

Don't let your story go off the rails

A disjointed lecture

On Monday night, I attended a lecture put on by a local education nonprofit. The topic was interesting, and based on her biography, the speaker seemed knowledgeable. She started her talk by plunging the room into darkness and playing a video. Then, she got up and without preamble, started talking. She showed photographs of the subjects of her book, and talked about the people without context. She even brought up a guest who was related to one of the subjects in the book, and talked as if the room should know the person. The speaker barely talked about the subject of her lecture, making it the most disjointed and uninformative lecture I've been to in a long time.

Why so bad?

What went wrong? I am not sure what made the speaker give such a poor presentation. It could have been that she was having a bad night or that she hadn't prepared enough or that she's bad presenter.



Story time

Photo by Lina Kivaka from Pexels

Always seek best practices

One thing I know for sure: This presentation could have been much better if the speaker followed the following storytelling rules:

1) *Have a beginning, middle and end*

Avant-garde cinema often plays with these elements (starting at the end, etc.), but in traditional (and clear) storytelling you start at the beginning and conclude at the end. That's a story arc that is easy to follow.

2) *Don't make assumptions*

When you are the expert, you may assume that everybody knows what you know. But that is not so. You have to fill in details and information for those in your audience you may not know everything there is to know about your subject.

3) Focus

It's easy to meander when telling a story. There are also sort of side stories and interesting details about your main topic. But before you can go down a side path, you have to clear the main path. In other words, focus on the main story before you start telling tangential stories.

Bottom line:

Sure, there's more to effective story telling than this. But before you embellish a story, start with the basics.

Hosting a speaker or a panel? Read this first.

Have you been to an event where the speaker did not meet your expectations? It may not have been the speaker's fault. He or she may have not been well prepared or well chosen for that particular event. Having been asked to speak at a few different events, I can tell you it is up to the host to prepare the speaker.



Empty Podium by Karin Dalziel on Flickr

If you (or your organization) is hosting an event featuring speakers, here are a few things to do:

1. Determine exactly what your topic is and whether you have a theme you want to highlight.
2. Make sure you understand your audience. Who will be coming to your event and why? If it is a professional development event, for example, what level of understanding does the audience have about the subject?
3. When choosing your speakers, make sure their experience matches your topic and audience. Recently, a friend attended a talk where the speaker's understanding of the topic was BELOW the audience's. Generally, the audience wants to learn something.
4. Prepare your speakers. Give them all the information they will need for the event, including date, time and location. I know several speakers who have been late to an event (causing them to get frazzled) because they were confused about how to get there or the exact start time. Tell your speakers how many people are expected, who they are and what you told the

audience to expect.

5. Talk to the speaker a couple of days before the event. What will he or she be talking about exactly? Does he or she need any special equipment?

6. Have a plan B (or be prepared for things to go off track: missing presentations, faulty AV equipment, missing speakers, etc.)

7. Prepare you audience by giving an introduction of both the speaker and the topic. Make sure the program handout includes the speaker's bio and contact information. When introducing the speaker, stay topline. Nothing is more boring (and more time-wasting) than having the host read the entire biography to the audience.

The bottom line is that most speaking events don't go well because the host has not done a good job of choosing or preparing the speakers. This is particularly common in volunteer-run organizations. However, if you are charging for your event, and you are associating your organization's name to it, it is imperative that you take the time to make sure the speaker is given the best shot at success.

What would you add to the list above? Does your organization have a list of speaker guidelines? If so, what does it include?