

Are You Too Smart for Your Own Good?

Speakers and seminar leaders don't need to do all the work.

The Point

I still attend lots of workshops, seminars, and speaking engagements where the presenter seems compelled to talk TO the audience. Though I do believe they're expressing a sincere desire to teach, enlighten, and inform their audience with the best of intentions, how often have you actually been inspired by sheer quantities of information?

I don't give "speeches" anymore. When I'm asked to give one on a topic I feel comfortable with, I accept but when introduced as the speaker, I love to change that perception by saying, "Well, I am going to stand in front of the room today, but I don't plan to be your speaker. Instead, I hope to serve you better by being your listener." The rebel in me revels in this!

I sincerely believe that my success as a "speaker," facilitator, trainer, teacher, whatever, rests more in my ability to hear what people need and to create an environment where they can get that, in content and delivery, from whoever can best deliver it at the time.

Now ofcourse, if I've shown up for a speaking gig in the hopes of getting lots of attention and ceremonious fluffing of my expert ego, I certainly wouldn't employ the above approach. But if I want to truly empower my audience by asking, listening, and delivering what they want and need, then I'm going to continually refocus my attention on them. We're going to have discussions, demonstrations, and exercises and only enough focus on me to maintain the energy of focused connection and involvement among the participants.

Example

I attended a workshop last weekend with an energetic healer and her husband, a psychologist, with a new technique to assist people to return to their essence, to lessen the influence of their personality and coping mechanisms that they had developed through childhood.

While I was most interested in the topic, and they had a lot of valuable information, they almost lost me. There was very little experiential interaction or none at all as they talked for over an hour about their mysterious techniques. It was apparent that most everyone there was puzzled and trying to figure out what it was all about. They kept asking but the explanation got more and more obscure and it felt as we were being marketed to death. Finally, during the 30 minutes of the 2-hour presentation, they offered an opportunity for everyone to have a short reading. Lo and behold, the seminar picked up strength, everyone started asking questions and were very involved. It was evident now through their work on us that they were quite talented and had something to offer that all the words in the world would never have conveyed. Several people even signed up for individual work afterwards.

Why do people insist on telling us when they can show us? Maybe it's just the way that we were taught, or maybe it's just the best way we know. Whenever you get the chance, teach people a facilitation tip that will make their presentations more powerful and engaging with less effort.

Tips

- **If you have the choice between showing and telling, show first, tell later.** Then people know and feel what you're talking about. Also takes a lot of pressure off of you to entertain. Once you impact people with a physical or emotional experience, they'll have lots to tell themselves.
- **Talk to your audience.** Ask them more about themselves and what they're interested in learning at the beginning and adjust your approach accordingly.
- **Don't talk so much.** Check in with your audience periodically and see what they have to say about what you're saying. Are they getting it? Do they have something to add that can amplify or validate your point?
- **Get them talking to each other.** Use simple methods to get participants talking to one another about their experiences, what they're learning, what they want, etc. This brings more energy and attention to the group, can mine new perspectives, and can improve the experience for everyone.

Our Value Lies in Our Ignorance.

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The Point

Facilitators are highly regarded (at least we hope) professionals, right? We must present a strong and professional image as we're "on stage" much of the time, performing an important function for our clients, employees, students, neighbors, etc. And as is often the case with people standing in front of a room, orchestrating processes, offering feedback and advice, we are looked to as authorities, as experts, as wise men and women.

So it's not surprising when we begin to believe these things about ourselves and feel we have to live up to the "image" of the professional expert. As this image takes hold in our own minds, it may be difficult at times to not have the answer or know where to go next. In and of itself, this is not a bad place to be, however, we can really short change those we serve by withholding this information.

Huh? What are you talking about? Are you asking me to share my weakness with my people? My clients? That would be suicide! I think it's time to unsubscribe from this journal!

Now hold on dear reader. There may be another way to look at this. You see, I view Facilitation, or Facilitative (Servant) Leadership, if you will, as a kind of a spiritual task. I suggest that one of the most powerful things you can do as a leader or as a facilitator is to empower your people to access and utilize their own wisdom and problem-solving skills as a group. This is not likely to happen when they are focused on you as the authority.

Example

Hold the space for truth and honesty. There are few places one can venture in the world where private truths can be fully shared and respected. The facilitator that gives voice to those subtle perceptions that no one sees or admits is very empowering, e.g., "I'm sorry people but I'm experiencing complete confusion right now and don't know where to go next. What to you see right now?"

Be willing to be unliked. Putting yourself in the position of not knowing, shining the light on an unflattering behavior, or giving air time to a minority opinion can piss some people off. This may sometimes prevent you from sharing your full truth. Giving up your need to be liked by those you serve will, in the end, serve them best, and garner you respect in the long run.

Find strength in your vulnerability. If you can view yourself as simply a catalyst for a dynamic and ongoing process, that process will evolve. A catalyst is not attached to its greatness. It is transformed in the process it seeks to catalyze. Sharing what's real for you is transforming for all concerned. Surrender to being transformed by sharing your truth irrespective of your judgments about it. "I've never been here before, I'm not sure where we're going, but I'm willing to be a mirror for you on the journey."

See through eyes of innocence. A child doesn't anticipate the outcome of sharing her truth, and as a result, is granted the gift of living fully in the present moment. Your innocence will allow you to see through the ever-present crap of judgment, fear, and withholding. If you begin to risk trusting your truth, your vulnerability, and your innocence; if you step into who you are, not what you know, you will be leading people to themselves, and their true strength.

About the Author

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