

OWNING THE ROOM



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I was sitting in the audience of demo day presentations a few years ago. Six teams had gone through an 8-week incubator, and all of them had viable PowerPoint projects and articulate sponsors. But one young woman walked onto the stage and rather than give a presentation, drew everyone into her vision. We became captivated.

We all wanted to be on her team. As I was clapping for the young presenter, I overheard someone in the audience say, “Wow, she really owned the room.”

In another instance, I once sat on a conference panel of five industry participants discussing the state of the market. I was being myself and answered transparently. I was not there to teach; I was there to share. That night, my competitor’s marketing person approached me at a cocktail party and asked, “How do I get my teams to be more relatable? You really owned the room.” The last comment made me smirk.

It’s NOT just natural

In my opinion, one of the biggest compliments an audience member can offer someone is saying they really owned the room. The context could be a presentation like what I witnessed or anywhere from a business cocktail party to a board room. Owning the room does not mean being the loudest or drawing the most attention. The young presenter did not do anything flashy or outside the box. Owning the room has significant positive connotations of drawing people in, being relatable, and insightful. What makes one person stand out from the crowd in a positive light? What brings our focus to that person, leaving us wanting more as soon as it is over? People often discount the ability to own the

room by saying it comes naturally to some people. While coaching another employee recently, I heard: “but it is easy for you since you are a natural speaker.” I assure you; I am not. I believe most people are not.

These are learned skills that can be developed and practiced over time. There are steps we can all take to own the rooms we are in rather than be owned by them.

Finding relatable authenticity

The first step is understanding the key attributes for the goal of owning the room and developing a working definition of how to do it. It is not about being the best in the lecture hall. Aggressiveness and decibels might catch attention, but they do not own the room. It is about developing a presence that draws the in audience or the attendees. Owning the room involves a confidence without ego and an engagement around concepts without top-down instruction. People are not told to follow along; rather, the audience joins the speaker in their vision. People follow authenticity that relates to them. Further discussion with the marketing person at that conference led me to realize why she made her comment. She enjoyed my ability to distill some complex numeric concepts into a relatable framework that was at the level of understanding in the room. Other panelists went down bond math tunnels, that I am sure were brilliant

points, but they completely lost the audience. Fortunately, I may not have realized I was self-regulating based on the body language feedback I was getting from the room, but I was.

Owning the room in 3 key steps

How does one further develop these skillsets? The three critical steps below can get leaders to a position where they own the room:

1. Listen to the room before you speak
2. Be relatable with an authentic voice
3. Be prepared so you can be flexible

Know your audience

It sounds simple, but it takes intention and practice to come across as natural and organic to others in the room. The first item is perhaps the most important and may be the hardest to understand and get right. There is usually no ability to poll the room first or walk around and listen to what people are saying prior to walking onstage. At a cocktail party or a board room, listen first and read people’s body language before you speak. However, this might not always be available to you in every situation. Translating that same skill to the podium is similar but not as obvious in relation to how someone gets there. The best way to read the room before you speak is to know your audience. Understand who is there and what their point of view might be. Anticipate the pain points

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in their business that you are trying to address. When engaging with that audience, continue to read the body language just like you would at a cocktail party. You can read the room only if you avoid reading to the room. Be prepared for your important points but let yourself have some leeway to use one anecdote versus another or use an explanation that resonates better.

Share your story

The next step is a direct outgrowth of the first. Be relatable. A great way to be relatable is to use authentic stories that drive home the point. If the story is personal, it tends to be more impactful. There is no better substitute for drawing in the audience and creating a shared vision. Leading with authenticity and vulnerability sometimes feels uncomfortable in a business setting, but it leaves a huge impact. Editing is allowed to protect the innocent but not at the expense of an authentic voice. Think literary license – not fiction – and strive for something that makes sense. If you put yourself in the story with some vulnerability, they will often put themselves in the story too.

Be prepared

The last step, which should also be the first, is to be prepared. Everyone who sounds like a natural, organic speaker has prepared well for the opportunity and has enough prepared remarks that they can go off

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script but not be caught off guard or run out of coherent thoughts. Know your numbers and have at least a few specific data points that help tell the story. Actual data is always well received in context and drives home the relevance of the discussion. Nothing conveys knowledge better than an example backed up by facts and numbers.

Bringing it back to the original protagonist at the demo day above, I spoke to her at length after she won the best pitch that day. She had followed the framework described here without knowing it. First, she knew her audience and spoke to the audience like she would a user of her concept product. She had spent two weeks doing focus groups with potential users and constituents and geared the pitch to them. She understood the questions and friction points that might occur, and she wove

the questions and answers into her pitch. She anticipated the thought process in the room by making the needs of the potential users real thereby bringing the audience into the problem-solving. Secondly, she made the pitch relatable by putting herself in the story of why the product might be helpful. She crushed her presentation with not only what the potential returns could be for the business, but then added sustainability goals and the social impact of the company. 🌱



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