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The Magic of Movement

by James Gray

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The best speakers around are on the move.

Celebrated presenters like management guru Tom Peters and former U.S. Labor Secretary Robert Reich pace their respective stages, pausing, reflecting, gesturing, their voices rising and falling with the import of their words, their words consistent with their movement, their audiences mesmerized by the choreography.

Wireless microphone technology, which has improved in quality and more importantly, reliability over the last five years, has provided the security for more speakers to roam. Today, headliners on the big time U.S. speaking circuit will, more often than not, take flight soon after they've been introduced.

When they do hit the road, it's magic. Nothing engages audiences like passionate, well-prepared, assured presenters who move in tandem with their narrative. It wasn't so long ago, less than a generation, when business and political leaders delivered speeches as if hammered into place at their lecterns, all stiff and unbending. The resulting scenes—overly formal presenters rendered immobile by logistics and convention—seem immeasurably dated today.

There's a premium now on naturalness and openness, on revealing something of your character as you relate to the audience. It's much easier for most people to accomplish that goal while in motion.

Sweeping movement works in many speaking situations, but not all. Politicians have less opportunity for mobility, for reasons of security

and television's requirement for stable, clean head-and-shoulder shots. Ontario Premier Ernie Eves wouldn't have done well to pad around during his recent, twice-daily briefings on the province's electricity situation, not with TV cameras trained on him from so many different angles.

Besides, Eves was addressing a potentially ominous state of affairs, and the generally accepted rule is: The more serious the situation, the less you should move. While a well-taken walk invariably goes down well at industry conferences, sales meetings and motivational seminars, it wouldn't be acceptable for a State of the Union address, an announcement of employee layoffs or a news briefing on a potential power outage.

Let's take this further: If you're a CEO announcing terrific financial results at your annual meeting, you'll be able to roam with the full endorsement of the assembled shareholders. For bad news, you'd be best to stay put. (Staying put never means staying frozen.)

However, when the occasion is right, it's great to travel. Your 'journey' may be limited to a few steps, or it may be as far-reaching as a sojourn deep into the recesses of a packed auditorium. It doesn't really matter. What matters is that body movement carries with it tremendous power, a sort of inherent credibility that delivers rewards of impact and persuasiveness out of all proportion to the kinetic energy invested.

Confident speakers move. They pause. They smile, forever keeping in mind that their presentation, after all, represents simple human interaction. Speakers who lack confidence repress themselves and their inclination to stir even a modicum. They think: "If I move I'll have to reveal even more of myself!" Exactly.

If you want to be a top-tier speaker, if you want to have an edge, you have to move when the circumstances are right. Here's how.



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Start Small

The best presenters didn't become great overnight. They learned slowly, over time, how best to leverage body movement in support of their oratory. You can commence your education when the performance stakes are lower, in informal meetings with little career-limiting potential, like a planning session for the office Christmas party. Establish your 'beach head,' with your notes or laptop, at the head of the conference table or lectern. Always stand when presenting to groups of 10 or more, unless it's expressly prohibited by dictum or tradition. Standing provides authority and a take-off point for your walk.

Establish Your Presence

Don't hit the road right away. Always begin slowly, in speech and movement. Remember that the audience needs to get oriented to you and your message in the early going, so don't overwhelm the crowd with rapid-fire patter and activity. Relax. Introduce yourself (or build on another's introduction of you) calmly and unhurriedly, and then explain to those in attendance why the information you're about to present is important to them. You need to hook the audience before you move or else no one may be watching when you do.

Learn to Balance

Just the act of stepping a few meters away from the lectern to share an anecdote or expand upon a point communicates poise, panache and personality. (You're saying, in effect: "Hey, I have the confidence to be real.") As you approach the individuals on your route, make eye contact, but don't forget the larger audience; its members will require your attention too. This requires a fine balance—telling your story in an absorbing manner as you walk, maintaining a relationship with those in your path and beyond it, all the while restricting the amount of time each section of the audience views not your face, but your back. That's why you're advised to keep your first trips short. In time, you'll master the combination of content, delivery and movement required to compel your colleagues, clients and customers.

Expand Your Zone

How do you move when the world so often seems intent on keeping you stationary? How do you possibly integrate action in speeches and presentations when there's no stage to traverse and no wireless technology to free you? Answer: You can expand your delivery zone. If you're confined by the old microphone-on-lectern setup, you can lean slightly forward when accentuating key points. If you have a 'gooseneck' mike, you can move to either side of the lectern (but only after conducting a pre-presentation sound check to ensure your voice will be picked up). For dramatic effect, you can walk silently to a flip chart, and with the audience watching and wondering, print (not write) a number or slogan or term that summarizes your theme.

Ask a question: I was conducting a presentation skills session with some pharmaceutical executives in Florida last year when something in the room distracted me and my mind went vacant. (It will do that on occasion.) There I was, having wandered into a sea of 40 high-flyers, quite lost. Guess what? They didn't notice. I paused, which looked thoughtful, and then asked a question. Several voices piped up with answers that fit neatly into the points I was making and all was, thankfully, well. Life can certainly be more stressful 'in the field,' but the rewards of presenting on the go far outweigh the risks. Besides, if you get stuck, you can always ask a question. Now, when are you going to start moving? □

