

KAREN HOUGH



BE THE
BEST

BAD PRESENTER

EVER

BREAK THE RULES,
MAKE MISTAKES, AND
WIN THEM OVER

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BK

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Be the Best Bad Presenter Ever

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To Mom and Dad

*who enthusiastically attended every speech, performance, and
improvisation—no matter how “bad” or bad it was.*

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SO WHO SAID YOU'RE A "BAD" PRESENTER?

Respected Rules for Speaking and Why You Should Break Them—Mercilessly



Let me guess: You're a terrible presenter, right? You hate giving presentations. Some teacher or boss told you that you just don't have it when it comes to presenting. I bet that was a fun day. You'd love never to stand up in front of a crowd again, but you're stuck. You're required to present, maybe because of your job or your position in the community. And every time another presentation comes up, all you can think is "Ugh."

sensation comes up, all you can think is "Ugh."

Or maybe you're a pretty decent presenter. You like taking on a challenge, but you sometimes get hung up on all the things you're supposed to do. You feel excited to stand up but still worry that you're not following all the rules.

I bet something else is true, too. You really *do* have something important to say. You've got a few opinions and probably a message you'd love to share with people—if only you could stop shaking and sweating.

So you took all the feedback to heart. You tried to change. First you tried to mimic famous orators or entertainers—and that made you feel like you were wearing someone else's clothes and

they didn't fit. Then you took classes, learned the "rules of speaking," and accepted abuse from counselors who just made you feel more awkward and worried. You just can't seem to get what you want, and you hate the fake, sales-y approach—which, of course, makes you hate presenting even more.

Excellent!

You have more potential to give great presentations than any polished phony on the planet. Because guess what? You're *not* innately a terrible presenter. Someone else's rules are making you "bad"—rules from Presentations 101—the rules that box you in, regulate everything you do, and define "good" presentations. Rules like "Always stand to the left of the screen," "Never cross the beam of the projector," and "Remain detached during the presentation."

Those rules are plain stupid! They hamstring you and keep you away from the real stuff—the mystical secret sauce of great presentations: your authentic self.

I once worked with an executive at an insurance company who was a really rotten presenter. He stood stiffly back by the screen and froze every time he stumbled on a word. And he was actually presenting something he really loved—his team's record-beating success! Take this guy off the stage, however, and one-on-one he was a gregarious, funny man. He'd been verbally whipped by so many coaches to follow the rules of presenting that his confidence was blown. He felt trapped in the space up by the screen and miles away from the audience.

I suggested he just be himself—to literally do whatever the heck made him comfortable. So he stood right at the front of the stage where he could see his audience's faces. Sometimes he stepped off the stage. In some parts of the presentation he even gave himself permission to sit down right in the audience! He

was miked, so everyone could hear him, and the audience loved how he became one of them rather than a distant expert on stage.

Leaving the stage, stumbling over words, and sitting down would all be considered classic “mistakes.” Who cares? What really mattered was that the audience connected with the success of this executive—his team beat all the records. And he suddenly felt connected again to his message, his excitement, and his audience. His voice and body loosened up, he stopped stumbling on words, and his stories became funny again. All this happened because he’d found a way to really be himself in his presentations, and that’s what worked.

And here’s the thing: if presentations really didn’t matter, we’d all just send memos. There are a million ways out there to share information, but no matter how much we digitize, we end up wanting human connection. We pay big money to see recording stars and great thinkers in person because their music and words touch us. And yes, it’s really important for people to hear you speak, too. Suppose you’re spearheading the effort to build a community park. You can have phone conversations, write letters to the editor, and start a community blog until you’re blue in the face. But when the advocates for a new park decide to get together, they want to hear your story. They want to connect with *you*, not a proxy of you.

I’m here to give you the ultimate out—the ultimate freedom. Be human, be you, make mistakes! Don’t worry about all the rules you’ve been taught. People would rather see you, warts and all, if you can communicate with passion. And that’s when all the things you want will follow—jobs, funding, support, partners, believers.

So do it! Your way.

It’s time for a longitudinal change in how we approach

presentations. It's time to turn what we consider "bad" on its head and reconsider what matters. The reason most people believe they're bad presenters is that they're bound by archaic rules that make them stiff and uncomfortable. This book is about giving yourself permission to be who you are and to present in a way that is authentically yours—mistakes and all. Everyone has something important to say. We all want to change people's minds about issues that really matter to us.

