly every presentation I conduct, whether it is a funny story that illuminates a point, or to provide entertainment and information retention when conducting technical training.

Why should an organization embrace humor and stories in presentations?

Each year, the Great Place to Work Institute asks tens of thousands of employees to rate their experience of workplace factors, including, “This is a fun place to work.” The results of the surveys are used to produce Fortune’s “100 Best Companies to Work For” list.

Adrian Gostick, the author of the book The Levity Effect, interviewed Amy Lyman, founder and research director of the institute, to talk about the benefits of incorporating fun into the workplace.

In the interview Amy Lyman stated, "If you are interested in increasing the opportunities for fun across an organization, and people genuinely engage and have fun, then that is an indication to
me of a strong workplace culture that people will want to commit to. You would see a correlation between fun and reduced turnover, better recruiting, greater camaraderie…all those positive things you see happen in great workplaces. You can also see the exact same thing happen within a work group."

More information on the Great Place to Work Institute can be found at http://www.greatplacetowork.com/news/reading.php

**Why should you include humor and stories in your presentations?**

Humor is such a powerful tool that it is well worth the effort to learn how to develop it and to incorporate it into speeches, presentations, training, and meetings.

Humor can help you form a bond with the audience and help them relax. It can help illuminate your point to make it understandable and to help with retention. Imagine how good it feels to have someone come up to you and say, “I remember you! You told the hilarious story about …………when you presented to my group several years ago.”

Humor is a powerful tool to use in all speaking occasions, but I recommend analyzing your audience to the fullest extent possible. Find out what is on their minds, what subjects are off limits, and get some feedback on the humor you are considering using. Building your instinct to be able to determine when to use humor is crucial for success. The humor instinct comes with experience and thoughtfulness.

While coaching a woman for a huge California event where she would be speaking to more than 1,000 of her peers, a question came up regarding the use of a line of risqué humor she had written. She really wanted to include levity in her presentation, but was in two minds about using it. She had been advised by friends to give it a shot.

I asked her about the audience and its makeup: ages, ethnicity, and ratio of men to women, etc. What was the purpose of the event? What was she trying to achieve? It became clear that this event, if done properly, could help build her credibility and her business.

The humor line she was considering was really more of a risqué pun, and I recommended that she leave it out. The wisecrack could easily be taken badly, could reflect negatively on her professionalism and could have an impact on the potential growth of her business. Just because some people laugh does not necessarily make the humor appropriate. We have all been in a situation where someone told a joke or story and there were groans or laughter. In our minds we silently considered it inappropriate and viewed the person telling it disapprovingly.

**What are some methods of incorporating humor or stories in presentations?**

- A relevant simple cartoon clip that is clearly visible to the audience can lighten up a PowerPoint Presentation. Make sure any writing on the cartoon is large enough and
clear so the audience will “get it” with the first glance. Get permission to use material that is not yours.

- Poke fun at yourself.

- Do an internet search to find funny quotations that relate to your content. I do a Google keyword search to see if anything relevant can be found. For example I did a keyword search using the keywords “teamwork funny quotations” and I immediately found the following:

  □ Teamwork is the ability to work as a group toward a common vision, even if that vision becomes extremely blurry. ~Author Unknown

  □ Life is like a dogsled team. If you ain't the lead dog, the scenery never changes. ~Lewis Grizzard.

  □ If things seem under control, you are just not going fast enough. ~Mario Andretti

- Take a common idiom or quotation that relates to your content and subtly change the wording so it is obvious that you have added a twist. One site to locate lists of idioms is [http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/](http://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/). An example would be the opening line of Shakespeare’s play Hamlet, “To be or not to be, that is the question”. This could be twisted to “To buy or not to buy, that is the question”.

- Gather, file, and use personal stories/anecdotes that illuminate the points you are making. Once you commit to this, you will find that you develop a filter where you start recognizing and capturing day to day occurrences that you might use at a later date.

