

BRIDGING THE GAP

BY PIERS IBBOTSON



If you want people to take some action as a result of your presentation, some element of narrative and some engagement with emotion needs to be included in the communication.

Theatre people know that their impact on their audience results from delivering an engaging and compelling event or performance. The elements of this event include the narrative, the message of the text, the cast, the setting, the costumes, the set design, the venue. In preparing a live event, attention needs to be given to the entire context of the interaction to reinforce and guide the audience's attention.

People take away a perception of a live event that includes only a tiny part of the text that the event is based on. People can't recall the text of a performance of Hamlet, for example, but they can recount the gist of the narrative, and report the impact. These are the elements of the interaction that will stay with them and inform their behaviour and understanding after the performance.

All business presentations are live events, too. The frequent problem with such presentations, however, is that the text is usually composed of facts and information. People do not readily engage with facts. They engage with narrative and emotion. If you want people to take some action as a result of your presentation, some element of narrative and some engagement with emotion needs to be included in the communication. The text may contain information that is of interest to the audience, but the text is only the framework on which the communication event is built.

However clear and well ordered your argument, however exciting and relevant the text, you are then faced, in a live event, with a practical, physical problem. There is a gap between you and the audience. The craft of theatre is to bridge that gap in a way that ensures the audience is compelled to listen, is riveted by the narrative unfolding before it, and receives the message that it carries.

When you are watching someone speak you receive what they are saying in many ways. Not only is the pace, intonation, and power of their voice important but also the animation and engagement of their body, the setting, the light, the way they are dressed. These things together cause an emotional response in us that is very strong. Our engagement with the content of what someone is saying is always enmeshed with our total emotional response to them.

As soon as someone stands up in front of a group of people who are seated, a different dynamic enters the space. We will give the speaker our

attention; we will look and watch, expecting something. If the person makes us feel anxious or irritated, no matter how compelling the content, our reaction to that content will be coloured by these emotions. If they are not engaging with us directly, if we cannot see or hear them clearly, we will feel bored and detached, they will not be bridging the gap in space between us.

There are three things that will help the process:

Narrative: If the content has some sort of narrative structure it will drive the presentation forward with energy; it will dramatise it. Drama needs a protagonist and an antagonist; it deals in conflicts between individuals or ideas. "We used to think this... but now we think this." "You believe that... but the truth is different." These are all hints at dramatic narrative and will help the speaker to bridge the gap.

Focus: When you stand up you will be given focus. To keep it, you must connect with the audience, look at them, return their gaze. When you stop talking, they will continue to watch for what you say next – if you are connected with eye contact. And if you are connected with them you will be able to tell if they are really listening or not.

Actions: Acting is action. You are always acting on someone – trying to do something to them with what you are saying – trying to delight them, fascinate them, shock them, seduce them. The action need not be related to the content directly. You can delight them with some shocking information; you can intrigue them with something simple. If you are always trying to provoke some clear response from them you will be performing with enough energy to bridge the gap.

But a word of warning: Presentations at their best are good theatre. But theatre is fiction, it is partial, it is biased, it speaks to our hearts as much as our heads. And fiction is sometimes just not true, it does not describe the way the world is, it describes the way we wish it was. If your presentation is critical – make sure it is also the truth.

Piers Ibbotson runs The Directing Creativity Program, developed for The Royal Shakespeare Company. The program provides management development and consultancy for business using techniques from the world of theatre.