

Oratorical power is all in the mind

Understanding how your brain works is the key to being an engaging speaker

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GOOD COMMUNICATION skills are essential for school leaders. Most will be adept at making themselves understood, particularly one-to-one or in small groups. But things can unravel when they have to make a speech to a hall of 250 parents.

There is a science to the art of public speaking and it is based on how our grey matter works. The brain functions in three ways: unconscious, emotional and rational. Successful oratory taps into all three. Here is a crash course in employing them all to make persuasive, compelling speeches.

Link in a blink

The first step is winning your audience's unconscious. When we look at people for the first time, we unconsciously make instant judgements on whether they are to be trusted or not. This happens, as journalist and author Malcolm Gladwell puts it, in a "blink".

Empathy establishes an unconscious alliance from the outset. Speaking from a shared perspective creates a powerful feeling of unity among an audience. This gives everyone a little high.

Smiles also win approval and are integral to the appeal of leaders such as Tony Blair and Boris Johnson. It's simple but effective: if you smile at people, they will probably smile back. And if you can tell a joke that makes people laugh, they are almost bound to be on your side.

Breathing is also important. We unconsciously tune in to people's breathing patterns. David Cameron's breath is very shallow; he speaks in short, sharp sentences that can make people feel anxious. Barack Obama, in contrast, breathes deeply, rolling out long, luxuriant sentences and radiating calm.

Wear your emotions

Our minds are constantly seeking to satisfy our emotional needs. These can vary, from wanting recognition or acknowledgement to feeling a sense of pride or anger. Great speakers tap in to these needs; they make rousing emotional appeals anchored in our values, they tell inspiring stories (from their own experience or history) and they speak from perspectives they know their audience will care about.

They also put their whole bodies into their performances. Our brains automatically urge us to mirror people who are acting with purpose. If we see urgency, we feel urgent ourselves. This means you have no hope of enthusing people if you speak like you are dead inside. But if you give it your all, you are far more likely to win over the room.



Fuzzy logic in focus

Our mind is nowhere near as logical as we think it is. We can be misled into believing that something is right simply because the sentence sounds right. Doing this involves simple rhetorical devices, such as the rule of three. Here are a few that you might recognise: "Education, education, education", "Government of the people, by the people, for the people", "We came, we saw, we conquered" and "Friends, Romans, countrymen".

The rule of three also features in advertising ("A Mars a day helps you work, rest and play"), music ("Sex and drugs and rock'n'roll") and humour ("Infamy, infamy, they've all got it in for me"). You will often see this used when engagement is crucial. Research published earlier this year by the University of California, Los Angeles shows that people are more likely to be moved if an appeal has three elements rather than four.

Poetry in motion

Curiously, the researchers named their work using another rhetorical device: rhyme ("Three charms but four alarms", bit.ly/ThreeCharms). Research also shows that people are more likely to believe something is true if it rhymes (bit.ly/RhymingTruth). "An apple a day keeps the doctor away" is a good example, as is the famous OJ Simpson defence "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit".

I still remember "I before e, except after c" from my own school days. I was Alan Johnson's speech-writer when he was education secretary and sent guidance to every school in the country asking them to stop teaching this rule because it is nonsense. There are 44 words it applies to but 923 words it does not.

The other great rhetorical device is balance. A sentence that sounds well-balanced suggests that an idea is well-balanced. Education has many of these: "There is no elevator to success, you have to take the stairs" and "The best teachers show you where to look, not what to see".

As the saying goes, "Once you've got 'em by the balls, their hearts and minds will follow." My advice to school leaders is not to start by reaching for people's balls – that can only lead to trouble. You should start by winning minds, then the rest will surely follow. ●

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