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# Four Presentation Lessons from President Obama's State of the Union Speech

Even political junkies admit that the State of the Union (SOTU) speech can be tough for the President delivering it. It's a list of policy proposals that can cause one to fall into a trance, regardless of their value or importance. Kind of like some



US President Barack Obama walks down the West Wing Colonnade at the White House in Washington, DC, February 12, 2013. Obama will deliver his first State of the Union address of his second term tonight at the US Capitol before a Joint Session of Congress. (Image credit: AFP/Getty Images via @daylife)

of the presentations you may have to deliver for your organization.

Thus, it's an exacting task to make it persuasive and engaging. Here are some lessons we can learn from President Obama's delivery. You can read my thoughts on Senator Rubio's rebuttal [here](#).

**1. Front Load It** – You want to save memorable lines for last as a call-back technique, but you also have to front load your talk with your top priorities. Your audience remembers most what

they hear first and last, and less of what's in the middle. President Obama started with [results](#) and what matters most -- avoiding the sequestration budget cuts.

***The Bottom Line:*** Take the two-minute test: if you had two minutes with your audience, what would you say? Start there as you craft the opening of your talk.

**2. Put Your The Foot in the Door** – At the end of Obama's speech, he urged Congress to pass stricter gun control measures, generating applause. Did you notice how he continued to talk over the applause, citing names of victims of gun violence who “deserve a vote”? This is an example of the classic “foot in the door” technique.

As Dr. Kelton Rhoads of USC reminds us, “ This influence tactic of ‘talking over the cheers’ could be considered a variation of the classic foot-in-the-door gambit. In foot-in-the-door, the salesman asks for a little commitment (the foot in the door), followed by a larger commitment (the salesman squeezes through the door). So the first, smaller or easier action (opening the door a crack) makes the second, larger or more difficult action more likely. The smaller and easier commitment here—cheering a well-received phrase from the previous sentence—allows more of the salesman to squeeze in through the door while the cheering is still going on.

The momentum of the cheering also helps cover whatever new concept is added. People are unlikely to break off mid-cheer and think critically about the new material that's been added. You don't hear people yelling: ‘Yaaaaaaay—wait, now hold on, what do you mean by that?’ New material that follows immediately gets the momentum cheer. Cheering crowds aren't known for their critical thinking skills. And accomplished orators know that.”

***The Bottom Line:*** Is there a proposition that you know your audience will cheer for or support? How can you use that door opening to win them over to new ideas?

**3.The Authority Tactic** – - Obama asked Congress to consider supporting the creation of an [Energy Security](#) Trust by invoking the authority principle of influence: “So tonight, I

propose we use some of our oil and gas revenues to fund an Energy Security Trust that will drive new research and technology to shift our cars and trucks off oil for good. If a non-partisan coalition of *CEOs and retired generals and admirals* can get behind this idea, then so can we.”

He’s implying that these individuals, by virtue of their positions, know better. Have CEO’s, general or admirals ever made a bad decision? The “authority” principle of influence, states that we shortcut our reasoning if we see that certain authority figures support a cause or position. It’s like telling someone, “These people are smarter than you, if they approve of this concept, it would be unwise and/or stupid for you to think otherwise.”

***The Bottom Line:*** I have mixed emotions on this technique, as it is bereft of evidence. It relies on the thinking of others without personal examination of the issue. It’s the “everybody’s doing it” rationale from junior high on steroids.

If you use this tactic, cite *why* the authority figures came to their conclusion.

**4. End With the Underdog** – Making lofty public policy issues real requires drilling down to the individuals who are affected by those policy decisions. Obama didn’t do anything new here, but I am surprised by how many smart, articulate professionals don’t use this technique in their public presentations. He deftly (continuing the tradition started by the great communicator President Reagan) incorporated examples of his legislative proposals bolstered by [flesh and blood characters](#)

like Brian Murphy, the [Wisconsin](#) police officer who saved lives with his heroism during the Wisconsin Sikh Temple shooting, [New York](#) City nurse Menchu Sanchez, and 102-year-old [Miami](#) voter Desiline Victor.

***The Bottom Line:*** Are there flesh and blood characters that you can integrate into your presentations? The more “ordinary” and similar to those you are trying to influence, the more persuasive the example or story.

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