And if being the real you is "bad" according to nasty old rules, then let's change the definition. Just like Michael Jackson, you are now bad in the coolest way. Come on, people, say it with me—"I'm BAD."

We're all ready to break these rules. As a society, we have evolved, even if our presentation primers haven't. We prefer scratchy authenticity to plastic perfection. We are much more likely to trust an online vlogger than a slick scripted commercial. The vlogger's very mistakes, imperfections, and scruffy jeans make her more believable and appealing. And what's more, when she speaks enthusiastically about her opinions, we're drawn in like suntanned kids to a Slip 'n Slide. Now imagine a report given by an impeccably dressed executive who spouts corporate acronyms without cracking a smile. It's like comparing Velveeta to local artisanal cheese. We don't want scary processed-block perfection. We want the real deal—lumps, imperfections, and all.

And there's another reason the authentic stuff is yummier. Artisanal cheese is made by masters who've been at it for decades, whereas Velveeta comes from a factory. We respect mastery—produced by an authentic expert. We realize that they know their stuff and are willing to listen even if they aren't polished. You can be a master, too. You know about something that people would

love to hear about. And you can also master being an effective presenter in a way that feels right to you.

**In eloquent speaking it is the manner that wins,
not the words.... You are uniquely yourself—
unlike anyone else in this world—and that is
what you must project to an audience.**

—Elbert Hubbard

Still skeptical? You have every right to be. “If everyone thinks I’m a ‘bad’ presenter, how do I get to the cool kind of bad?”

I understand. So consider this. I’m fortunate to have worked with more than one thousand people in discovering the best way to be themselves in presentations. Whether they are professional speakers in front of a huge audience, a manager giving a quarterly report via teleconference, or a mom talking to the PTA committee, they can all find power and passion in being authentic. And that often means breaking all the old rules.

You see, I’m an improviser. I’ve been on the stage since I was five, and improv comedy is the core of my business and philosophy. Improvisation is about freedom, positivity, leapfrogging boundaries, and thinking on your feet. It’s about questioning all the rules, throwing out the script, and making it up as you go along. And that core philosophy has allowed me to make a career and life of throwing away all the outdated rules of training and presenting. Shy, skeptical, and gruff people have gone through my company’s courses and walked out transformed. Scientists, accountants, attorneys, engineers, editors, introverts, and

extroverts have all figured out that they get to be who they are—and who they are is *good*.

A leader once told me: “I thought you were going to polish my team, but what I got was even better. They’re authentic. I don’t care anymore that they’re not perfect, but I suddenly care about what they’re saying.” I don’t want you to be a plastic version of me or anyone else. I do want you to throw out all the rules, get rid of your fear of mistakes, be excited, and dig into your personal power.

I’m going to be drawing on the powerful tools of improvisation and theater to help you break rules. So let’s look at how to begin the transformation, how to give yourself permission, and how to stop freezing. Let’s look at passion.

The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.

—Anna Quindlen

BE PASSIONATELY BAD

Passion—what you care about most—is the core of authenticity. It’s the real deal, and you have it. Somewhere under all those nasty restrictions and buttoned-up rules, there’s a rock star inside you.

It doesn’t matter whether you love your business, your kids, your boat, or your basketball team. And passion isn’t always about loving something. Many folks are passionate about changing

something. They work tirelessly to raise money and awareness about disease. They give up their own comfort to provide aid to victims of disaster or poverty. They face their own demons and addictions to show others it's possible to live a better life.

Passion comes in many forms, but there is a common thread. It lights and drives us. It's a special part of our psyche, values, and beliefs. We can talk about our passion for hours, and it's always interesting to us.

And the best part is that in a presentation, *passion overrides technique*. Audiences would much rather watch someone who is passionate about his or her topic, who isn't polished and perfect on stage, than someone who is slick and soulless. And here's wonderful news: audiences want you to do well! They are not out to get you—they really want you to be fabulously bad, and *love* seeing your passionate, quirky self. (More on this when we break Rule #3.)

