

# 1 The Rise of Impromptu Speaking

**T**he way leaders communicate in organizations has undergone a remarkable transformation in the last half century. No longer is leadership delivered primarily by C-Suite executives standing behind podiums reading words written for them. Today, individuals at every level are leading with impromptu remarks. How and why that transformation has occurred provides the foundation for this book.

## **The Glory Days of the Formal Speech**

Back in the 1980s when I entered the business world, CEOs and top executives in every organization regularly delivered formal speeches and rarely spoke spontaneously—nor was anyone else encouraged to communicate. The law of the land was for managers and junior executives to keep their mouths shut. In fact, when a group of engineers heard that we in the corporate communications department were about to introduce a program that would teach managers how to communicate, one senior engineer wrote an email, “How can we shut this program down?”

My first job as a speech writer was supporting a group of senior executives. It felt like I was joining a secret society. My boss looked me in the eye on that first day of work and said: “I’m going to turn you into a speech writer.” I was a novice—and he was the old master passing on the secrets of this sacred craft. He sent me to New York where I took a course with one of the greats: a man who had crafted remarks for Nelson Rockefeller. When preparing a major address, there were elaborate rituals, spread over many weeks or even months. I learned to plan, research, outline, discuss, write, rewrite, and format the script for a thirty-minute talk. The CEO was involved in most of these activities, and took them very seriously. So elaborate was this process that my boss once told me that we should not agree to write a major speech if the executive did not give us at least three months to make this happen. Three months!

In those days the speech writer worked closely with the senior executive. When a CEO retired, he might pass his writer on to a friend or colleague in the industry. In fact, one retiring CEO I had been writing for called another senior executive in the industry and “offered” me as a speech writer. I didn’t take the job but I was honored to have received his endorsement.

I found this work exciting, and through my affiliation with IABC (International Association for Business Communicators), I regularly presented a speech-writing course in major U.S. and Canadian cities. During these years, which were the heyday of formal speech giving, this one-day program, “The Art of Speech Writing,” was often oversubscribed.

When, in 1988, I established my own communications company, The Humphrey Group, the demand for speeches was still high. Writing those speeches and coaching executives to deliver them was the bread and butter for my new firm. The demand was so great that I and my husband (an academic who regularly helped out) often worked until the wee hours of the morning to meet deadlines.

And then in the 1990s something odd but unmistakable occurred. The demand for formal speeches declined, while the number of people asking The Humphrey Group for assistance with impromptu remarks soared. I remember a conversation with a chief financial officer at that time. He had just come from speaking to analysts about the company's quarterly results. I said to him, "Where is your speech?" He pointed to his temple. I thought he was a genius to speak simply and confidently from a mental outline, but that is exactly what leaders had begun to do. The focus of leadership communications was evolving from prepared speeches to impromptu remarks.

I remember in the early 1990s coaching a senior executive—the head of engineering for a large utility—who transformed his style dramatically when he scrapped his speech and spoke from notes. In his elaborate scripted text he had highlighted certain words in yellow, in a desperate effort to draw them out. There was so much detail—numbers, information, technical data, jargon—all on the subject of metallurgical engineering. As he spoke I realized the text was dragging him down. His tone did not change from thought to thought. His pace did not change. His face was without expression. He was buried alive in all that verbiage.

I turned the videotape off and we both agreed his scripted remarks had been awful. Together we revised the text. We ditched the long, cumbersome sentences and created "memory joggers" that would remind him of his message and key points.

The transformation was remarkable. Now he was looking up, not dropping down into the text. He was talking, not reading. He embellished each point with an illustration. He was free. Free to improvise. This, I thought, was what the informal speech should be.

For good reason formal speechmaking has lost its devotees. As Bart Egnal, my successor and CEO of The Humphrey Group, says: "Over the past fifteen years that I've been with the company one trend that has never changed is the decline of formal speaking and the rise in

extemporaneous communication. The speech has died—and is being replaced by the conversation. Audiences are craving authentic conversations; formal, overly scripted performances are rejected. Leaders who take note of this trend and build their skills to capitalize on such everyday moments are winning hearts and minds.”

Today more and more leaders—pressed for time and anxious to be authentic—are scrapping the script. Elon Musk, CEO of SpaceX, hired Dex Torricke-Barton, Mark Zuckerberg’s speech writer, but was quick to point out in a tweet that “Dex will do comms, but my speeches are just a conversation w the audience. No time to rehearse & don’t want to read from a prompter.” One fan tweeted back, “That’s JUST the way we like you, Elon! Off the cuff & personal.” Another replied, “I agree 100%. Don’t change the way you talk.”<sup>1</sup>

This transformation of leadership communications from scripts to spontaneity, from the big stage to the small stage, reflects a new era of impromptu speaking.

## **The Three Reasons for the Rise of Impromptu Speaking**

The rise in impromptu speaking (and the decline of formal addresses) reflects three closely related developments that have changed our world.

### **First, the Flattening of Organizations**

Businesses large and small, governments at all levels, charities, and even volunteer associations are very different than they were twenty (or even ten) years ago. There’s still someone at the “top.” But there are now fewer layers, and fewer barriers between top and bottom. Knowledge and decision-making are decentralized.

