

Six Crucial Rules for Keynote Speakersⁱ

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In presenting to a convention, having the right story to tell is only half the battle. Just as critical is to tell the story right.

1. Choose a plain style of storytelling

There are many styles of storytelling. However the basic style of storytelling that is most suitable for the modern fast-paced organization is a style that is plain, simple and direct. This will be the foundation that you can customize for particular settings and requirements. It is close to the classic style of writing described in a wonderful book by Thomas, and Turner, *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose*. (1994, Princeton University Press.)

Let's take an example. It happens to be Lou Gerstner, talking at a press conference in New York on June 5, 1995 about the events that led up to the IBM's purchase of Lotus. As a story, there's nothing unusual or remarkable about it. It's a typical example of business storytelling: plain, simple and workmanlike. It's not a story that would be considered "brilliant." Nor is there anything that would draw attention to Gerstner as a storyteller. Listen:

I think it is useful to step back and look at the evolution of this industry to really understand the strategic rationale of this transaction. The industry began as a very centralized model of computing. It was the world of mainframes, large central processors.

And while there will be the need for central processors for many, many years to come, that first phase ended a decade or so ago -- and the second phase began, which is the era of the PC.

And so powerful, stand-alone computers were put in the hands of workers around the world, and we had the PC revolution. It provided enormous personal productivity benefits to workers in enterprises, small businesses, and even at home.

But it's clear to me and to many others that the industry is now entering a new phase of the information technology industry. And it is a phase in which all of the computing power of an enterprise is linked together -- so that the mainframes or servers and the PCs become linked in a network...

...but not just a hierarchical network, so that the PCs can talk to the mainframes or servers -- but very importantly, a world in which all of the users can talk horizontally to each other, and to work together in what is known as

"collaborative" or "team" computing. That is a very, very powerful need of our customers around the world. [1]

While not being in any way remarkable, Gerstner's story illustrates a number of important characteristics of a style of storytelling that is effective for leaders in organizations.

2. Tell your story as if you were talking to a single individual

Gerstner's idiom, and the idiom of most effective organizational storytelling, is the voice of conversation. The model is that of one person speaking to another. The style appears to be spontaneous and motivated by the need to tell the listeners about something.

It's as if it has just occurred to Gerstner to tell his audience about what has been going on in the computer industry, and so he begins to do so. What he has to say doesn't feel like a set piece. There's no sign that Gerstner has labored over the language beforehand, systematically refining and arranging his thoughts, editing their expression, checking with his lawyers, and then reading the final, cleared text aloud. It's as if something has just occurred to him and so he says it.

As it happens, Gerstner is talking to a crowd of journalists, but he might just as well be talking to each person in the audience, one on one. His voice is the voice of dialogue.

Gerstner says one thing, and after another moment, something else occurs to him and so he says that too. It happens to be a useful progression from his former thought. So the listeners follow along. His speech has the rhythm of conversation. It's a series of movements, each one brief and crisp, beginning at the beginning and ending with a suitable conclusion.

The appearance of spontaneity is of course an illusion. Gerstner has carefully rehearsed the story and knows exactly where it is heading. In retrospect, the audience may see that these movements of thought are in fact organized into a flawless order, but at the time, the illusion is created that this order is simply the consequence of Gerstner's logical, penetrating, uncluttered mind. His words appear to come out the way they do without any special effort. The order is never referred to. Its existence is not even acknowledged. Everything that is dispensable has been edited out, but the result doesn't sound edited.

3. Avoid hedges

Gerstner avoids indicating that he is doing anything other than the presenting the situation as it actually is. Thus he avoids the kind of hedges that writers often adopt, to protect themselves against possible objections or provide insurance that they may have overlooked something that might change the audience's view as to the import of the story.

Gerstner has banished from his vocabulary phrases like, “As we shall see...” and “Before I move on to my next point...” and “As far as I know...” He doesn’t bother with disclaimers that he doesn’t have time to tell the whole story, or that he has skipped over important events.

In telling his story, Gerstner presents the situation as being obvious to anyone who will take a hard look. “It is clear to me and to many others....” He refrains from indicating alternative points of view. He doesn’t, for instance, say, “My predecessor in IBM took an entirely different view of the situation and was on the verge of breaking up the company...”

In his more philosophic moments, Gerstner might perhaps recognize that all human beings are liable to leap to conclusions with insufficient rational backing, are unable to be both honest and consistent, have no good grip on the future and that his account of the history of the computer industry is at best a very partial one.