Passion uses emotion to engage attention. It actually draws in your audience. In her essay, "How to Fascinate," Sally Hogshead explains:

Think back to a time...when you were leading a presentation and your audience was completely focused on you.... They were lowering the barriers of cynicism and inertia. They stopped merely listening to you, and started connecting with you. This moment—of intense emotional focus—is when you have an opportunity to persuade.¹

You want to know where presentation power comes from? Passion. In our trainings, my company has participants give an extemporaneous presentation on something they feel passionate about. You would not believe what I've seen. I have been utterly

flabbergasted more times than I can count. People who have been boring or stiff will transform completely. I don't even recognize them. It's as though a new person walked into the room—someone I haven't met until now—and I'm blown away by their confidence, clarity, and energy.

I'll never forget one man. I'll call him Sam. He was a new safety manager for an energy provider that distributes electricity, natural gas, and water in the United States. Sam had just been promoted from the field. He'd suddenly gone from digging ditches for power lines to having to provide critical safety presentations to the people who used to dig with him. In his first formal presentation, he couldn't even finish a sentence. He was so nervous and miserable, he tried to bail out three times. We encouraged him, and by clutching a safety booklet and reading it verbatim, he was able to whisper his way through. He kept saying, "I can't do this. I'm terrible. I can't do this."

When we got to the passion exercise, my expectations were low. I expected Sam to speak a few sentences and get off the stage. I could not have been more wrong. He couldn't wait to tell us all about building dune buggies and four-wheelers. He stood up straight, smiled, and joked about his wife having to put up with all the mess in the garage—and oh my. When he related the experience of driving over beaches, the thrill and pleasure he got from it, we were all transported. It was as though we were there in the buggy with him, the radio blasting. Sam even taught at-risk youth how to refurbish vehicles, how to drive and fix them, and how to find a career. When he finished, we all sat stunned for a moment. Even his colleagues couldn't react, they were so surprised. But once we started applauding, we couldn't stop.

Your passion allows you to be... well, *you*. As a matter of fact,

most people don't know what they look like when speaking passionately. I'll bet you light up like Rockefeller Center during the holidays when you get going.

When you are connected to who you are, all the stuff that gets in the way is diminished. And by the way, anyone watching you doesn't care as much about technicalities. When Sam was talking about zipping along in his dune buggy, I was busy visualizing the sand, sunset, and speed. I wouldn't have noticed if he had used some incorrect grammar or stuck his hand in his pocket. I just wanted to see more of this interesting, funny guy.

Here's what I'm asking you to do: go deep. What really matters to you? Knowing about your passion is critical to bringing power to your presentations.

This is also the point where some people suddenly feel stuck.

"Well, of course I do well talking about something fun or meaningful. But what do I do when I'm stuck with that boring quarterly report? How can passion possibly apply to that?"

That's the key. Finding out what's important to you, no matter the topic, is one of the trickiest but most effective ways to be really bad in the best way. Even the driest topic can be animated by passion—you just have to identify how you connect to it. I'll talk about that next.

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That's how the light gets in.

—Leonard Cohen, "Anthem"

APPLYING PASSION TO WORK

I worked with an impressive manager at an East Coast Internet and cable service provider. I'll call him Todd. Todd's first presentation was about the company's health and wellness program. Sounds great, but Todd looked like he had the flu while presenting—he was visibly unhappy. He actually said, right before he began, "I'm warning you, this is going to be really boring."

And it was boring! He just delivered the outline of the program and a bunch of numbers. Something wasn't clicking. He happened to be a very fit, active guy, naturally excited about health and wellness. It took some digging, but we finally figured out that Todd was disappointed with a major portion of the program. Employees weren't embracing one of the offerings—it was a waste of the company's time and money, which frustrated him intensely.

Todd really liked the walking and smart-diet portions of the program. He felt they were financially efficient, and they were extensively embraced by employees. So I challenged him: could he present his thoughts about slimming down the program to the company's leadership and focus on the parts that really worked? It was like someone had just thrown him a surprise party—he laughed and started working on his new presentation right away. He was passionate about the health and wellness program. Passionate about making it good rather than wasteful.

Now, let's take a reality check here. Presenting your opinion on company programs is not always possible. It can risk your reputation or even your job. We made sure to question Todd closely about the appropriateness of this action. Luckily, he was in a position where he could state opinions freely. And let's not forget, when he was fueled by his passionate belief that the program

could really work, he made a powerful presentation. He didn't go in and complain. He went in to convince his audience that he had a more effective, more budget-conscious option so that they would reorganize the program. He used his passion to create and present options that were well received. What started out as a boring corporate chore became an opportunity to make a difference.