The change that emerged in the 1990s was a long time in coming. Deborah Ancona, a professor of management and organizational

studies at MIT, chronicles an evolution that began with the “super bureaucracies” of the 1920s. And while there were modifications in the intervening decades, the most significant changes have occurred in recent years. The result has been today’s workplace with “what’s called variously eco-leadership, collaborative leadership, or distributed leadership.”<sup>2</sup>

As Ancona and Henrik Bresman explain in their book, *X-Teams*, “The shift from a singular reliance on command-and-control leadership to more of a distributed leadership mind-set requires additional dialogue and alignment up and down the organization.”<sup>3</sup> That’s because “critical knowledge and information that used to flow vertically from the top is now flowing not only both ways but also laterally across units and organizations.”<sup>4</sup> Everyone now is expected to bring forward their ideas and inspire followers. Communications are no longer the sole responsibility of those at the top. Leadership is expected at all levels of the organization. Even a junior analyst must be able to present a clear summary of his thinking to someone who might be a C-Suite executive or a portfolio manager. Nobody gets off the hook! Leadership does not reside in a title. It exists in this ability to inspire people up, down, and across the organization.

Today’s leaders must communicate in a more open, authentic, and informal manner than was previously done at the top. This approach requires listening, consensus-building, and collaboration in meetings, one-on-one encounters, and parking lot or elevator conversations. Leadership is based on everyday encounters where one feels the need to lead in the moment, speak spontaneously, and share an idea or a vision of what’s possible. This is leadership in the organizations of the twenty-first century.

## **Second, the Power of Technology**

Technology has accelerated the shift to distributed leadership. For the longest time knowledge was the exclusive domain of the few individuals

at the top. In the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century the CEO and his circle (invariably men) received the reports from an army of accountants and bookkeepers. That exclusivity did not end with the advent of mainframes in the 1950s. Still relatively few individuals had access to information.

But all that changed beginning in the 1990s with the rise of the World Wide Web and low-cost networked computers. Almost overnight every knowledge worker had access to extraordinary amounts of information. In *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, the authors argue that the Internet has transformed organizations from a structure based on hierarchies to one based on distributed knowledge: “Org charts worked in an older economy where plans could be fully understood from atop steep management pyramids and detailed work orders could be handed down from on high. Today, the org chart is hyperlinked, not hierarchical. Respect for hands-on knowledge wins over respect for abstract authority.”<sup>5</sup>

With technology everyone has access to everyone else. Emailing, messaging, texting, blogging, tweeting, and conference calls provide nonhierarchical channels of communication. Even CEOs now use Facebook as a way of reaching their employees. As Paul Vallée, CEO of Pythian, a global IT services company, told me: “I post on Facebook four or five times a day. And almost everything I post is about unlocking the potential in others. Pythian has people in 155 cities around the world. Facebook lets me reach them and other groups I support.”

Technology has created a whole new environment for communication. “Technology starts the human conversation much faster and transforms it into a global conversation,” according to Murray Wigmore, vice president of sales for Panasonic Healthcare Corp. of North America. He told me: “I live and breathe the health care market. Let’s say someone in our industry says, ‘Hey, we have a customer who’s developing a new product.’ This news would spread around the world through the web. The next communication is from someone

who picks up the phone from somewhere in the world and wants to talk. That leads to a teleconference or videoconference, and the voice on the call replaces the fancy PowerPoint slides that used to define the conversation. The human voice has replaced pictures, and given rise to spontaneous communications.” Technology has reinvented the way we communicate in organizations.

Hence the link between technology and impromptu. People are communicating in shorter, more spontaneous, and more authentic ways, making impromptu speaking more the norm than the exception. As well, thanks to technology everybody in an organization is a little more familiar with everyone else. So let’s say a manager sees the CEO in an elevator, she’s more likely to say, “How did your speech go?” Or if a sales executive has brought in a new client, he is more apt to share this good news with others in the elevator.

Technology and its empowerment of employees have also created team-based organizations. At Google, executive Diane Greene notes, top executives are “emailing and talking and meeting and coordinating constantly now.” This development means that “We all have a really clear understanding of what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and what we’re trying to achieve.”<sup>6</sup> And this collaboration takes place at all levels. As David Hahn, managing director of New York media relations firm Media Connect, observes, “Everybody is working in teams so there’s a lot more familiarity with people across departments and in your own department. A CEO might be on a pitch team or a strategy meeting. That whole flattening means more familiarity, more informality, and more impromptu moments.”

Thomas Petzinger, Jr., of the *Wall Street Journal*, writes in the Foreword to *The Cluetrain Manifesto*: “This book shows how conversation forms the basis of business, how business lost that voice for a while, and how that language is returning to business thanks to a technology that inspires, and in many cases demands, that we speak from the heart.”<sup>7</sup>

### Third, a New Sense of Time and Space

The third factor in the emergence of impromptu speaking is the recalibration of time and space. Thanks to our interconnected world, time zones have dissolved and we live in a 24/7 universe. Virtually every company is affected by fluctuations in financial markets or news stories that happen halfway around the globe.

