



# HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

Article Reprint No. C0112C

## Impromptu Speaking

by Cheryl Wiles



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# Impromptu Speaking

*The secret is to prepare for spontaneity.*

IN THE MOVIE *The Hunt for Red October*, Jack Ryan (played by Alec Baldwin) is summoned to the Pentagon by his boss for a briefing to the Joint Chiefs of Staff on recent Soviet submarine activity. As the two of them sign in to the high-level briefing, Baldwin whispers, “Who is giving the briefing?” His boss calmly says, “You are.” The imposing doors swing open and Baldwin is confronted with the expectant faces of the Joint Chiefs.

While most of us won’t be called on to address such an august body in the midst of a national crisis, we can relate to the panic that registers on Baldwin’s face at that moment. Impromptu speaking isn’t easy, and this truth hits home whenever we are asked to put something together on the spot. We want to be clear and direct, interesting and informative, persuasive and concise. That’s a tall order, especially when we are nervous.

A lot can go wrong when speaking spontaneously before an audience. What if you get off message? How will you remember everything you want to say? What if a pontificator undermines the logical flow of your sales pitch? How will you deal with trick questions that are meant to embarrass you, or worse, lead you to make a mistake? Fortunately, with a little advance work, even the most terrified impromptu speaker can improve.

Here’s the secret to successful, impromptu speaking: preparation. While “impromptu” may seem to convey “winging” it, the best speakers avoid that trap. Don’t confuse impromptu speaking with casual, off-the-cuff remarks. In today’s business environment, there’s no such thing as passively attending a meeting—you need to be prepared at all times to explain your objectives and make the case for your decisions. Impromptu speaking is about packaging information that you’ve

already thought through. This is good news, because most of us do not feel confident winging it. Remember the last impressive “impromptu” talk you admired so much? Chances are, it was rehearsed, in some form or another, prior to the delivery. The moment felt fresh and spontaneous, but the message was crystallized at an earlier time.

So begin your impromptu speech preparation by first deciding how, when, and why you are most likely to deliver your next talk. For example, will it be at a staff meeting? If so, then anticipate the topics your manager is likely to bring up during the meeting.

Next, think about the key points you’d like to make. Who will be at the meeting? What will persuade the attendees to champion your initiatives? Once you anticipate the objections and questions that may come up, turn on a video camera and deliver a brief “impromptu” speech as if it were the real thing. Ask a friend or your spouse to ask you some tough questions on tape. By watching your performance on videotape, you should quickly identify your weaknesses and strengths. You will improve with practice.

Following are some tips for taking the terror out of impromptu speaking:

**1 Analyze your audience.** Think hard about your audience members. Make sure you ask yourself who they are, what they care about, and what is in it for them. Once you know the specific characteristics of your listeners, you will be able to keep their attention long enough to persuade them.

**2 Identify your communications objective.** Even if you have just a few seconds to prepare, decide what specific and measurable outcome you want to achieve as a result of your communication. Examples of good communication

objectives are: I want the VP of sales to agree to meet with me again in one week; I want three volunteers to take on this assignment; I want Ted to champion this idea in the California office. Avoid communication objectives that are vague or too broad.

**3 Stay focused on your message.** It is said that Henry Kissinger once opened a press conference by saying, “Does anyone have any questions for my answers?” This is exactly the right way to approach any impromptu speaking opportunity. When you are asked to make an impromptu presentation, or when you are answering questions during Q & A, think of it as another opportunity to make a case for your objectives.

**4 Structure your response.** When making impromptu comments or answering difficult questions, give an overview of what you plan to say before you begin your explanation. This is helpful to those audience members who didn’t hear the question. It also gives you time to think. For example, “You’ve asked a good question about the ROI, and I plan to address this concern in a few minutes. First, for those of you who may not be familiar with our approach, I’d like to outline the rationale for change.”