Try applying this to your own work. I'm sure you've been stuck with presenting a quarterly report or a department update that made *you* want to fall asleep, let alone your audience. Where's the passion in that? It's there, but some rigor is needed to find it. Any information you present has some connection to you. Try taking the time to ask why it matters:

- › How does this apply to me?
- › If I could change anything in this situation, what would it be? Can I talk about that?
- › If this is the most important thing I'm doing today, how can I find the powerful part of it?
- › What piece of this do I really care about?
- › If I don't care, why is that? What could change to make me care?

Those questions allow you to pause in the midst of your busy life and consider what matters to you. Examining motivations, opinions, and thoughts on any topic allows anyone to present in a more meaningful way. When working with presenters, I'm surprised how often they've forgotten to ask themselves why they are doing what they are doing. And time spent digging a little deeper is well spent—it enables your ability to connect to passion and meaning, no matter what the topic.

Channel your passion—find surprising places where it might apply. I’ll be sharing more stories of people who took boring updates, applied their passion, and came out fabulously bad.

But before we move on, let me make an important point.

Does this mean that if you’re passionate, nothing else in presentations matters? No. Being both passionate *and* effective in your presentations is the magic combination. It means that passion can transform you, elevate you, connect you with your audience. The questions to ask are “How can I be myself and bring my passion out?” “How can I show it without being so crazy or emotional that I sink my own ship?”

Rethink your approach to speaking. Instead of focusing your preparation and presentations on following rules, start centering them on *you*. What matters? What do you want to accomplish? How can you have the most fun?

And whatever you do, break any rules that don’t work for you!

**For a short video on Passion,
visit www.ImprovEdge.com/videos**

THE BADDEST WAY TO PREPARE

Start Breaking the Rules Before You Even Hit the Stage

There's just too much going on in presentations: information to remember, slides crammed with data, your pulse racing, and all those rotten rules to follow. Focus, people, focus! You need to peel away the excess stuff that gets in the way of efficient, authentic presenting.

Let's put on our geek hats and consider why this matters. Neuroscience is uncovering more and more information about the importance of focus. David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz have done insanely cool research into how our brains connect to our leadership abilities and to our everyday human behavior. As we dump behaviors that stand in our way (i.e., break old rules) and replace them with new ways to focus our thoughts and energy, we are actually rewiring our brains. Being ourselves becomes easier and easier if we focus on it.

Over time, paying enough attention to any specific brain connection keeps the relevant circuitry open and dynamically alive. These circuits can then eventually become not just chemical links but stable, physical changes in the brain's structure... the brain changes as a function of where an individual puts his or her attention. The power is in the focus.¹

So instead of focusing on what you're doing wrong (which the rules of presenting just *love* to do), focus on your strengths and being yourself. Get this: if you focus on new behaviors, you can change your brain to embrace patterns that make you a better, more authentic speaker. Rock and Schwartz call it "attention density," and it applies to many areas of human behavior, as well as mood and learning skills. Put simply, if you start presenting in new ways, your brain will open up circuits to support your confidence and capabilities. If that doesn't make you feel like you have a bionic brain, I don't know what will.

In Appreciative Inquiry, we find that the things which you focus upon, grow.

—David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney

Passion and focus may seem like surprising ideas with which to begin talking about presentations. Most discussions start with the rules. But trust me: it's all part of the business of getting down to business. If you can let your passion out of the stable to run free, you can certainly try a few new techniques to replace the old rules.

There's impact and influence in knowing just what you want to share and doing it at just the right time. And that means you can use techniques that feel right for you. Whenever a technique gets in the way of you being authentic, it's time to break the rules.

So let's do it. Let's break fourteen of those archaic rules and instead present in a way that feels good, fun, and really *bad*.

Break This Rule

#1: Your purpose is to give a good presentation



**“Good” is to a presentation
like “fine” is to a compliment.
Your purpose is to make
something happen!**

Rule to Break #1 is mired in technicality. There you stand, waiting for your chance to speak to the committee, and all you’re worried about is “giving a good presentation.” What does that mean?

It means you’re obsessed with all the wrong things: your slides show every number in existence, you say everything in order, you stand up straight behind the podium, you never cross the beam of the projector, and you don’t pass out. You’re drowning in worry because the only thing rolling around in your head is, “Give a good presentation. Give a good presentation. Don’t mess up, and give a good presentation!”

