

The secret of the three most powerful presentation tools

These tools only work if you consciously pay attention to *breathing out*. If you stare into space with your mouth closed, well, you're not using the tools and they don't work. If you look at the client, but don't smile, he might feel intimidated. Of course, if that's what you want ...

Think about the tension that can build up during a meeting, a sales call or a negotiation. The one who breaks the silence loses.

Keep paying attention to your breathing, as deep as you can in your stomach, and give yourself a chance to win. Breathing out will keep you calm and in control, and Mother Nature will make sure that after a few seconds you'll automatically breathe in again.

Situation

It's a short open training, just one evening. About 130 managers, salespeople and independent businesspeople are in the room. At one point Jack puts up his hand and asks:

'Yes, but what do you do when you're really nervous?'

'Do you want to take a risk?'

'Sure.'

'Right. Come up front.'

This alone is pretty frightening and confronting for Jack, but he's serious and wants an answer. I ask him to tell us who he is and what he does. It's painful to hear him stumbling over his words and watch him twisting his body in discomfort. I ask the audience:

'Could Jack's presentation be better?'

The response is a polite but definite 'yes'.

'Jack, do you want to make some improvements?'

'Yes.'

'Jack, do you know that you move your arms a lot when you're talking? (*affirmative nod*) Would you please swing your arms, make circle movements around your shoulders ... faster, higher ...'

I ask him simply to *exaggerate* the movements he's making anyway, and to loosen up his shoulders with the exercise.

Then I ask him to jump up and down a few times, landing on his *heels*. Jack laughs - he's having fun now - and complies.

'Tell us again who you are and what you do.'

This time there are clear signs of appreciation from the audience. It's already a much better presentation.

'Great ... and: could it be better?'

'Yes.'

I ask those in the third row to put their hands in the air.

'Jack, look at each person in the third row. Smile. Keep breathing. When you've looked at someone and he feels you've *seen* him, he'll put his hand down. That's when you go on to the next person. When there are no more hands in the air, you may begin to speak.'

I encourage him to keep breathing and smiling. He completes the exercise and a spontaneous round of applause confirms his success. Jack expresses his amazement and delight, and admits that he feels quite different. His body is calm, his voice is deeper, his language is direct and clear. In short, he's credible. Jack has *experienced* the answer to his question.

A last word about abdominal breathing

There must be hundreds of books about the value of conscious abdominal breathing, its power, and what it can help you achieve. It is sufficient here to emphasise the importance of breathing in presentation training, and in the presentations themselves. Correct breathing directly influences how you feel, how you present and how you come across. You can change your charisma *just* by breathing more effectively!

Silence and presenting for small groups

Apart from presentations to (larger) groups, you're constantly presenting to smaller groups: to just one or two people around the table, with clients at project meetings, and in discussions with colleagues. The quality of your silence is perhaps your most powerful aid in presenting and communicating in such situations. You ask questions, you explain matters, and above all you *listen* with all the attention you can muster. We all start out in life with two ears and just one mouth - maybe that's a tip to listen more and speak less ...!

My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and to ask a few questions.

Peter Drucker

It happens all too often that conversations tend to resemble a series of monologues instead of a true *exchange* and interaction of ideas and opinions. The listener misses what the other person is saying because he's so busy with what he wants to say next: '*Hurry up, I want to talk again.*' And the speaker is so busy with what he's saying that he completely misses the (mainly) non-verbal signals indicating that the other person wants to say something, too. The best conversations are those where each participant continues to observe the