- Gather, file, and use appropriate jokes that illuminate the points you are making. Only use jokes that are not well known so that you maximize the impact of the punch-line. If the joke is well known, you may just get a polite groan which can deplete the energy in the room. Do not open or close your presentation with a joke.

- Use humor development techniques such as the “rule-of-three”.

As a short, fat, bald Irishman who speaks with an accent let me tell you that the safest humor is to make fun of yourself. This is also a great way to warm up an audience and start them laughing. Audiences are very comfortable laughing at someone who is using self deprecating humor. On the other hand, if you make fun of someone else, people may be hesitant to laugh and will wait to see if others laugh first (particularly smaller audiences). If you do not have a few instinctive laughers (the kind of people who are typically first to laugh and do it intuitively) in the audience, you may get silence or token nervous groans.
One of the best examples I have seen of someone poking fun at himself and getting the audience rolling with laughter was at a corporate office meeting. At noon, a lunch was laid out on a table in the hall. As everyone ate, the room was penetrated by the loud beeping of what sounded like a forklift truck going in reverse. The noise was coming from a co-worker walking through the door slowly, in reverse, with his plate overflowing with slices of pizza and a big smile on his face. The conference room erupted in laughter. This security manager, who weighed more than 300 pounds, had recently acquired a two-way radio that hung on his belt and came with a choice of emergency alert sounds, and he had switched it on at the door. His sense of humor was spot-on, and I will never forget this hilarious scene. It has been years since this event, but I still find myself talking about it several times a year.

**How to find and compile stories/ anecdotes to use in technical presentations:**

Back when I was living in Ireland, I liked to visit a farmhouse-type pub way out in the countryside, seven miles from my home. I traveled there along roads that were barely the width of two small cars, with twists and turns all along the way. I frequented this pub on Tuesday nights because that was when musicians, poets and storytellers would show up for a fun, relaxing evening. A roaring fire would push out the dampness. The characters that would turn up ranged from pretty young farmer girls to weathered-looking storytellers to jolly musicians. Just thinking about this place brings fond memories. It amazed me the way the old storytellers could tell a story with so much tension, emotion, humor and visual detail.

As a public speaker and award-winning storyteller, I cannot emphasize enough the importance of using stories in keynote speeches, workplace meetings, presentations, seminars, or training. They make your points come alive, captivate your audience, and make your information memorable.

I also recommend using them to build rapport with the audience members prior to your presentation or meeting. This can help build your likeability and diffuse tension if your content will include controversial or unpopular information.

**Success Strategies:**

I want to share with you a methodology for compiling hundreds of your own stories. Once you begin doing this, you will never again look at a blank sheet of paper and think, “What can I write about?” or “How can I make this interesting?”

Purchase some small Post-it Notes and keep them in your car, wallet, and kitchen. Anytime you see, hear, or recall something amusing or interesting, write down a few words that will jog your memory later. The key is to write down the words immediately. My rule is to write down the thought within one minute. There is nothing more frustrating than standing with a pen in hand, looking at a Post-it Note and finding that the thought you had a few moments ago has evaporated.
Over the last few years, I have captured nearly 300 vignettes and observations that I build upon to incorporate into presentations, training sessions, humorous speech competitions, blog articles, newsletters, humor and even books. Every month or so, I gather my Post-it Notes and transcribe the information into a database. In this database I hyperlink each story summary to a separate page, where I stretch them from observations or vignettes into stories that have vivid details. Does this sound like a lot of work? It really isn’t. When I am having a lunch break or drinking coffee at home on the weekend, I might peruse my list of outlines and decide which one I am in the mood to elaborate on and write out in more detail. All my articles started as a sentence or two on a Post-it Note to remind me of the observation.

I’m a big fan of Post-it Notes, but you may prefer some electronic ways to capture your memories. These include:

1. Digital recorders. Keep a small one with you and use it to record a few words that will remind you of the story later. You can also incorporate a voice-to-text software program such as Dragon NaturallySpeaking.

2. Phones such as iPhones and Blackberries can incorporate an application that allows you to record messages and have them converted to text.