It’s time to have a heart-to-heart with yourself about why you’re standing there. What purpose does this presentation serve? Having a searingly clear purpose will filter out all the silt from your presentation. Think of purpose as the destination—the outcome of your presentation. What do you want to have happen? What great change will come from you taking the time to talk to these people? Consider Todd from the Internet and cable company. The purpose of his new presentation was to convince his company’s leadership to cut out the wasteful portion of the health and wellness program and keep the good parts. He wanted to make something happen.

Your purpose is the “so what” for your audience and your driving goal. Here are some examples:

- › You want to convince the committee to *increase your budget by 10 percent next year.*
- › You want to entertain the youth club so that they *enter the state go-cart competition.*
- › You want to inspire college students to *vote for the first time.*
- › You want to anger your community council so that they *enact laws to protect the environment.*
- › You want to motivate a client to dump its old vendor and *buy your products instead.*

Purpose has to be tied to an outcome—what do you want your audience to do as a result of your work? You make something happen because your passionate presentation had a purpose.

Purpose is critical because it colors all your decisions about the presentation. With a purpose, you can suddenly make clear decisions about content and flow. If you really want kids to enter the state go-cart competition, don’t tell them about seven different kinds of toys they could build and just hope that they decide to make go-carts. You focus on go-carts and tell stories about other kids who have won!

If you want your budget to be increased by 10 percent, don’t review all department budgets, the corporate marketing plan, and the company picnic. Talk about your success and map out how you would use the additional funds to benefit your company. Suddenly, slides, comments, and quotations that don’t support your purpose are easily trashed.

One of the most obvious signs of a purposeless presentation is a tsunami of information. When you’re drowning your audience

in data, it's because you're not sure where you're going. You just hope that all the information will move the audience in the right direction.

I worked with the chief strategy officer of a national insurer and her direct team—a small group of about eight people who were incredibly intelligent, data-driven, and numbers-oriented. The team was also in a very delicate position. They needed to influence decisions but didn't necessarily have the power to tell people what to do, and that included the CEO!

The team's presentations made my brain feel like it was on novocaine. Numbers, numbers, everywhere, and not a purpose in sight. One participant was trying to influence the company's leaders to invest in car-safety technology. But you'd never know that. He saw his role as that of the informer. He threw tons of data at the audience and hoped enough stuck to move them in his direction. We in the audience were busy reading slides covered with data. Whenever we did have a chance to listen, he overwhelmed us with his racer-fast delivery of acronyms and scientific projections. I eventually removed the fire hose from my mouth and asked him, "What are you trying to accomplish?"

Once he focused and agreed to hone in on one purpose, everything changed. He clearly stated his purpose, used only the data that directly supported investment in car-safety technology, and talked about the benefits of that one idea. He cut out confusing information and moved toward a single outcome. That, in turn, allowed him to communicate a powerful, simple message. Most importantly, he influenced listeners without seeming to do so.

It was like in *The Wizard of Oz*, when the black-and-white screen gives way to Technicolor.

This concept also applies to one-on-one meetings or conversations around a table. We've all been in way too many purposeless

meetings and conversations. Think about how much more productive, clear, and short those meetings would be if they had a purpose. For example, “We’re going to discuss only digital marketing and decide on the first step today.” Whenever someone starts to careen into on-site advertising, they’re wrangled back to the purpose. “Let’s decide where to go on vacation with the current budget.” Whenever topics such as what you’d do with more money or what to pack comes up—screech! Put on the brakes and bring it all back.

So, keep it simple. It’s best to walk in with one strong purpose, accomplish that, and move on to another purpose at another time. I’ve seen presenters try to accomplish two, three, or four purposes at once, and you can guess what happens. Nothing. The audience walks out not knowing what to do.

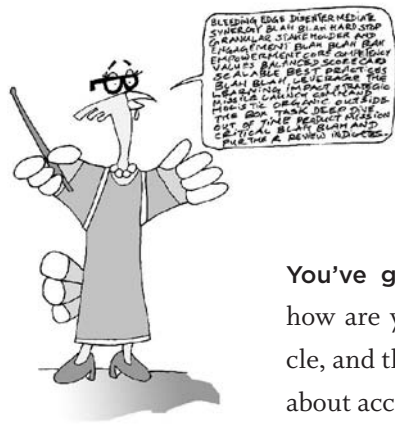
And every now and then, your purpose can be very selfish and a little secret—no one else has to know what it is. There’s nothing wrong with choosing a purpose such as impressing the boss so that she gives you a promotion or making your children laugh so that they think cleaning up is fun and you can do less of it. All your audience will know is that you gave a very compelling presentation and they’re coming around quickly to your suggestions.

