



Ajit Ninan

16. LEARN TO CHARM!

There's much more to public presentations than memorising speeches and preparing slides. For successful speaking, you must learn the art of winning people over – the ability to charm. This isn't rocket science – you can have this impact with these steps:

- **Use humour – cautiously:** Nothing helps you bond with an audience as effectively as a joke. Humour is the best ice-breaker and a great way to focus attention. Do laugh at yourself; it endears you to an audience. Just don't overdo it! And steer clear of humour when in doubt about an audience's socio-cultural background. Age and gender powerfully inflect people's perceptions of humour – what's uproariously funny to a young, all-male audience may seem coarse to a group of middle-aged women!
- **Be natural:** If you over-prepare, your presentation looks stiff and lacks spontaneity. Importantly, people feel skeptical about the credibility of speakers who sound too glib and word-perfect. Be natural and relaxed – if you make a mistake while speaking, just apologise, correct yourself and carry on. Remember, a relaxed, yet confident air charms those watching.
- **Include listeners:** Ensure you have a finger on the audience's pulse. Build common ground by starting with a subject you mutually agree upon. Then, tap into familiar experiences; draw listeners into an inclusive circle. For instance, you might ask, 'Have you noticed how competition always eats into our market share when...?' Once you have them nodding in agreement, gradually introduce your point. Thrusting solutions down people's throats is unlikely to work with educated audiences. They may resent an overly forceful attitude – instead, demonstrate both sides of an argument, letting the advantages of the preferred option emerge through your analysis.

Follow these steps – your audience will be charmed!

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The Higher Education series offers weekly insights on improving public communication skills