The key is to find a method you will use. Set a goal to capture a certain number of story prompts each week, and your brain will switch on a scanner that prompts you to be observant and to capture a memory that comes to mind. Watch or listen for “triggers,” such as someone telling you a story that reminds you of something.

One simple and effective technique for humor development – the Rule-Of-Three:

The excerpt below is from an award-winning humorous speech I delivered in 2008 to an audience of about 200 people. It is an example of the effectiveness of the humor rule-of-three.

The human brain finds it easy to process information presented in groups of three. For example, races begin with, “Ready, set, go!” You often see PowerPoint presentations showing information in groups of three bullet points.

The humor rule-of-three sets a pattern that follows one of these formulas: set-up, set-up, twist; or set-up, anticipation, twist. What gets laughter is that you are fooling the audience’s brains. The first two set-ups get the brain thinking in a certain direction, and it automatically tries to come up with the third item before you say it. When the twist goes in another direction, the audience responds with laughter.

Crrrraaaaack! The sound of a breaking tree branch exploded into the silence of the night. We were camping in the Canadian wilderness. My girlfriend whispered, “Did you hear that?”

“Yes,” I answered. “Are you afraid?” she asked. “No,” I lied. Then she said the seven little words that every man hates: “Go outside and see what it is.”
I nervously opened the zipper of the tent armed with only a keychain-sized flashlight. To my right was the cutest baby bear. “Growl, growl, growl,” it said. I was thinking that this would make a great humorous speech when from my other side came the loud, angry sound of Mummy Bear, “Growl, growl, growl!”

Mummy Bear was on my left, Baby Bear on my right and I (dinner) was in between.

You know how some young men can face danger and do incredibly brave things with adrenaline pouring into their bloodstream? That didn’t happen to me! I flung the flashlight at Mummy Bear, then sprinted for the nearest tree and began climbing.

Mummy Bear began shaking the tree. My brain told me, “Climb higher!” My stomach said, “Jump and run!” My bladder said, “Gotta go!” I fell out of the tree, rolled toward the campfire, and grabbed a piece of wood to use as a weapon. “AAAAHHH!” I screamed. My girlfriend peered through the opening of the tent just in time to see Mummy Bear and her cub running into the forest.

Christine, who’s now my wife, still wonders how someone my size can be so brave as to take on a bear. Between you and me, when I picked up that piece of wood, I felt fear, I felt anger, I felt … the searing red-hot embers burning into the palms of my hand from the still-smoldering piece of wood. AAAAHNN!

Using the humor rule-of-three in the bear story

Example 1: (set-up) Mummy Bear was on my left, (set-up) Baby Bear on my right and I, (twist) “dinner,” was in-between.

Example 2: (set-up) Do you know how some people can face danger and (set-up) do incredibly brave things with adrenaline pouring into their bloodstream? (twist) That never happened to me!

Example 3: Mummy Bear began shaking the tree, (set-up) my brain told me, “Climb higher!” (set-up) My stomach said, “Jump and run!” (twist) my bladder said, “Gotta go!”

Example 4: (set-up) I felt fear, (set-up) I felt anger, I felt … (twist) the searing red-hot embers burning into the palms of my hand from the still-smoldering piece of wood.

The bear-attack story showing these four examples and the audience’s reaction can be viewed on my YouTube Video Channel in the folder “Award Winning Storyteller.” Another video clip illustrating the rule-of-three in three different stories can be viewed in the folder “Humor Development and Delivery”: www.youtube.com/user/davehillspeaks#g/p
How to use the humor Rule-Of-Three in technical presentations:

As I am developing my presentation content, I look for areas where I describe multiple items and where humor would benefit from the 1, 2 and 3 structure. Once I identify sentences where this is possible, I spend a lot of time thinking of an effective twist.

The time invested in this process may seem excessive, but when you get the audience’s laughter it is well worth the effort. Once you find sentences that work, you can add them to your library of tried-and-tested humor that can be used more than once.