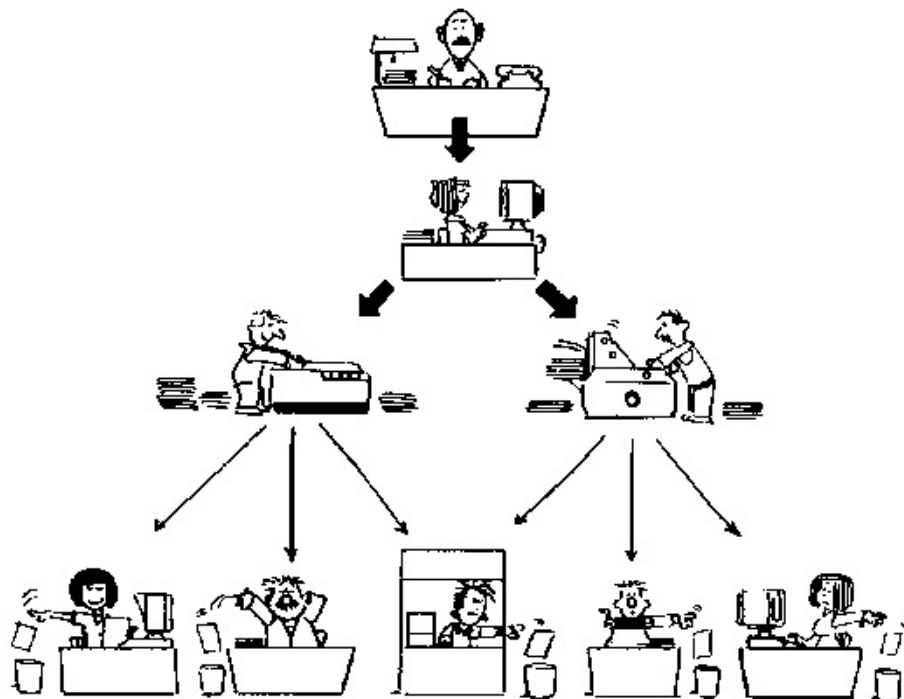
others while he is talking. Where the listeners *actively* listen to what is being said.

Active listening is a vital part of presentation skills, especially in group presentations and sales meetings. Where silences are built in, and where you create possibilities with those silences.

When you are willing to wait until the other person has truly finished speaking, what do you think that does for your image of self-confidence?

I should add that if you wait long enough - as in selling, when you've asked for the order - the chances are that the other person will become unsure enough to break the silence. That's when you often get to hear the most vital information!

For the sake of clarity: 'active listening' is a complex combination of verbal and non-verbal signals indicating your presence, your continued attention and your encouragement to the other to keep talking.



Remember that in every situation you are competing for the attention of your listeners, your readers, your clients ...!

A powerful answer

In which of the following situations do you make the best impression?

You are asked a question, or a problem is presented to you, and you respond immediately (because you understand the matter perfectly).

You hear the question, and even though you know the answer, you wait a few seconds.

You'll surely agree that you come across more convincingly and powerfully in the second instance. Waiting, however, requires a certain stillness of body and spirit in order to be truly effective.

More and more courses these days include simple relaxation (meditation) exercises. You'd be amazed at how popular and enjoyable these exercises are, and how much energy you get from them!

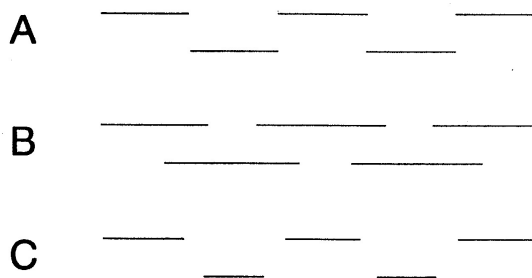
Conversation as a game

You've just read about the importance of building pauses into the conversation. A good conversation should be an *exchange*, a give and take that encourages a sort of 'ping-pong' game.

When you breathe out consciously before answering, you give yourself a better chance of reacting spontaneously and more accurately to everything your partner has said, verbally and non-verbally. What otherwise happens - and see if you recognise this - you begin to formulate responses based on the smaller units of information you receive. Breathe out, and you let go of the tension you build up around your potentially premature answer; your subsequent answer is then a reaction to the totality of the communication.

It is absolutely essential to bear this concept in mind while dealing with questions from your audience in more formal situations, and always in group situations when there's a lot at stake.

A broad-based presentation course pays attention to this game.



A, B and C represent three nationalities or cultural groups. Two people in each group are having a conversation. Which couple is from Italy or Greece? And which from a country such as Japan? Which group could be West European? Answers and explanations at the end of the chapter!

My thanks to Fons Trompenaars for introducing me to this simple and effective model.

Words should only serve to improve the quality of the silence.
Karel Jonckheere

Your inner silence

Have you ever noticed how full your head is of thoughts, pictures and sounds? All this activity between your ears restricts you in fully experiencing what *is*.