Purpose is the ace in the hole. It gives you focus, drive, and clarity.

**For a short video on Purpose, visit
www.ImprovEdge.com/videos**

Break This Rule

#2: Give informational presentations



That's about as exciting
as watching grass grow.
Take action!

You've got a destination—your purpose. Now, how are you going to get there? You need a vehicle, and that's your action. Action is the way you go about accomplishing your purpose. In other words, how you get there. Purpose = What. Action = How.

Action is probably the single most critical reason that presentations even occur. Remember when I said that if you're just going to hand over a bunch of data, why not send out an email or a memo? You're there in person for a reason, because your passion, purpose, and energy are going to affect people. Action is how you will make them feel. It is an emotional connection to the audience that moves them—and drives your purpose. By choosing an action, you're going to make people feel something, consider new ideas, maybe even get mad. You will be:

- › motivating
- › convincing
- › entertaining
- › angering
- › invigorating
- › teaching
- › inspiring

Your action is the driving force that gives power to your presentation. Remember my examples of a purpose in the previous chapter? Let's look at them again, now with the action words in italic:

- › You want to *convince* the committee to increase your budget by 10 percent next year.
- › You want to *entertain* the youth club so that they enter the state go-cart competition.
- › You want to *inspire* college students to vote for the first time.
- › You want to *anger* your community council so that they enact laws to protect the environment.
- › You want to *motivate* a client to dump its old vendor and buy your products instead.

Much like purpose, action helps you—the presenter—to focus. You *know* what you want to make happen, so you focus your delivery. You're there to entertain the youth club. So don't present boring information about the number of boards the kids need, the width of the boards, and the length of the nails. Talk about the wind in their hair as their go-carts race along at top speed. Talk about meeting other kids at the state competition and the cool prizes. Tell funny stories about your first awful, lopsided go-cart and how proud you were when you learned to do it right.

Do you think it's an accident that every college-student organization has pizza at its meetings? Students are always hungry—you feed them, and they see you as a friend. Then you whip up their natural desire to be part of something exciting. You use stories about how one vote can win an election, making their voice

heard, being part of real change. All those steps lead to inspiring them to vote for the first time. And better yet, tell them you'll drive them to the polls, and the deal is done.

Or if you're there to motivate your client to switch to your products, be sure they're aware of your competitor's falling stock price and the fact that the other guys source their devices from a foreign country. Give your client compelling reasons why you're a better bet so that they're motivated to go through the difficult process of dropping a vendor and starting with a new one.

Purpose and action are rooted in the theater. Great actors, improvisers, and speakers drive their work with action and purpose. When you see a great performance on the screen, one that moves you, makes you laugh or cry, it's because an actor has chosen a purpose and an action for his character. Hamlet's single purpose was to find out who killed his father, the king. His actions were to threaten, confuse, and outsmart the other characters until he found the murderer.

I had a wonderful early career in improv, stage, and film. I eventually left that life and went to work in technology—network engineering—in New York City. What a switch! Even though I was working hard and cramming at night, I often had no idea what the heck I was talking about. So I had a purpose and an action for every meeting and presentation. I may still have been learning the fine points, but I absolutely understood the big picture of what I was after: a signed contract, a raise, or a partnership program. I thought about the people I was trying to influence, then I used data to convince them. Or funny stories to entertain them. Or falling stock prices to scare the doo-doo out of them.

But there's one very sticky issue with action. This is the

baddest piece of my bad advice. Remove “inform” from your list of acceptable actions. Notice it’s not on the list at the start? If you use it, cross it out permanently. Inform is a cop-out. It is the default action for 95 percent of presentations, and it’s one of the weakest choices you can make. Think about it—most presentations are approached with an attitude like, “I’ll give them all the information, and then I’ve done my job. If they do nothing, it’s not my fault. I’m just there to inform.” Gee thanks, milquetoast.

