

The Essence of a Great Presentation by Whitney Johnson

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Last week, I played the piano for my friend Macy Robison's cabaret-style recital Children Will Listen. The 1,400-seat Browning Center auditorium at Weber State University was sold out. The crowd loved her. I played exceptionally well, but the outcome could have been very different.

Prior to this event, we had performed the recital for audiences of no more than fifty people. Each time, nerves bedeviled me. I majored in music in college, but over the last two decades I've played only intermittently, and never professionally. A few months ago when I had worked with Macy in the recording studio, I found the circumstances even more daunting. Nearly every time I began to play, my mind would start churning: "I'm not a professional musician. I'm going to make a lot of mistakes. The audience/album producer/recording engineer will think I'm lousy. I am lousy. I am going to let Macy down. Why did I think I could do this?"

I've come to realize that my mental stumbling started when the performances stopped being about providing a musical foundation for Ms. Robison and creating a good experience for the audience — and became about me. As soon as my focus shifted to "How am I doing?" "Do I sound good?" "Do they like me?" nerves inevitably took over.

Perhaps you've experienced something similar as you've prepared for an important presentation at work: a board meeting, a speaking engagement, or a one-on-one meeting. I know I have. One of the most stressful parts of my job as an analyst at Merrill Lynch, and now at Rose Park Advisors, is to meet with investors. At Merrill, for example, when I met with investors such as Fidelity, it was my job to be an expert on the stocks I followed. It was expected that I would have built a financial model, be able to readily talk through the assumptions behind my projections and valuation and then explain which stocks I liked and why. Often I would script out what I wanted to cover in these meetings, but once I showed up, I needed to be prepared to let the meeting go where my client, the investor, wanted the meeting to go. Naturally I couldn't anticipate every question, and hence I didn't always have an answer, at least not in the moment.

Then, and even now, walking into a meeting knowing I won't field every question as well as I'd like can be intimidating. Yet when I present myself not as a soliloquizing authority, but rather as a resource to help clients get their job done, they seem to trust me more.

As we ready ourselves for a "performance," we envision the ideal: today I will deliver the perfect speech, and the client or audience will be so wowed, they will be sold. But for me, whenever playing the piano or giving a presentation becomes about performing — about proving something, rather than communicating — I rarely do well. Like Sisyphus, I can never roll the stone up the hill of my expectations.

In setting aside the script and focusing on the client's bottom line, instead of our own, we lay the groundwork for a long-lasting rapport. Of course, it is essential that we are well prepared and know our material cold; however, knowledge alone is insufficient. Moving

away from a scripted, pundit-style, one-size-fits-all message, we will certainly make mistakes. But, the only real mistake is thinking that these slip-ups equal failure. If we focus on the audience, not ourselves, whether in a one-on-one meeting or a packed auditorium, we'll deliver a crowd-pleasing, even praiseworthy, performance every time: because success is ultimately about connection, not perfection.

This article originally appeared in the Harvard Business Review and is published here with permission from the author. More from Whitney Johnson on Twitter: @johnsonwhitney.