**5 Don’t leave anyone out.** Whether it’s an audience of seven or 70 people, address your comments to the entire group. One of the biggest mistakes a speaker can make is to leave out members of the audience during Q & A. Refrain from the natural impulse to talk to the questioner or to the decision maker alone. This can engender bad feelings among the rest of the audience. For example, one company president recently severed a long-standing business relationship with a consultant because in meetings the consultant routinely focused on the person whom she perceived to be the decision maker. Eventually, she offended the wrong person and lost an important client.

**6 Always be polite.** If you are rude or impatient during Q & A, the audience will sympathize with the questioner. If you lose the sympathy of an audience,

you will lose a powerful persuasion tool. This is one of the toughest messages to get through to young executives, who pride themselves on being “tough” and “brutally honest.” Don’t lower yourself to the level of a difficult questioner by saying something like, “So, exactly what’s your point? I didn’t hear a question in there.” It is better to segue back to your main idea. “Tom, your anecdote certainly seems contrary to the point I was making, and I’m sure there are other objections; however, I want to focus on the general trends that we have uncovered through our research.”

For most of us, the challenge of impromptu speaking hits home during the questions that follow the talk itself. Fortunately, most of the time audiences are kind and questioners seek clarification. Sometimes, questions are not straightforward and can be difficult to answer. Once in a while, people don’t have your best interests at heart.

Difficult questions tend to fall into three categories: (1) unclear questions, (2)

questions framed in a limited way, and (3) “I don’t know” questions.

**Unclear questions.** Some questions are confusing because of their structure or word choice. The questioner may throw in vague phrases such as “this notion,” “your plan,” or “it.” Other unclear questions refer to broad issues that can’t be addressed in a limited time.

Begin by restating unclear questions. If the question is too broad, point out what part of the topic you plan to clarify and why. Vague language, such as the use of “this plan” or “it” should be defined. When several questions are strung together, separate them logically and decide which questions you will choose to answer. Remember that you are in charge of the flow of conversation.

**Leading questions.** Leading questions are meant to limit or restrict the speaker in some way. See the box below for examples of five types of leading questions and strategies for not getting tripped up by them.

**“I don’t know” questions.** There are times when you simply don’t know the answer, or you need time to think. Never hazard a guess unless it’s extremely clear that it’s a guess. Better to say, “I don’t know.” It’s a good idea to suggest where the person can find the answer or offer to find out the answer for them.

Impromptu speaking is never easy, but effective preparation builds confidence. That’s the secret. You never know when you’ll be put to the challenge. □

—*Cheryl Wiles is an independent speech coach based in the Boston area. She has taught workshops at Columbia Business School and is affiliated with Columbia’s Executive program. She can be reached at hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu*

**FURTHER READING**

*Guide to Presentations*  
by Mary Munter and Lynn Russell  
2002 • Prentice Hall

Type of Leading Question	Strategy
<b>Forced Choice Question:</b> “What is more important to you, integrity or profits?”	Don’t allow yourself to be restricted by an either/or choice. You can point out that <i>both</i> integrity and profits are important.
<b>Hypothetical Question:</b> “If earnings fall by 6% or more, will you take action?”	Whenever a question starts with “assume” or “if,” you can refuse to speculate. Don’t get pulled into a question that you don’t want to answer.
<b>Empty Chair Question:</b> “Can you tell us what will be done at the top to address this crisis?”	It’s best not to speak on behalf of anyone else, unless you are a spokesperson. When asked to comment on another executive’s plans, it’s safer to make it clear that you are speaking from your own vantage point.
<b>Leading Question (with a false preface):</b> “Since layoffs are inevitable, when will you be making the announcement?”	When the preface is false, recast the question. “If you are asking me whether or not layoffs are inevitable, the answer is no.”
<b>Emotionally Charged Question:</b> “Frankly, this plan sounds like another one of your crazy schemes.”	Refrain from taking the bait. You don’t need to defend yourself. Restate your main points and move on.