

# How to become a more engaging speaker

Being able to speak with clarity, authority and confidence so others will engage with us is an important skill for nurses. Unfortunately, some of you may not be aware of what you need to do to develop this skill.

Recently, I attended a three-day personal leadership convention. Other than the breaks scheduled for lunch and dinner, the sessions ran non-stop for 16 hours a day. The amazing part was that at no point did I find myself tuning out to think about my to-do list or to contemplate the exhaustion I was going to feel once the sessions ended. I was fully engaged with the speakers. I made it my mission to find out how they had been able to command my attention.

After doing some research on these speakers and on some others who've impressed me, I realized that none of them had made any of the most common presentation mistakes:

- **Not being clear about what you want to say.** Are you able to take the important point you want to make and express it in writing in 10 words or less? If not, you need to go back and think about your message.
- **Talking at the audience.** No one wants to be talked *at*. Ever.
- **Using irritating filler words.** You know, it's really uhh, hard to, umm, listen to someone, who, um, like, fills the, uh, um, space with fillers, right? I think you get my point.

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@Barb\_Langlois

Now that we've looked at what to avoid, here are a few tools you can use that will definitely promote engagement:

- **Tell personal stories.** Whether you are having a one-on-one discussion with a colleague, contributing during a meeting or presenting at a conference, others will engage with you if you share a story that's relevant to them. We are hard-wired to lean in when someone begins a story, even if it's a 20-second anecdote.
- **Pause.** Give people an opportunity to take in what you've said. Stop talking, and pause for a moment. This also gives you time to think about what you are going to say next. If you're feeling nervous and forget to pause, try to remember to breathe. It will help you *and* your audience.
- **Ask audience-focused questions.** This is one of the very best engagement tools, regardless of the size of your audience. These questions help people relate to what you're saying by getting them to think about their own experiences, e.g., "How many of you have had your mind go blank just before you were called on to speak?"

Remember that your body language also plays a role in how well you engage with your audience:

- Standing still while you are making an important point communicates self-assurance and focus. On the other hand, taking a step back at that moment suggests to your audience that you lack confidence.
- Don't put your hands behind your back or in your pockets. We trust people whose hands we can see.

I encourage you to practise using these tools and tips to see what works for you. ■

**BARB LANGLOIS, RN, BSN, MSN,** IS A KEYNOTE SPEAKER AND COMMUNICATION EXPERT WHO WORKS WITH HEALTH-CARE LEADERS ON IMPROVING THEIR ENGAGEMENT, COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT SKILLS SO THAT THEY CAN CREATE AND SUSTAIN RESPECTFUL ENVIRONMENTS.