

# Do You Engage or Enrage?

Some words of wisdom for today's CEOs who take the stage at annual company events

By David Gouthro, CSP

In our modern era of accountability, transparency, relevance and stakeholder value, it is no longer “sweet” to deliver a one-way (albeit important) message to an audience filled to the brim with intellectual capital just waiting to be deployed. Not only does this method of information dissemination fail to engage people, it is more likely to enrage them.

Audiences these days want to use their heads for more than sound dampeners in a conference room. A safe operating assumption is that the majority are willing to use their brainpower to help themselves and their company perform better. Is there a need to get everyone up to speed on the new opportunities and challenges being faced in the marketplace? Absolutely. Is there a need to get employees motivated and committed to organizational success? Definitely. However, we know that simply hearing messages does not do the trick. So how can a CEO (or any other senior executive) create greater value from precious stage time?

## ENGAGE PARTICIPANTS BEFORE THE MEETING

Provide employees with key message content before the meeting (unless confidentiality is absolutely necessary). Presenting information in person that could easily be provided in advance is not a particularly good use of valuable face time. It is much better to use meeting time to explore or expand upon critical issues that employees have had a chance to think about in advance. This could be done via email, webinars, Google Hangouts or other internal communication technologies. When participants arrive, they've already been thinking



“Enough! No more.  
’Tis not so sweet now,  
as it was before.”

Duke Orsino in *Twelfth Night*,  
William Shakespeare

about the meeting content, participated in conversations with their colleagues and are ready to more fully engage. The CEO's words land in more fertile minds.

## ENGAGE WITH CONTEXT BEFORE CONTENT

Give them a reason to listen! Just because the speaker is the head honcho, there is no guarantee that all attention will be focused on the words about to be delivered. Provide context for why the presentation will be important to hear, absorb and act on. Otherwise, there is a tendency for participants to tune out, focus on remaining vertical and/or trust there will be a handout or report they can refer to at a later date.

## BE ENGAGING DURING THE PRESENTATION

Almost every CEO can generally benefit from rehearsal and coaching before “going live.” Regardless of how critical the content may be, a droning voice and poor visuals can put the most dedicated and loyal employees into snooze mode. Dim the lights and you might as well provide the audience with pillows. Rehearsing can help the monotonal CEO seem a little more lively while the comfortable, charismatic CEO gains more focus. If the CEO seems to feel he or she is too good (or important) to rehearse, you may suggest that a practice session is for the benefit of the audience.

## QUESTION THE AUDIENCE IN AN ENGAGING WAY

Pose questions on which the audience can reflect, but don't ask for individual responses. One of two things generally happens using that approach: the “usual suspects” stand up and

respond, or no one says anything. In either case, the opportunity for the majority of audience members to engage with the content has been lost.

Instead, suggest that pairs, triads or table groups have a short conversation on how to answer the question. This process forces them to wrestle with the content and, as a result, to integrate it in their own minds. The CEO can then choose to take responses... or not. It is less about the audience getting the “right” answer as it is about getting them to think about the content. Do not ask closed questions that require individuals to raise their hands in response. It often annoys members of the audience and the results of raised hands may be highly inaccurate as a result (they may raise them in compliance, or keep them on their laps in defiance).

### ASK FOR QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE

For similar reasons do not ask a large group, “Does anyone have a question?” A much more effective approach is to suggest small groups generate questions they believe would be of general interest to the entire audience. The result is generally a set of richer, deeper questions that are less self-serving than the ones from individuals who are trying to score points or address a very specific issue that is of limited interest to the rest of the group.

One way to ensure a good supply of questions (if participants are sitting at tables), is to have each table numbered. Let the audience know you will be using a random number generator to select which table will have an opportunity to pose a question. This greatly increases table engagement because no one wants to take a chance that their table is selected to ask a question when they haven’t got one.

The CEO must respond. Participants will be as interested in how the question is answered (openly, transparently, non-defensively, etc.) as the content of the answer itself.

### ENGAGE THROUGH AN MC

Another technique to engage audiences is to have an MC or moderator prepare some tough questions in advance. The CEO should have a very good idea of the biggest opportunities, challenges or issues that audience members are thinking about, especially if they have been informed in advance about the content of the presentation.

If you can determine a couple of juicy questions for the MC to ask, it will cause audience members to sit up (in interest or horror) to see how they are addressed. It frees them up to ask some tough ones of their own, too. I highly recommend that the MC have a conversation with the CEO prior to using this particular technique, unless the MC is the type of individual who enjoys jumping out of a plane without a parachute.

It is the duty and responsibility of CEOs and senior executives to make the most of the time, talent and intellectual capital of their employees at all times. There are wonderful opportunities to do so from the stage. **SOI**

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