

Seven Secrets of HR Leaders Who Speak Well

by Suzanne Bates, President and CEO of
Bates Communications, Inc.

When it comes to public speaking, human resources specialists must technically speak well, but they must also have substance. They must look and sound like true leaders—especially if they're on the front lines whether describing their company's benefits package or explaining new trends in the HR arena. To do this well, they can learn from business leaders such as CEOs, executives and other types of leaders who had to learn it themselves.

What exactly must you do? Your first focus must be not only what you say, but how you say it. Your content must be clear and compelling, not just technically competent. Without that you're just another speaker but not a leader.

Secret #1: Talk about big ideas

Every speech, presentation or communication needs one big idea. A big idea is all most people can remember. A big idea has a life of its own. And it doesn't require a big speech. It's big because of its power, not its length. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address is 271 words, and it's one of the best speeches ever given.

Secret #2: Speak in the moment

No one likes a canned speech. Canned speeches turn people off. You must talk to people about what is happening in the moment. Your message must be about them and about what's happening to them RIGHT NOW in order to win over an audience that may not even be sure it even wants to listen to you. To achieve this, act natural and put away the script.

Secret #3: Keep it simple

One big problem with many speeches is they try to do too much. Instead, to be remembered, make your message simple and straightforward

Roger Marino, founder of the high-tech giant EMC, says he learned early on how important communication is in business—especially when it comes to keeping things simple. Marino considered the brilliant professors when he was in school to be the ones who could actually communicate the ideas in ways people could understand. "Communication is everything," he feels. "You really have to hammer a message home."

Keeping it simple is how he now keeps people interested and absorbed in the subject at hand. "I just explain the steps," he explains. "A CEO has to do the same thing: take people from A to B to C."

Secret #4: Be a straight-shooter

A survey my firm once conducted on communication found the number one quality people want in a leader is honesty and integrity. Thus your message must ring true. Audiences want a leader to be more than a good speaker; they want a leader to tell them the truth, no matter what. In all aspects of corporate life these days, with so much distrust about thanks to the many ethics scandals of the past decade, HR leaders must be viewed as trustworthy to a fault!

Secret #5: Be an optimist

As a business leader, you face good times and bad, and must balance reality with hope. A



Suzanne Bates is an award-winning television news anchor, reporter and president of Bates Communication, a presentation skills consulting firm that helps business leaders and executives project an authentic voice of leadership, and get a competitive edge in business. This article is adapted from *Speak Like a CEO: Secrets for Commanding Attention and Getting Results* (McGraw-Hill) which has been translated into Russian and Chinese. Suzanne can be reached by phone at 800-908-8239 or by visiting www.bates-communications.com

hallmark of leadership is optimism. The true leader must perceive and talk about what's possible.

When Bill Ford, Jr. ousted CEO Jacques Nasser at Ford Motor Company in 2001, the company was losing billions of dollars. But at that quarter's news conference in June 2003, Ford responded to each question with unbridled optimism. "We are back on firm footing," he said. "I feel good about where we are today and where we are headed." Within 20 months, Ford had turned optimism into reality by turning the company completely around.

Secret #6: Focus on the future

In difficult times, we look to leaders for hope. New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani was in mid-town Manhattan when the first plane hit the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. On that morning, his political career was on thin ice; he had been kicked out of the house by his wife who was furious after publicity about a mistress.

But that day, Giuliani knew what he had to do. At the scene of the disaster, he literally risked his life, trapped in the rubble of Ground Zero for 15 minutes. But through it all, he focused on hope. "New Yorkers are just the most wonderful people in the world," said Giuliani, "with the best police department, fire department and the best emergency workers (anywhere)."

His message was potent. New Yorkers, and the world, made it through that frightful day, thanks in no small part to Rudy Giuliani's message.

Secret #7: Be real

At times your position as an HR manager may put you at a distinct disadvantage with many audiences. Again because of past scandal, employees for example start out feeling skeptical about what you have to say. This is obviously a lousy way to start a speech, meeting or even a conversation. Yet your job is to find a way to make a connection. So to connect... be real!

Dan Wolf, CEO of Cape Air, has a reputation for doing this. Warm, self-effacing and genuine with his audiences, Dan draws on his background and eclectic interests to connect. In town meetings with employees he can relate to all individuals—pilot, mechanics, business folks.

"I use self-effacing humor," he explains. "And my organizational skills are not great, so that's great material for humor, too." Good leaders find ways to humanize themselves and still maintain their authority.

Business leaders who succeed as speakers don't get to the top because of luck. Most leaders who speak well became great speakers because they chose to be. By heeding these 7 secrets, any HR executive can follow in their path.