Perhaps Gerstner never has such philosophic moments. But even if he does, he doesn’t encumber his listeners with them during the telling of his story. This makes sense, since nothing is more irritating than to listen to a speech is clotted with hedges of ignorance or frailty or the possibility of error. So Gerstner simply presents his story: “This is the way things have happened in our industry.” From his bearing and demeanor, listeners tend to conclude that it is indeed so.

4. Keep your storytelling focused, simple and clear

The virtues of Gerstner’s story, like most good organizational storytelling, are clarity and simplicity. These are also its vices. Gerstner doesn’t acknowledge ambiguities, qualifications or doubts. Gerstner has made hard choices silently and out of the listener’s sight. He presents the story on the basis that this is what happened. Once made, the choices are presented as if they are inevitable.

Gerstner’s language doesn’t draw attention to itself, but rather serves as a window that reveals the content of the story he is telling. If the audience were to notice Gerstner the person, through a dazzling use of language, or some unusual mannerisms, or some striking gestures, rather than the content of the story, then he would have been less effective. *How* he tells the story is understated. At the end of his presentation, no one says, “My heavens, that Lou Gerstner is a wonderful storyteller!” Instead, the focus is on *what* he says. The audience is more likely to exclaim, “How fascinating!”

Gerstner presents his story in a way that is seemingly transparent, as if the listeners are looking at his subject through a perfectly clean and non-distorting window. The window doesn’t draw attention to itself.

5. Present the story as something valuable in itself

Gerstner doesn't spend time justifying the telling of this particular story. He gives no indication that the listener will have any question about the value of his story. He doesn't raise any question about whether the listeners are interested in what he has to say.

As storyteller, he presents his story as something that is inherently valuable. The value comes from the story itself and from its role as part of a larger whole. He has selected elements that are common knowledge and put them together in a way that gives them broader significance. In so doing, he gives the events a meaning that the audience might not otherwise have grasped.

Gerstner presumes upon the listeners' attention as his right. To justify his presumption, he offers something important, complete, self-contained and intelligible. He presents his story as being valuable independently of any special knowledge he might have or his hierarchical position. What he says is something that is clear to him "and to many others." The implication is that anyone who takes the trouble to see what is going on in the industry would see what Gerstner is seeing. The value of his story emerges from the listeners' ability to grasp the story and its implications because of their own clear and focused minds.

As storyteller, Gerstner enters into a kind of tacit contract with his listeners. He agrees to tell the listeners a story and they agree, at the outset at least, to listen to his story. As he repays the listeners' attention with something valuable and self-contained, they continue to listen. His story begins by breaking silence and ends by returning to silence, leaving nothing unresolved.

6. Be yourself

Style isn't something separate from the person. Nor is it detachable from the content of what is said. Gerstner performs his story in a style that lets the content shine through. He stands behind what he has to say because he has seen it, and experienced it, and thought it out independently. He may be stating what is a common conclusion among experts in the industry at the time, but in expressing it, he is neither joining a chorus nor embracing a platitude.

Instead, he presents his story as if it has the freshness of a discovery. He talks as though what he is saying doesn't come from following what he has been told to say by his public relations team or from a briefing of his technical experts. He doesn't point to the acceptance of others as grounds for accepting it. It is not the opinions of other people that gives force to his story. It is his conviction that he knows what he is saying to be true.

As a storyteller, Gerstner presents himself as a thinking human being, not the head of a large bureaucracy or the construct of his handlers. In the apparent absence of these

encumbrances, his utterances have a freshness that no committee of speechwriters can give.

Gerstner simply presents the evidence that he has found and the reasoning that has led him to the conclusion that he has reached, just as anyone else would reach it independently with the same evidence and reasoning.

He speaks, not as if he is trying to persuade, but rather as though he is presenting reality as it is. The implication is that listeners are free to draw their own conclusions, but if they were to draw any other conclusion than Gerstner's, they would be in error. Once he has shared his take on the situation with his listeners, his account becomes part of their lived experience of what is going on in the computer industry. They may conclude, just as Gerstner already has, not only that the experience has a bearing on the future but also that there is a need to update their previously held views.

As a storyteller, he doesn't suggest that the listeners may be mistaken in their current views. He tacitly accepts that the listeners may well be justified in whatever views that they currently hold, given the range of experience to which they have had access, prior to hearing him speak. In telling his story, he is enabling the listeners to expand their lived experience so that they may conclude of their own accord that the views they have held up to this point need to be adjusted in the light of this newly acquired experience. It follows that the views the listeners now espouse are more likely to be aligned with his, because they derive from the same base of experience.

1. Gerstner, L., IBM Press Conference Upon the Purchase of Lotus. (June 5, 1995).

ⁱ This article is based on Chapter 2 of *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*