HOW TO ADD HUMOR TO A TALK

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Humor is a great way to engage your audience in your speech. Not only does humor keep your audience interested in your presentation, it also aids learning.

Some of the most popular and inspiring TED talks of all times are also the most humorous.

For example, in Sir Ken Robinson’s popular TED talk (http://bit.ly/1advzg8), he makes the audience laugh an average of once a minute.

Dan Pink’s TED talk (http://bit.ly/1bOOiuG) also contains great humor.

So, how do you add humor to your presentation?

CREATE AN EXPECTATION, THEN SUDDENLY BREAK IT

A comment is humorous when it creates an expectation and then suddenly breaks it.
We laugh when we are surprised.

This is why we usually burst into laughter when we see someone suddenly trip and fall on their face. It was unexpected – it was a surprise – and it causes us to laugh. The side benefit of laughter is that it makes us more alert, which aids learning.

So, how can you add humor to a presentation without resorting to telling jokes?

Ken Robinson is a master at creating expectations and then breaking them. Consider the following line:

“If my wife is cooking a meal at home, which is not often... thankfully.”

In comedy, the part of the line that creates the expectation is called the set-up. In this case, the set-up is “If my wife is cooking a meal at home, which is not often …”

Sir Ken’s set-up makes us think that he is complaining about his wife not cooking often enough. The punch line refers to the part of the line that suddenly breaks the expectation. In this case, the punch line is the word “thankfully.” It suddenly breaks our earlier expectation because we find out Sir Ken is actually glad his wife doesn’t cook often!

The thing that makes a comment humorous is the sudden breaking of the expectation. Thus the shorter the punch line, the greater the laugh. If Sir Ken had said, “If my wife is cooking a meal at home, which is not often, and I’m thankful about that,” the comment wouldn’t have been as funny. If you want to produce a gigantic laugh from your audience, keep your set-up and punch line as short as possible.

Here’s another example of this technique from Dan Pink’s TED talk:
“I didn’t do very well. I, in fact, graduated in the part of my law school class that made the top 90 percent ... possible.” (audience laughs)

The set-up creates the expectation that Dan graduated at the top of his class. The punch line of “possible” suddenly breaks that expectation and gives us new insight that Dan graduated in the bottom of his class. Our brain realizes that it’s had a verbal trick performed on it, and so we laugh. The other reason this line works so well because it’s self-deprecating humor – Dan is poking fun at himself.

**USE SELF-DEPRECATING HUMOR**

Self-deprecating humor refers to making yourself the butt of the jokes. If you’re willing to make fun of yourself, you’ll never run out of humorous possibilities.

Consider the following piece of self-deprecating humor from Dan Pink’s TED talk:

“I never practiced law a day in my life; I pretty much wasn’t allowed to.”

Self-deprecating humor works because it shows that you’re willing to poke fun at yourself. It gives the audience permission to have fun because you’re having fun by making fun of yourself. Furthermore, it makes you more likeable as a speaker because we all like people who take themselves lightly.

Here’s another piece of self-deprecating humor from Sir Ken Robinson’s TED talk:
“I used to be on the board of the Royal Ballet in England ... as you can see.”

Sir Ken pokes fun at himself because it’s obvious from looking at him that he doesn’t do ballet.

The lesson here is this: don’t be afraid to poke fun at yourself on stage.

OVER-EXAGERRATE

People also laugh at obvious over-exaggerations.

Consider the following piece of humor from Elizabeth Gilbert’s TED talk (http://bit.ly/yDEr):

When I first started telling people — when I was a teenager — that I wanted to be a writer, I was met with this same kind of, sort of fear-based reaction. People would say, “Aren’t you afraid you’re never going to have any success? Aren’t you afraid the humiliation of rejection will kill you? Aren’t you afraid that you’re going to work your whole life at this craft and nothing’s ever going to come of it and you’re going to die on a scrap heap of broken dreams with your mouth filled with bitter ash of failure?” (audience laughter)

The obvious over-exaggeration of the last comment is what causes people to laugh.

In his TED talk, Sir Ken also used over-exaggeration to get a laugh from his audience. Consider how grossly he over-exaggerates his wife’s ability to multi-task:
“If she’s cooking, you know, she’s dealing with people on the phone, she’s talking to the kids, she’s painting the ceiling, she’s doing open-heart surgery over here” (audience laughter)

Here’s another example of over-exaggeration from the same talk by Sir Ken:

[If you are at a party and someone asks] “What do you do?” and you say you work in education, you can see the blood run from their face. They’re like, “Oh my God,” you know, “Why me? My one night out all week!” (audience laughter)

There are entire books devoted to humor, but I find that the above three techniques are the ones from which I generate the bulk of laughs.

If you want more tools on how to become a more powerful and dynamic speaker, then check out my book “How to Deliver a Great TED Talk”: [http://amzn.to/18fD1Tn]