Recently I was travelling on a Southwest Airways flight and the stewardess used this technique effectively. The plane had just landed by noisily slamming into the runway and without missing a beat the stewardess was on the intercom and said, “Sorry about the rough landing folks-

- It wasn’t the pilot’s fault
- It wasn’t the co-pilot’s fault,
- It was the asphalt (heavy on the pronunciation of….ass-fault).

The passengers erupted in laughter. It this kind of wit and culture of levity that keeps me coming back to this fun-embracing airline. If you present to your customers do you think they would appreciate that you incorporated some levity into your content?

Should you use humor when presenting to upper management?

In March 2011, I was presenting a one-hour keynote on presentation skills for technical people. I was asked a great question: “Is it appropriate to use humor when delivering presentations to upper management?” The answer is yes.

I asked Michael Kerr, the North American expert on humor in the workplace to put together some detailed guidance on this subject. Michael Kerr is an award-winning Hall of Fame speaker and the author of “Putting Humor to Work.” The following are his words of wisdom:

People often ask me if it’s appropriate to use humor in business presentations, to which my response is always, “Only if you want to be effective and successful.”

When used appropriately, incorporating humor in any presentation helps you keep the audience not just awake (always a good thing), but fully engaged.

Humor can help you come across as more authentic, which in turn helps the audience like and trust you more. Remember, if the audience is going to buy your message, they have to first buy you. (There’s a reason, after all, that Jon Stewart of The Daily Show tops polls as “the most trustworthy journalist.”)
Because humor creates an emotional response, chances are your audience will retain the information longer. It increases the likelihood that people will act on the information you deliver. Humor can also be an amazing reframing tool, helping both you and your audience to see old ideas in new ways.

Finally, humor is one of the best ways to manage your nerves. Sharing a little humor is one of the best ways to beat the butterflies, boost your confidence, and keep you relaxed, spontaneous, and in the moment. The more relaxed you are, the more relaxed and receptive the audience will be.

“But what about using humor when my boss is in the audience? And my boss’s boss? And the entire head honcho team from corporate office? Isn’t there a chance I’ll come across as not taking the talk seriously?”

When people ask me this question I always remind them that, chances are, their senior management team is comprised of real human beings. In other words, all the benefits of using humor apply regardless of who’s in the audience. In fact, using smart, effective humor could make you stand out and shine in front of your boss. And if senior managers realize how effective your approach is with the entire audience, they might just be persuaded to practice a little less déjà moo (“the feeling you’ve heard this bull before”) and lighten up themselves the next time they have to present.

And I’m not suggesting for a moment you take either the audience or the topic lightly – it’s largely about taking yourself lightly in order to take your audience and talk seriously.

Now, having said that, here are three R’s to keep in mind when you flex your funny bone in the presence of your managers:

Respect Your Audience. Important in any talk, this is doubly important when senior managers are present. Which means when it comes to humor, stay even further away than you normally would from any off-color jokes. So no racist, sexist, ethnic, religious, sarcastic, or political humor.

Rule number one with any presentation is “know thy audience.” So know that senior managers tend to be extra sensitive about inappropriate use of humor. The good news is that when I’m talking about using humor in your presentation, I’m not suggesting you turn your talk into a night club act and start cracking jokes. There is an entire universe of funny research stats, hilarious quotes, funny anecdotes, funny cartoons, or even funny props that involve safe, clean, harmless humor.

Also be respectful of your boss’s position, especially when their boss is also present. Maybe you have the kind of relationship where you are comfortable kidding around with your boss when it’s
just you and him or her, but others in the room may not know that and an offhand comment taken in the spirit of fun by your boss might be viewed as suspect by others in the room.

Be Real. Ninety percent of the battle when it comes to public speaking is simply being comfortable in your own skin. You’re not giving a performance; in fact, it might help to remind yourself that you’re not even giving a speech. All you’re doing is having a conversation with a roomful of folks.

