



# HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

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## You Are the Best Visual

by Judith Humphrey



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# You Are the Best Visual

*Use your own physical presence to drive home your presentation's point.*

**J**OHAN F. KENNEDY'S inaugural address. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's Falkland Islands address. All great speeches. Each has earned a place in history. What do they have in common? None of these speakers were using visual aids. Just imagine John F. Kennedy standing before the world at his inauguration with a flipchart that read, "The Torch Has Been Passed." Or Martin Luther King showing a slide with a clip art image of a black girl and a white girl holding hands. Such props clearly have no place in these stirring speeches. In fact, they would detract from the drama of the moment. Why?

Great leaders understand that they are the best visual. They instinctively know that their message will come through best if the audience looks at them and listens to them—with no distractions. Audiences that divide their attention will only be able to partially commit to you.

Let's look at the logic behind this statement. The goal of any business presentation, speech, or conversation should be to lead others. Of course, there are many possible secondary goals of a presentation—to entertain, to inform, to share expertise, or to persuade. *But if you are speaking as a leader, your only goal should be persuading the audience to think or act differently.*

The best way to create a persuasive leadership moment is to become the audience's focal point. If you are committed and engaged, the audience can see it in your face, in your gestures, in the way you walk, in the way you stand, in the way you hold your head high. Your body becomes the very best visual for portraying your leadership message.

We say a great leader has "presence." That is, the speaker is *present* in a way that engages everyone in the room. Many great speakers realize that being present gives them power to persuade. So they do everything they can to maximize their visibility.

President Woodrow Wilson broke with a 113-year tradition by personally reading his messages to Congress, rather than sending them to be read by a clerk. His reason? He wanted to show "that the President of the United States is a per-

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son, not a mere department of the Government hailing Congress from some isolated island of jealous power, sending messages, not speaking naturally and with his own voice." Of course, Wilson lived in an era before the temptations of PowerPoint slides and multimedia presentations. But the truth still holds.

Motivational leaders today also realize the importance of presence. Tom Peters is admired for his charisma, in part because he makes the most of his physical presence. He often moves away from the podium when speaking, moving back only to look at his text. But a wide variety of personal styles are possible for the committed, passionate speaker. For example, creativity guru Edward De Bono uses his physical presence in a very special way. He creates his presentations on the spot, while sitting in front of his audience.

Props that enlarge your presence can be useful. For example, family members flanking a politician are a "prop" that says the politician has family values. The leader who delivers an address from a battlefield, as Abraham Lincoln did at Gettysburg, clearly shows a concern for those who fell in the struggle. These props don't have the distancing effect of words on a slide.

Emphasis on your physical presence should not detract from the importance of your message. In fact, physical presence must underscore your message. By concentrating on you visually, the audience can actually hear your message better. That's because an audience "hears" with its eyes.

Winston Churchill well understood that if you could visually distract an audience, the speaker would have less power. During Parliamentary debates, he would smoke his cigar while his opponents were speaking. First he would insert a hat pin through his cigar. As the ash grew longer, people in the audience sat staring at the cigar, wondering when the ash was going to fall off. Because they were focused on his cigar, they would stop listening to his Parliamentary opponent.

Churchill realized that in a battle between the "eye" and the "ear," the eyes have it. No speaker, no matter how effective a presenter, can control the room when the audience is visually distracted.

Managers often use PowerPoint or other visual aids, believing that their audience can absorb more of their talk if they listen *and* look. But that's not the case. When speakers use visuals, they create competition for the audience's attention between the eye and the ear. And because the eye is a much more powerful sensory device than the ear, the eye wins. Your information gets star billing; your leadership qualities finish a distant second.

PowerPoint slides are usually a dumbed-down version of the narrative script you are delivering. Visuals rely on bullet points; you speak in full sentences, with

illustrations and stories. Slides are dispassionate; your voice and gestures provide passion and emphasis. So in deflecting the audience's attention away from you to the bullet points, you're reducing the quality of your material and its impact on the audience.

But it gets worse. Visual blight overwhelms many slides. Far from underscoring your points, these "visually challenged" slides frequently illustrate mental confusion. Lou Gerstner, when he first joined IBM, complained: "I have never seen foils [overhead transparencies] like in this company. There must be a manual that says every foil must have four circles, two squares, two triangles, 16 arrows, and as many of them as possible should be three dimensional—with shading—and at least four colors." How many business presentations have you sat through where just puzzling out the cluttered information on the screen caused you to lose several minutes of the speaker's talk?

Speakers love these slide shows because they function as a "crutch"

or security blanket. It's easier to show prepared slides—particularly if they've been blessed by the PR department or your technical people, or your boss—than to speak from your own passion.

Some speakers defer to visuals because they are nervous. The darkened room appeals to them. They become narrators. But the ugly truth is that the leader can't lead from the sidelines using a crib sheet. Two examples:

- Speakers often delegate speech creation to a subject matter specialist, who loads up each visual with elaborate graphics and excessive content. The result is that the bells and whistles take center stage, relegating the presenter and his or her message to a supporting role. The opportunity for leadership is lost in a sea of information. Michael Dell, Chairman and CEO of Dell Computer, succumbed to this approach in a recent presentation. His people had put together a glossy visual presentation, but as Dell spoke he paid little attention to what was

on the slides. In fact, at several points the statistics he was reciting bore no relationship to the numbers that were on the slides.

- At a glitzy presentation given by the CIO of a Fortune 1000 company, state-of-the-art slides dazzled the audience. After the presentation, a member of the audience came up to him and said, "Do you have a card—the card of the firm that produced the presentation?" Ouch. But the audience member was simply giving credit where it was due.

In sum, if you want to achieve your maximum power, focus the audience's attention on yourself. Only then will you have control of the room. Only then will you experience your full potential to reach and motivate an audience. Only then will you be a convincing leader. □

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