When you pay more attention to how you sit, stand, move, breathe and relax, you'll gradually discover more silence inside. This in turn gives you more 'space' to listen more deeply to others, and so be able to react more effectively to their needs. Your 'presence' will further encourage them to confide in you.

A standing exercise

You'll probably agree that these characters waiting for the bus are all communicating *something* by the way they stand or slouch ...



For this exercise, and to experience *balanced* posture, stand where you can read the following text. You'll notice that it's printed larger so that you can read it more easily while standing (just a matter of 'reader-friendliness!'). All right, up you get!

Place your feet as wide apart as your shoulders.

Let your arms dangle.

Check the position of your hands and if necessary roll your shoulders back so that your hands turn with the palms towards your thighs.

Pull your shoulders up to your ears, as high as they'll go; keep them tensed for a few seconds, then release them as fully as possible as you breathe out.

Breathe out in your belly.

Empty your lungs.

Breathe out fully through your mouth, making a deep groaning sound.

Breathe in and out, feeling how you push your belly in and out as your lungs fill and empty. Keep your lower jaw as relaxed as possible, and your lips apart.

While breathing, keep your shoulders relaxed; it's your belly that goes in and out, *not* your shoulders that go up and down (then you're doing it wrong).

Rock slowly from one foot to the other. Do this by slowly shifting your weight onto the other foot. Then back again. Slowly, four or five times - then find a position that feels comfortable with your weight on both feet.

Now rock slightly forwards and backwards. Shift your weight slowly from your heels to your toes, and back again. Slowly, four or five times - then find a position in between in which you feel comfortably solid on both feet.

Relax your knees slightly.

Keep breathing in and out through your mouth, pushing your stomach in and out.

Relax your mouth, let your chin drop. (*Amazing how tense it was!*)

Relax your tongue. (*Amazing how tense it was!*)

Relax your backside. (!)

Give your attention to your shoulders, and notice how relaxed they are since you started breathing in your belly.

Notice the heaviness in your hands as they just hang at your side.

Feel - enjoy! - how in balance you are as you stand. Remember this feeling and the posture.

Finally check the angle of your head. See if you want to change it, so as to look someone *straight* in the eyes.

Dear reader, congratulations on completing the exercise. Please take a seat and read on!

The posture you've just read about and perhaps also experienced, is ideal for letting your audience know that you're fully present. Nothing more and nothing less.

Every other posture tells its own story, which may not be quite what you want.

Remember, you're the one who chooses what you project and what others see.

This standing position is ideal, of course, for when you're presenting to a group, or for when you wish to gain more power during a meeting. Even the way you sit can be improved. It all boils down to what you want to project and how you wish to be seen. Are you dynamic and enthusiastic, or a know-all? If you want to project dynamism and energy, straighten your back, put both feet flat on the floor with a 90° angle at the knee. (Yes, try it out now; you don't need larger type for this exercise!)

Now you can breathe better (more deeply). Move forward in your chair so that there's a column of air between your back and the back of the chair. Place your forearms on the table so that you lean ever so slightly on them. Your fingers can touch each other in a relaxed way (palms open!); avoid entwining them! If

you continue your abdominal breathing, you're doing fine, and are ready for anything!

If you want to fall asleep during a meeting, this is the way to do it - at least you project that you're present!

Oh yes, before I forget. If you *do* want to come across as the know-all, slouch deeply in your chair, put one leg loosely over the other knee, point your chin upwards, and steeple your hands together into the air. Half close your eyes, take off your glasses (if you wear them) or push them back into your hair (if you have any), and the picture's more or less complete.

A final tip, primarily for those readers, male or female, who wear a jacket. If you're in a panel discussion, a forum or are interviewed for TV, pull down and sit on the tail of your jacket. In this way you'll remove the shapeless bulge of material that tends to creep up on your shoulders and can be most unsightly.

Finally ...

Our daily (business) lives are getting busier and busier. There's always so much to do and we have insufficient time for both our clients and ourselves. It's up to us as individuals to treasure every moment of peace and quiet, for that's where we can make our greatest discoveries.

Solution to the ABC model

A: two West-Europeans engage in an exchange of monologues.

B: a Mediterranean couple talk excitedly together.

C: two Japanese who weigh not only the words but the *implications* of both the other's statement *and* their own response before replying.

Naturally, B represents two enthusiastic West-Europeans, too!