Whenever I’ve coached senior leaders, it amazes me to see the difference in their posture, tone of voice, and entire demeanor when they slip up and laugh at themselves. Humor, as one of the most human characteristics of all, helps us come across as more authentic. And if you come across more real in the presence of managers, you’ll also come across as more confident and competent.

Now, making jokes about a core competency related to your position on the topic at hand might just make you come across as insecure or incompetent, not always the best career move when speaking in front of your senior managers. However, laughing at your receding hairline or cracking a joke when you lose your place in your talk can help you come across as humble and honest.

Be Relevant. You are there to deliver a message that is relevant to the particular audience in front of you, not to entertain them. Humor is simply one of the delivery vehicles you’re using to make sure the relevant information gets imparted effectively.

You’ll score big points with senior managers when you take the time to understand their concerns and deliver a talk that is targeted specifically to them. So always plan your presentation around what your key messages are, and then look for ways to enhance it by incorporating relevant humor.

Several studies suggest that when presenters use humor even with dry subject matter such as university level statistic courses, audiences rate speakers’ credibility higher when the humor they used was relevant to the topic. Using relevant humor shows that you understand the subject matter so well that you can play with it to find the humor buried inside it.

The bonus of using relevant humor effectively is that by getting your audience to laugh and think at the same time, you are effectively killing two birds with one rubber chicken. So even if the humor doesn’t produce the laugh you were hoping for, it doesn’t matter because you’ve still delivered your point if you focus first and foremost on the message you’re trying to deliver. The humor is simply the icing on the cake.

If done right, relevant humor will also get you the biggest laughs in your talk. I constantly see “Bob from accounting” get huge laughs at conferences I am speaking at because Bob has referred to some inside joke that only the people in that room understand. So doing a little
research and finding some insider humor that will resonate with the managers in the audience will pay off enormously.

And if you do dig up some insider humor that involves one of your managers but you’re not entirely sure if it falls under the category of “safe humor,” then err on the side of caution by asking permission beforehand. Most managers see the benefit of being included in the humor because, like politicians who scramble to appear on late night comedy shows, they recognize that it helps humanize them in front of all the employees.

If you’re serious about being a more polished and persuasive presenter and want to incorporate more relevant humor in your talks, then start a few humor files related to the different topics you speak on. Collect funny newspaper articles, magazine clippings, weird trivia, or amazing stats related to the different topics. Once you start a few humor files, selective perception kicks in and you’ll start seeing more humor everywhere in your day to day life.

**Resources to learn techniques for story & humor development**

**Books:**


*The New Comedy Writing Step By Step* – Gene Perret

*Comedy Writing Workbook* – Gene Perret

**Website Resources:**

Dave Hill – Presentation Skills Articles [http://www.ardmoremedia.com](http://www.ardmoremedia.com)

Dave Hill – Humor Observations [http://twitter.com/davehillspeaks](http://twitter.com/davehillspeaks)


About Dave Hill

Dave is a professional speaker, trainer, and coach. As an engineer of 30 years, he helps technical people develop presentation skills excellence.

Picture engineers, computer programmers, project managers and others delivering clear concise information with passion and energy, illuminating their points with relevant stories and humor.

He also works with speakers who want stories and humor that audiences will tell their friends about.


In 2004 Dave was a finalist in the World Championship of Public Speaking; he made the top 10 out of 20,000 contestants. He is a member of the National Speakers Association (NSA).

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Video clips: http://www.youtube.com/user/davehillspeaks#g/p
Dave’s humor on Twitter http://twitter.com/davehillspeaks
LinkedIn Profile http://www.linkedin.com/in/davehillspeaks

Dave’s 2011 Dallas Forth Worth Full-Day Presentation Skills Workshop Dates:

September 22nd – http://www.davehill09222011.eventbrite.com

November 10th - http://www.davehill11102011.eventbrite.com

Arrange to have Dave conduct his Presentation Skills Workshop at your association, company, or group – http://www.davehillatyourworkplace.eventbrite.com

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