

# STAGE FRIGHT



What the actor's craft teaches us about business presentations. Research in neuroscience, as explored in recent books, underscores our understanding of how human functioning plays out in effective leadership.

If all the world's a stage, then certainly at the heart of business is the art of acting. We play roles, we orchestrate meetings, we speak extemporaneously, we direct action, and we script presentations. Isn't that what you do almost every day? In fact, isn't that how most accomplishments happen? We work mostly with words, expressions, and gestures, those unconscious "beats" of communication that sometimes convey much deeper meanings.

We talk about the acting we do all day in terms of "good communication," refer to it as "leadership in action," or speculate about meaning as "reading the tea leaves." We may not think very much about the applicability of the actor's craft to our business life. But just as every actor is telling his or her part of a larger story, so we write our company's book by playing our parts, no matter how small or large they may be.

In fact, the common denominator between acting on the stage and performing a role in a company is the need to create a sense of life that is truthful so that the audience can find their own insights about what it means and what it is telling them to do. For at the heart of selling, decision-making, leading, resolving conflict, or working in teams is the "action, reaction" or "stimulus, response" that every actor strives for with the other characters and the audience.

The question, of course, is what lies behind the actor's skill at conveying meaning, purpose, or action? And how you can apply it in a business setting?

Great actors do not have some special, inborn skill that is not available to the rest of us. In Anne Bancroft's words, "Acting is a matter of becoming aware that you are thinking, of knowing what it is you are feeling, then of controlling it any way you want." She is pointing to the natural process that lives in all humans – we think, our thoughts are expressed as feelings, and the feelings give rise to our behaviors – as well as to the uniquely human power we have been given to choose. We are not slaves to our thinking any more than we are obedient to another person against our wishes.

Knowing this essence is what enables an actor to be present, in the moment, and to access his or her full creative faculties and talents. Experiencing this is like being in the midst of the same PowerPoint presentation (for the 32nd time) and suddenly seeing yourself doing it almost as if you were someone else. In that moment, you might be bowled over by fresh insights about the material or your audience that cause you to change your delivery, tone, or expression in ways that are refreshing to the listeners and surprising even to you! The material may be exactly the same, the script is unchanged; but you have changed, and your presentation will have a spontaneity and grace that transcend your spoken words.

This kind of spontaneity begins with our becoming aware of our feelings, for they are the windows to inspired thought. Actors need to have this awareness, for they are trying to create an artificial environment by using their consciousness (about their character, the other actors, and the script) to tap the unconscious (to portray the meaning life-truthfully).

Business people face a similar challenge since so often they are trying to create something out of nothing! By this I mean we are trying to serve the needs of customers even though they may not be able to articulate their needs; we are attempting to create a client experience that goes beyond a product's physical attributes, or we are trying to direct a staff's action in ways that are inspiring and not controlling.

This is much easier to do when you have warm feelings towards others and know that you are calm and your thinking is tranquil, without the busyness or sense of urgency that so often overtake us. In this frame of mind, you can access your creative unconscious and gain insights, flashes of inspiration, or just a sense of knowing what to do. Some would term this a state of profound concentration, of being completely aware of yourself and others and being able to perform something completely familiar and routine with ingenuity, verve, and spontaneity.

By contrast, trying to rely on your logical brain, using the experience and knowledge you've accumulated, blocks you from accessing your creative unconscious. You may experience this as, perhaps, anxiety about remembering all the material on the slides, fear of the audience's reaction to what you are saying, or boredom from going over the same old stuff. It's not that analytic and logical thought does not have a purpose, but rather that it is ill-suited to the kind of human interaction where you are seeking to inspire, teach, or provoke others.

Great actors have a knack for creating a vivid picture of their circumstances, giving context and depth to their performance. They can be working on an empty stage without props and yet convince an audience that they are making a bed or folding laundry. This is done not by rote gestures, but rather by expressing exactly how it feels, the physical sensation, to tuck in the sheets or fold the laundry.

For the actor, the key is knowing to start small. An imaginary shower begins with feeling the water on the back of your head, not on your whole body. It is as if human thought cannot help but take a small fragment of information and amplify it into a sizable parcel of knowledge – that feeling of "I know!"

As business people, we face the same challenge of trying to make the intangible, tangible. So we can begin by concentrating on the sensations and details that feel most real to us, then gradually widen our perspective to include just one other person, then the audience in the room, and finally the entire company, no matter where they are situated.

This can be most helpful when you are asked to speak to others. For example, if a visiting group is inspecting your floor and stops by your desk for a quick tour of your department, say it's payroll, don't panic! Find a detail to focus on and start there, perhaps the common experience of not getting a paycheck for the amount you expected. You might find it natural to expand from that small facet and draw a vivid picture of how that might happen in the context of churning out hundreds of thousands of checks annually, each one of which has 100% "audit for accuracy."

Telling this story one sensory detail at a time will be memorable because people will sense your understanding and relate it to their own experience. Because communication that makes a lasting impression stems from feelings, the sensory aspect is more important than the content. Have you ever been in a foreign country and had a conversation with someone who does not speak your language? I'll wager that the memory of this is still vivid. This is what I am pointing to.

Portraying one small detail at a time, with feeling, is exactly the opposite of what most people do when they try to make their case. Usually, people tell everything in a rush of words, spinning out fact upon fact in a way that simply overwhelms the audience. After a few minutes it becomes mind numbing. PowerPoint presentations are not our friends here!

The final point concerns choice. This is the human element that allows us to experience something freshly, no matter how often we have said or done it before. Choice is the uniquely human capacity to act on a thought, stemming from listening deeply with all your senses.

This is not the same as logical or analytic choice that requires deliberation and investigation. What I am pointing to is more organic, often going on below the level of conscious awareness. The experience is akin to a flash of realization that is immediately acted upon or the surprise of finding yourself saying or doing something because it just feels right.

For an actor, operating in the artificial world of theater, behavior must be true to the script. But for an ordinary person, truthful behavior is the normal, default setting we call life. It is operating whenever we are living moment to moment, allowing our thoughts to come and go.

In business, choice is almost always bounded by intention. In other words, you know the direction you are trying to go without necessarily knowing how you will get there. What is required is to put yourself in the role by remembering, for example, that your goal is to serve the larger purpose, a question of "loving the art in yourself and not yourself in the art."

For all of us, it is as if our brains become our own stagehands, getting on with the work while we are performing the scenes. It is knowing that you are working even when it feels as though you aren't (I am just having an interesting conversation with my friends) by trusting the deeper intelligence inside.

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