



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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In a World of Words, the Eyes Have It

by James Gray

The chief executive officer was making an impassioned point at the company's annual meeting. As he was concluding his thought, he became concerned with the next part of his presentation, so he looked down at his notes and away from the audience. Things got worse from there.

The CEO's voice, strong and certain in the early part of his statement, softened and tailed off as he lost the critical visual relationship with the crowd. Listeners grew confused—here was an important theme, everyone knew that, so why wasn't the organization's leader driving it home with eye contact?

"Why," the members of the audience were mentally asking the CEO, "aren't you looking at us?"

That's the power of eye contact—and the lack of it. An enormous and often underemphasized part of communication, it binds teachers with students, parents with children and strangers with each other. With eye contact, we feel connected. Without it, we feel disconcerted.

If we're conversing and you're speaking to me but not looking at me, I won't believe you. I can't believe you. If we're talking and you look over my shoulder to spot somebody more powerful (which is just about everyone) or more interesting (which is everyone), I'll be offended, perhaps not forever, but I'll certainly remember your rudeness for as long.

To communicate convincingly, you need to master the curriculum of eye contact.

Big-ticket U.S. speakers who make the equivalent of a middle manager's annual salary with a single address, headliners such as former president Bill Clinton, utilize visual connectivity like a marvelously tuned instrument. They know that without it, even the best oratory will go flat.

We can learn from the pros. We can learn how to direct and calibrate eye contact to engage our audiences and bring our message to life. Here's how:

Use it early. The first minute of a speech is crucial. Lose the crowd during the opening sixty seconds and you may as well screen an episode of *Will & Grace* the rest of the way. The best speakers will often have the first minute or so of their presentation nailed to memory so they can focus on establishing a strong visual rapport with the audience. They know that once it's been established, they can look down at their script or notes more often, and the crowd won't resent it. My advice to clients who need to deliver a speech on short notice and simply don't have the time to learn it as well as they'd like is (1) know the first and last minute of your material cold so you'll be able to "bookend" your presentation with terrific eye contact, (2) start and end with impact.

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Make it personal. Experienced speakers cut a large audience down to a psychologically manageable size by selecting three or four friendly, supportive faces in different parts of the room, and making visual contact with them. Speak to those people as if they're friends—individuals you like and respect. By addressing a few, you'll reach the many. In smaller groups, always ensure that one of your "friends" is the most senior person present, the ultimate decision-maker.

Make every line credible. Regardless of how well you know your stuff, you need to end each sentence with eye contact. It's your ongoing link with the audience. While it's acceptable, indeed natural to occasionally look down or away in the middle of a line, if you do it at the end (like our CEO at the annual meeting), people won't buy what you're selling. While accomplished speakers can begin a sentence without eye contact, sometimes dramatically, for others it's advisable to begin each line with it. If you don't, you run the risk of disorienting your listeners.

Be careful with PowerPoint. The ubiquitous technology almost encourages presenters to read their slides at the expense of eye contact. Don't let that happen to you. Be among those rare speakers who employ PowerPoint to enhance their presentation, not become the presentation. Once you've confirmed that the proper slide is displayed, face the audience and begin speaking. While it's certainly acceptable to turn and refer briefly to the slide during your explanation or interpretation, if you're talking to a slide rather than the crowd at the start or end of a transition, you'll undercut the strength of your narrative.

Take a break. While great eye contact is essential for a great presentation, speakers who maintain unbroken eye contact with the audience can be downright creepy. Real people involved in authentic human discourse occasionally look away from those they're addressing. It's absolutely fine. However, when you do look away, look down, which appears thoughtful, not up, which seems disingenuous.

Your best lines need it. In any speech or presentation you'll have key content that needs to be conveyed with special emphasis: your theme, a quote, an important statistic, the punch line of a joke, your call to action. To make the lines all they can be, you have to put enough "space" around them in the form of a slower delivery, or even a pause, so the audience will know something special is coming. Then you have to calibrate the volume of your voice and the inflection of your words to hammer the points home.

Having done all that, if you haven't infused your language with the authority of eye contact, you've done nothing. You see, the eyes have it. □

