

# Speaking On Course: Adjusting to Your Audience

by Margaret Keys

You feel well prepared to speak. You've done advance work on the audience and the site. You arrived early to familiarize yourself with the setting and the audience. You are ready.

Your plan is to deliver your pitch exactly as you've set it up and written it, and then celebrate its successful completion.

Not so fast. The real work of delivery has just begun — the time when focus, concentration, and energy must be working in sync and your awareness of the audience must be at its highest. All the preparation you've done is just to hone and fine-tune the instrument.

Now you must rely on all that preparation to take your pitch from the *mechanical* to the *instinctive*. You have to be able to rely on your audience "radar" to guide you. If you don't, you'll find yourself fatally trapped in a monologue. The rapport with the audience — the dialogue — will elude you.

So how do you stay with your audience, and have them stay with you? Have them really hear your recommendation or message? These are the parts that have to mesh:

- You, and your point of view.
- The audience, and their point of view (perception of you/the issue).

There is an alignment and a psychological bridge that you construct between you and the audience.

*You ask them questions, both rhetorical and actual.* You create dialogue. You come back to the same point time and again, using all styles (intuitive, thinking, feeling, and sensing) so you can approach each person as he hears things best.

*You involve the audience* by asking questions getting them to ask you questions, involving specific people and using their names, and telling a story or "framing" the issue to set the stage.

*You break the tension* in the room by: calling out loud any hidden

"truth" in the room; synthesizing and facilitating group interaction; changing the talk's direction to get at the tension; surprising the group with dialogue in an example or some spontaneous movement; asking for their opinions; or asking what the tension is about.

*You read the energy* in the room and change it by: changing your pace, audibly and physically; changing the volume of your voice; using more emphasis; using silence; changing inflection; moving into or toward the audience; getting them to reflect on a particular thought or problem; or teaming with someone in the audience

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to widen the energy-expanding options.

Remember, tension is blocked energy. Once you break the tension, you can get through to the audience. As the speaker, *you are in charge* of the energy level in the room and should be able to read that level like a thermostat.

Audiences mentally click out after seven seconds, according to research. They close their minds quickly, unless they determine we have something to offer them.

You have several delivery tools:

1. Your awareness of them,

moment to moment.

2. Your ability to shift midstream to amplify, illuminate, or handle a questioning or skeptical glance.

3. Your vocal ability — to pace, to inflect, to pause, to muster strong breath support for diction and emphasis.

4. Your ability to gain and hold eye contact to strengthen the connection.

5. Your body movements and gestures.

6. Your clothing (one of the elite or one of the tribe?).

7. Your clear, memorable, quotable, often-repeated message.

8. Your energy level.

You'll notice that the more you speak, the more comfortable you become before audiences. Bob Doolittle, author of *Professional Speaking*, told me that all of us begin public speaking in a self-conscious state. Since that is intolerable, we become experts and enter a state of "message consciousness" — locked to our prepared script. Where we want to be is "audience consciousness," a state which comes slowly to most of us, never to some. If we are to be effective speakers, we must adjust to the audience of the moment, for *their reasons*, and position our content.

Don't stop at preparation and rehearsal. Use those to build your focus and energy. Save your greatest energies for your audience and the adjustments you must make as you weave the dialogue which connects you to them and them to the issue or message.

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