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Five Creative Strategies for project managers to reach their audience

How Sisyphus (of all people) “spices up” the presentation

Summary: Project managers face the difficult task of obtaining buy-in from team members, customers and other stakeholders for their plans. Providing only factual information is not enough. Brain research reveals: With skillfully placed emotional impulses, project managers can effectively embed messages. Five Creative Strategies show how professionals can increase the impact of their presentations and successfully convey messages.



The project manager spent days putting together figures. He wanted to show his team how important the success of the project was for their company. A few times already, other teams had failed to complete this project task; this time was going to be different. But, instead of figures, the project manager presented the team with a picture: a drawing of the legendary figure Sisyphus. Sisyphus always, again and again, had to carry a big rock up the mountain; once it reached the top, the rock always rolled down again. "I want this rock to stay up at the top this time," the project manager proclaimed during his presentation, "our project must be a success." The project manager's message had successfully reached his audience. Even a few weeks later, the team still remembered Sisyphus. "With good arguments alone, good figures, I'd never have achieved this effect on the team," the project manager reckons.

Data, facts and figures are all important in a presentation, but: A presentation with only factually presented information seldom "sticks" properly. The message soon fades and this presents a problem for project managers. "Project managers are dependent on winning over their team members, the managing directors or other stakeholders of their projects," explains Christoph Rabl, a specialist in Creativity in Economic Processes at "next level consulting". He recommends that

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presentations be "spiced up" with "creative ingredients", for example with symbolic photos, with short "stories" or even with the image of a legendary figure. "Such creative elements reliably embed the message with the audience," says Christoph Rabl with conviction.

Brain researchers have found that in the human brain, information and messages are better embedded when a presentation also appeals to the feelings - the emotions - of the individual. Therefore, skilful presenters always repeatedly give their audience an "emotional impulse", a small buzz for their feelings/emotions. In addition to inspiring pictures and photos, Christoph Rabl, for example, also recommends the speaker's skillful guiding of their voice, a suitable gesture or a brief, moving "short story" like that of Sisyphus.

He explains how project managers can prepare their presentation to "cater to the brain" with Five Creative Strategies:

First Strategy - Pay attention to the "non-verbal":

There is a saying: "it's not what you say, but how you say it". It is no different when it comes to presentations. Subconsciously, listeners pay attention to the voice of the speaker. "Many emotions are transmitted through the voice," says Christoph Rabl. "If the voice of the speaker has an undertone of concern or worry, they can only motivate their listeners with difficulty." The same goes for gestures. Standing with arms crossed in front of the audience does little to create a connection with the listeners. That is why Christoph Rabl warns against focusing solely on the facts when preparing important presentations. In a general "dress rehearsal", the speaker should observe how they are perceived by others - and whether their manner of conduct supports their presentation. Sometimes a few fitting gestures or a subtle inflection in the voice are enough to emphasise important messages. Critical for success: professionals remain authentic and do not copy anything uncommon to them. "I always keep to which I feel is natural for me," says Christoph Rabl. "From deep within I want my presentation style to resonate as right and appropriate with me."

Second Strategy - Change the "setting":

Many conference rooms are equipped with all amenities - but they are also not very inspiring. They hardly help to set emotional impulses. That is why experienced presenters select a suitable "setting" for particularly

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important appearances. For example, a manager who wanted to present a re-organisation project to eighty employees moved his presentation to a construction site. This unusual "meeting room" signalled: the company is like a construction site, where a lot of new and meaningful things are created. However, even with simpler means one can trigger an emotional impulse in the audience. A project manager from Oman circulated a small bowl of exotic incense among the audience when doing her status presentation. She thus conveyed to her audience: their project was taking place in a distant country, and would sometimes be subject to rules that are different from what they were used to.

Third Strategy - Involve the participants:

What does it mean for the employees when a re-organisation project brings with it that departments have to be dissolved and employees have to leave their familiar environment? A project manager showed this in his presentation as follows: He asked his 120-strong audience to change seats, and sit next to someone they hadn't yet met. After ten minutes, they all moved back to their old seats again - they had clearly felt how difficult it can be to familiarise yourself with strangers. Such "hands-on" activities can support core messages in presentations. "Some presenters ask their audience questions and write the answers on cards that they then put on a pin board," explains Christoph Rabl, "this also creates emotional impulses." However, project managers should guard against over-using such "hands-on" activities. Above all, the audience must not take the reins out of the hands of the presenter; otherwise the presentation may have an unintended outcome.

Fourth Strategy - Use emotional images:

Images and graphs are nothing new in presentations. But they rarely support the messages emotionally. An effective example: While the project manager describes the project objectives ahead, he shows the image of a country road leading into the distance. Pictures impact our feelings directly and need no further explanation. "Such pictures and photos, by the way, contribute to the understanding of what has been said," explains Christoph Rabl, "they support the formulating of messages by limiting the content." For example, the image of the country road seemingly rising towards the horizon in the distance is

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saying: the objectives are still far away - and they will not be reached as quickly as tomorrow.

Fifth Strategy – Tell a story:

The story of Sisyphus, who in vain rolls the stone up the mountain, is almost universally known; it is an image of vanity and frustration. "There are many such ancient stories that people all over the world will understand," says Christoph Rabl, "for example, legends like that of Odysseus or Grimm's fairy tales". Skilled presenters will tell these stories in three or four sentences - and touch the hearts, the feelings of those listening. For such ancient stories are always "matters of the heart" for humankind. "Some stories express that a person wants to have a companion at their side when facing challenges, other stories show how to courageously move forward into the unknown," Christoph continues. Whoever tells such stories uses man's ancient fountain of wisdom - and captures their audience immediately. The audience still remembers such presentations long into the future.

Critical for all five strategies: The audience must not feel that it is being manipulated or deceived by the use of such strategic devices. Many professionals therefore start by putting their cards on the table and explain their presentation strategy to their audience as well as how this technique works. "If I quote the myth of Sisyphus, for example, I explain the background for this," concludes Christoph, "I say that I want to make myself more clear and better understood through this picture."

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