In the worst case, the action of informing removes responsibility from the presenter for having a greater purpose for being there. It drains energy and diffuses focus. And that’s when extraneous data and unrelated points start to find their way in. Computers, machines, and spreadsheets inform. Humans interpret and find deeper meaning in numbers and information.

I challenge you to always choose a more powerful option than inform. Even a standard update can teach, motivate, or convince an audience.

I have a real-life example from my work with a regional sports media provider. One woman in my group, Susan, belligerently insisted that it was impossible for her quarterly updates to do anything other than inform. Updates are just that—information. So why should she care about doing anything else but laying out the info as quickly as possible and being done with it?

I asked her about the audience: she gave her presentation to an assistant to the CEO, and that assistant would then brief the CEO. So I nudged her. What might be the worst outcome of that process? She admitted that the assistant could develop all sorts of unbecoming perceptions. For example, she might presume that Susan wasn’t very committed, that the department was barely meeting its goals for the year, or that their ideas or attitude didn’t align with the company’s goals—which would then result in an

unfavorable report to the CEO. A report like that could mean budget cuts, uncomplimentary reviews, or even firings. It turned out that this assistant had a great deal more influence than Susan had really considered.

What about the best-case scenario? Susan shared that the best outcome would be for the assistant to return surprised and excited about the department's great work and voice her approval to the CEO. That could result in more funding for the department, positive performance reviews, and promotions. By focusing on the potential impact of this "standard" presentation, Susan realized how much influence she could have.

Susan changed her entire approach. For the next quarterly update, she and her team agreed on a purpose: having such good reviews from the assistant that they would be awarded a budget increase at the end of the year. Their action was to inspire her to comment positively to the CEO and support their recommendations for more funds. With that focus, the team's members gave the best update they had ever made. They integrated success stories, creatively shared their ideas, and used bright posters in a sunny room rather than PowerPoint slides in a dark room. For the first time, the assistant asked questions, laughed, and commented on the information. With each successive update, Susan and her team drove home their purpose in more and more creative ways to engage and inspire the assistant. And—you guessed it. At the end of the year, Susan and her team got a budget increase for the next year.

Susan connected to the information in a personal way. That filled her with the passion to have a clear purpose and action. By combining those elements, she and her team enjoyed an incredible outcome.

Action is the vehicle that gets you to your destination, the

purpose. Choose a strong action, and you'll add fuel to your next presentation!

**For a short video on Action,
visit www.ImprovEdge.com/videos**

Break This Rule

#3: Practice in front of a mirror



Mirrors are just a one-person show. Practice often, out loud, and on your feet!

Practicing in front of a mirror sounds like great advice. We don't know what we look like, and it's not always possible to videotape our practice, so why not? This rule is one of those that everybody knows is "right."

To give yourself the best possible chance of playing to your potential, you must prepare for every eventuality. That means practice.

—Seve Ballesteros

I've heard or read this tip countless times, and here's what happens when you practice in front of a mirror: You get used to performing for an "audience" that's about twelve inches away. You become obsessed with how you hold your face, the arc of your arm, and that part of your body you don't like. You think about yourself and how you look. You worry about tics you didn't notice before, or conversely, you really enjoy smiling back at that good-looking person in the mirror. In short, you practice watching yourself.

You're supposed to be practicing watching the audience! You won't be watching yourself when you present, but your body,

voice, and energy will all be used to a mirror, which gives no feedback, reaction, or energy and makes you focus on yourself. Nothing will make you self-conscious and inwardly focused more quickly than practicing in front of a mirror.

There's a Greek legend about a hunter named Narcissus, who was renowned for his beauty. He was quite proud, so Nemesis decided to act. Nemesis was the goddess of retribution against those who succumbed to hubris, or overarching pride. She lured Narcissus to a pool where he saw his reflection. He fell in love with his own beauty and eventually wasted away and died, staring at his own reflection. Psychology has an illness named for the hunter—narcissism.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines narcissism as "egoism, egocentrism," and synonyms include self-absorption and self-centeredness. Of course, most people aren't remotely narcissists, but a mirror can make anyone worry too much about themselves. Too much self-reflection removes your focus from the audience. You just keep coming back to the reflection, rather than to reality. If we're centered on ourselves, instead of on our audiences, we'll kill a good presentation.