The flow of information, once a trickle, has become a veritable Niagara Falls of emails, texts, news reports, videos, and social media posts. Research indicates that workers dedicate 28 hours a week to emails—writing, reading, or responding to them. And the average person checks his or her smartphone 150 times a day.<sup>8</sup> This leaves less time for lengthy, formal events, with the result that older forms of communication (speeches, presentations, meetings) have been replaced by crisp impromptu exchanges. In fact, impromptu speaking has become the *modus operandi* for leaders, reflecting the fact that everything leaders do is chopped up, fragmented into short bits of activity.

David Hahn regularly “huddles” with Media Connect team members in chats that last three to five minutes. He finds these more efficient than regular meetings, and the spontaneous huddles give him and his team members an opportunity to have a quick dialogue and move a project forward. Rory Cowan, CEO of Lionbridge Technologies, a Waltham, Massachusetts, technology services firm with about 4,500 employees, says that instead of spending a lot of time in long face-to-face meetings, he spends more time “doing frequent iterative touches,” either in person or via text message, instant messaging, and video chat—sometimes with “four or five windows open concurrently.”<sup>9</sup> If an employee wants to talk to her boss, she’s more likely to poke her head into her boss’s office for a quick impromptu exchange than wait to get on his calendar.

A University of California study revealed that work fragmentation is common, both because people spend less time on individual tasks



and because they are interrupted more frequently. On average, those interviewed spent just eleven minutes, four seconds on a task before switching to another activity or being interrupted.<sup>10</sup> No wonder business leaders find impromptu conversations better suited to today's environment.

Even the physical structure of our offices furthers this bombardment of information and fragmentation of activity. Michael Bloomberg, CEO of Bloomberg Inc., believes in transparency and his desk is in an open space on the fifth floor of the Bloomberg building.<sup>11</sup> Mark Zuckerberg has an office that is glassed in and on the same sprawling floor where project teams reside in a "building as village" concept.<sup>12</sup> The typical office is now designed around a more open concept, encouraging—for better or for worse—interruptions by colleagues who ask, "Do you have a minute?" or "Can you answer a quick question?" The new spaces also include chat rooms, as well as snack bars, kitchens, recreational facilities, and other areas that encourage conversation. As architect Jennifer Magnolfi writes: "The best practices [in office design today] are emerging from the world of coworking spaces, hacker spaces, maker spaces—environments that are designed around core principles of openness, sharing, and co-creation."<sup>13</sup> As a result of all these emerging realities in the workplace, communications have become more spontaneous. A more informal, impromptu style has become the norm. We in The Humphrey Group have seen this in our work with clients. A CFO replaced his one-hour PowerPoint presentation to analysts with a five-minute overview, followed by fifty-five minutes of questions and answers. It's no longer a speech. It's a conversation.

A senior vice president we work with had just joined a new firm and was asked to speak at the next town hall to three thousand employees. He did what most responsible executives would do: He carefully prepared a scripted speech. When his CEO saw him lay his script on the podium during a rehearsal, he asked, "What's that?"

“It’s my speech,” the new executive replied.

“Oh, we don’t give speeches here,” the CEO said. “Just talk to our employees.”

Fortunately he had time to mentally master the thoughts he had written out, and he spoke without a text to rave reviews.

Those who want to succeed must learn to lead in the moment—this goes for leaders at every level. No more speeches from on high. Just simple, heartfelt conversations with audiences—and if these remarks are not entirely spontaneous, they need to look and sound spontaneous.

Not only are leaders speaking more informally, but they are speaking more frequently to individuals at all levels in the organization—up, down, and across. They talk with customers and contacts outside their companies too. Here are typical requests we get from people who want to be better leaders.

- An analyst wants to know how to talk to his CEO at the coffee machine.
- A vice president wishes to be better at “small talk” so she can network with clients.
- A manager wants to share his ideas with his CEO without sounding presumptuous.
- An HR staff member wants to speak confidently to her boss’s boss in the elevator.
- A tech CEO wants to listen to his team and their ideas—rather than jumping in.
- A team leader needs help with “difficult conversations.” She has an employee who keeps arriving late and missing meetings.
- A bright financial wiz wants to share his ideas at meetings, but his tendency to talk too much is turning off his colleagues.

Speaking in meetings, corridors, elevators, offices, on the phone, and in a host of other settings is an exacting process. To be successful, a leader must read her audience, anticipate any questions or concerns, create a script on the spot that drives home a point, and deliver it with sincerity and political savvy. Even when there's time to prepare, the speaker must sound "spontaneous" and not scripted.

More than ever those who lead must find their authentic voice. It's no longer acceptable—or effective—to rely on jargon that once defined "corporate speak." Today's leaders need to get real, be authentic, and do so in all situations. They need a warm, conversational style that works in the new organization where everyone is connected and everyone is expected to be open and sincere.

Impromptu speaking provides a way to connect, inspire, and lead in the twenty-first-century world. Scripted speeches, PowerPoint presentations, dog and pony shows, and marketing hype are being replaced by the conversations that leaders have every day with their followers. These conversations will change minds, hearts, and organizations.

