



5 Questions to Ask... Before Speaking in Public

I've spent my life as a public speaker. I've spoken on stage for over 10,000 hours to both small crowds and to many thousands of people. People say I'm pretty good at it. My assessment is that I normally do well. (We all have bad days.) I think it's mainly because I've just done it so much. Like anything, the more you do it the better you get.

All great presentations start by asking the right questions. Here are five questions I always ask myself before I get up to speak, and two questions I never ask.

1. What would I personally need to hear about this subject to actually take action?

I am the most cynical person I know, so I generally speak to convince myself. Close to this question is thinking about what false assumptions I would have listening to someone else talk about the subject so that I can debunk those assumptions as quickly as possible. Call out the elephant in the room ASAP. If you're speaking to sell something, tell them. If you're going to ask them for money to support a cause, tell them. If you have a political agenda, let them know. Get it out of the way so that you can authentically move forward.

2. What do people already think they know about the topic that is inaccurate or incomplete?

I spend most of my time in any given presentation as a disruptor of common assumptions. Many people think they know all there is to know about a given topic, but I have found there is always a flip side and backstory to everything. Don't assume your audience knows what you do about the topic. Odds are many of them don't or you wouldn't be speaking to them.

3. What stories can I tell?

Story matters most. That's the foundational truth of Rebel Pilgrim, the creative company I lead. If I find myself tempted to give people mere facts or data, I search for a story that does it better. I aim for no less than 90% of any talk to be in the context of a story. Most of us believe that people will change their minds or take action once they see compelling data. They won't. They take action when they *feel* like taking action. All decisions are emotional. Only stories create emotion.

4. Am I prepared enough? Am I preparing too much?

This one is tricky for me. If I am underprepared, I have found that I can still get my point across, but I will generally talk way too long. Historically, I am at my worst when I am over-prepared though. I find myself talking to the back wall instead of the audience. Since I am a performer, I can start "acting" the part if I am too scripted. For almost all public speakers, I have found that memorizing word for word is even less effective than reading a script (which isn't normally effective either). I recommend memorizing idea for idea and using no or limited notes. (When I do use notes it is typically five or six words or phrases to remind me of the big ideas and stories I want to tell.)

5. Is there a memorable through-line?

The last thing I do in preparation is take what could be up to ten hours of spoken material (mainly stories) and narrow it down to whatever time I have been given, usually 30-45 minutes. (These days I can also do this in real time as I speak, but it's taken a while to get there.) The through-line determines which stories stay and which ones go. Is there a hook or word or idea that I can weave through every story? If so, I go with that and leave the other good ideas on the table for another lecture.

And, by the way, there are two questions I never ask myself:

1. How can I make this funny?
2. Will this make people like me?

Those two questions have never helped me communicate anything important. And not dwelling on them has allowed me to generally be known as funny and likable on stage.

I should also say there are some people who simply don't get me. They don't like my conversational style or my point of view. Thank God for that. The one thing I know for sure is that anyone worth listening to has people who don't like them. You aren't saying something worth people's time unless you are risking being unlikable.

* Tips shared by Cesar Viana Teague, as written and discussed by Joe Boyd: Founder, Rebel Pilgrim in the Huffington Post - 03/06/2016.

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