To feel the difference between a mirror and an open room, put your hand up in front of your face as though it's a mirror. Notice how it's several inches away, blocks your view of anything else, and makes the area around you feel small. When you practice in that "space," you keep your energy close and don't project your voice. Now stand at the front of an open room and look around. You can see all the way to the back wall. You realize that your energy and voice need to project to the front, sides, and rear of the room. You begin to notice details about the room and how you feel standing at the front.

This is the best way to practice presentations—in an open

room, your hotel room, or a conference room. Get used to how your body feels and your voice sounds. Stumble through, mess up—so what. It’s practice. And do it with an audience if you can swing it. Your best friend, spouse, or colleague will give you better feedback than any mirror ever will. You’ll feel what it’s like to have another person react to you, and you’ll understand how energy and eye contact affect them.

Sure, practicing in front of a mirror, maybe once, might help you become aware of how you look. That’s not an awful thing, but you’ve got to step away and feel the excitement and fear of facing a room. You may not look perfect, and that’s just fine.

**The whole world’s a stage and most of
us are desperately unrehearsed.**

—Seán O’Casey

Real, on-your-feet preparation—there’s no substitute. I had a man come up to me after a workshop laughing ruefully. “I was hoping your workshop would give me an out. I was looking for the magic pill; how I can be fabulous without practice. You just verified that there are no shortcuts.”

Sorry, kids. Even when you’re breaking all the rules, you’ve got to practice your badness! And I promise it’s worth it. There’s a staggering trend I’ve been tracking. My study isn’t scientific, and I’ve not formally recorded the numbers, but at workshop after workshop, the people in the most senior positions are always the most prepared. They set aside time to organize, practice speeches out loud, or simply work through the purpose for their next meeting. This makes it pretty obvious how they got to that top job, doesn’t it? These people tell me stories about their

solid preparation habits even when they weren't at a senior level. People who are less experienced or lower in the org chart rush around making sure we know how busy they are—and wing it, wing it, wing it. Yep, the people who most need to prepare are the least likely to do so.

I mean, come on. Do you really think Olympic athletes wing it?

Author Malcolm Gladwell studied people at the top of their fields. He found that it wasn't innate talent or intelligence that sent people to the top of their professions. It was practice and experience. He contends that it takes about ten thousand hours of real-time practice to catapult someone to the highest level of capabilities—whether as a computer programmer, concert pianist, athlete, or member of a rock 'n' roll band. The people who put in the time, work, and practice are the ones who excel. The Beatles, for example, played marathon eight-hour sets at strip clubs in advance of their celebrity. They had performed more than twelve hundred times before their first burst of fame in 1964.

That magic number—ten thousand hours—continues to pop up as the differentiator between people who work hard and do well, and those who work really, really hard and do incredibly well.² Or in our case, are super bad.

So, what about natural talent? Believe it or not, there's more danger here for those who are naturally comfortable presenters, and less for those who are nervous and uncertain. People who know they need practice might at least feel guilty when they don't prepare. But I have a special warning for those who often receive praise and feel they can pull off a pretty good presentation without preparation. Your advantage is that you have tricks and natural grace that allow you to wing it. Your disadvantage is

that you believe that's all you need. And the more you get used to winging it, the less time you'll devote to improvement. That's a mistake. Tony Schwartz, who has aggregated studies on this topic, says this:

If you're not actively working to get better at what you do, there's a good chance you're getting worse, no matter what the quality of your initial training—in some cases, diminished performance is simply the result of a failure to keep up with the advances in a given field. But it's also because most of us tend to become fixed in our habits and practices, even when they're suboptimal.³

I once had a member of my ensemble who was magnetic and smart but never prepared until the day of an event. Under pressure, it was clear that he hadn't looked up any new material and had not prepared very much. He could always come off as good and charming, but pretty soon I knew his entire bag of tricks and was onto his style. He lacked depth. I knew I'd never be able to send him to a client more than twice—they too would grow weary of his same old delivery. Buh-bye.

What we're talking about here is a plateau. When you reach a certain level of competence, your body and mind realize that it's good enough to get by on. And let's be honest—society rewards a certain level of competence and often doesn't expect more. The author Joshua Foer calls this concept the “OK Plateau.” You're okay at something, you're competent, but despite months, even years, of practice, you do not improve. Foer's examples include typing—once we are able to type at a certain acceptable speed, we might remain at that speed for the rest of our lives despite hours of time spent typing.⁴ We can discover why with a deeper look at practice.

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