Public Speaking Strategies for Bar Association Leaders

By Attorney Christina Plum

Note: These detailed materials are designed to supplement the key points Attorney Plum will offer during her presentation at the ABA’s Bar Leadership Institute on March 13, 2020. An additional handout will be provided to attendees at the presentation.

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I. Introduction

For many bar leaders, preparing and delivering presentations can be both exciting and daunting. Few bar leaders have the time or inclination to draft formal speeches for every appearance. Moreover, speaking situations frequently call for something less formal. Bar leaders can increase their effectiveness as public speakers by carefully selecting and preparing key points in advance and then tailoring each presentation to fit the occasion and available time. Professional bar staff can provide valuable assistance in that brainstorming and drafting process.

When it comes to giving the presentation, bar leaders will need to draw on established skills and habits. It is helpful to dedicate time at the beginning of one’s leadership year to review the basic tenets of public speaking, practice in advance, and seek constructive feedback from trusted colleagues.

Most bar leaders have had some experience both crafting and delivering presentations to audiences. These written materials are designed to provide a review of the key components

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of oral communication that are used in public speaking and the key strategies to use when preparing to speak and delivering speeches. At the outset, it is important to recognize that while lawyers are often thought of as accomplished public speakers, this does not mean that lawyers are expected to speak flawlessly all the time. There are times when most people—lawyers included—pause to consider their next sentence, use words like “um” and “ah,” and interrupt themselves midsentence. Effective oral communication and public speaking for lawyers is not about performing a script. Rather, it’s about being prepared and engaging in sincere, quality, in-person oral communication. With preparation, practice, and deliberate focus, one can become a consistently effective and credible oral communicator, whether given advance notice of a presentation or being invited to offer brief remarks on the spot.

II. Components of Effective In-Person Oral Communication

There are many ways to be an effective speaker. Thus, there is no single style that each person should adopt. Indeed, trying to introduce jokes if that’s not your personality, or to pace the room if you’re more comfortable at the podium, will only seem awkward. The key is to learn to recognize the techniques that are generally viewed as effective, try them out, and see what works best for you.

As you consider your oral communication, also keep in mind that the words you say are only one component of your communication—how you say the words, your body language, your facial expressions, and other components all affect your effectiveness. Below is a list of the components of in-person oral communication and qualities that are generally associated with effective in-person oral communication. Note how many are not the actual words you’re saying.

- **Words we say**
  - Organized
  - Clear, concise
  - Simple language
  - Repeats at times
  - Shorter sentences

- **How we say the words**
  - Tone – varies with context
  - Inflection – not monotone
  - Volume – loud enough to be heard; varied to make it interesting
  - Speed – must be understandable, but varied to make it interesting
  - Emotion – included where appropriate

- **Facial expression, head movement**
  - Smiling – when appropriate
  - Eye contact, use of eyebrows
  - Looking around the room
  - Glancing at notes, then waiting to look up before speaking
  - Avoiding sharp movements of head
• **Body language**
  - Posture
  - Gestures – fluid, not distracting, not repetitious
  - Jingling keys, moving pencil, playing with hair – avoiding these
  - Stay at podium, move from it – depends
  - Opening body to whole group – turning torso

• **Listening**
  - Nodding, showing you’re listening
  - Giving info back to the speaker
  - Asking questions that show you’re listening
  - Eliminating or reducing the use of electronic devices

### III. Presentations

#### A. Structure

Most effective presentations contain the same basic elements:

- Introduction (attention-grabber, such as storytelling, quotations, descriptive words)
- Core message (why should we listen to you? Sometimes includes call to action if the presenter is advocating action)
- Overview of structure (a.k.a. roadmap; can be explicit, such as: “Today we’ll examine three main areas: x, y, z,” or subtle, such as: “Today we’ll examine how and why we should xxx”)
- Main points (1-5 points; the meat of the presentation)
- Conclusion (generally includes restatement of core message, perhaps summary of points if presentation was long)

As you examine this list, it likely looks familiar. It’s the same basic structure most of us learned in high school speech class. The same structure still works, but as lawyers we must address more complex issues, often incorporating more analysis and examples. And every moment we speak, we are showcasing our communication and analytical skills, which helps us build our reputations as skilled and credible lawyers.

It’s important to note that although we generally think of using this structure for prepared presentations, it can also be used for extemporaneous presentations, especially if one practices answering extemporaneous questions. Adding structure to extemporaneous speaking has the benefit of sounding decisive and organized, and avoids awkward endings when you simply run out of steam for your stream of consciousness.

When it comes to preparing presentations you will offer as a bar leader, one effective strategy is to develop several minutes on multiple topics and then select the specific topics you’ll address in a particular speech. For example, you might decide at the beginning of the bar year that you plan to emphasize three themes throughout the year: access to justice, service to bar members, and elevating the public’s opinion of lawyers. You could craft an introduction that addresses those themes and then touch on examples that are most appropriate for your setting. For instance, on
one occasion you could talk about your association’s promotion of pro bono, a new website designed for solo practitioners, and a series of public service announcements about the role of lawyers. The next week, you might address testimony you gave to your state legislature about legal services funding, your association’s lawyer assistance program, and the legal career of a lawyer who made great contributions to your state’s legal system.

B. Other Components

Effective presentations frequently incorporate one or more of the following:

- **Storytelling.** Engaging the audience’s five senses makes your presentation more understandable, interesting, and memorable. Storytelling does not have to be dramatic or fictional—explaining to your audience what your client experienced during the accident, rather than simply saying she was injured, is storytelling.

- **Examples.** Similar to storytelling, examples help an audience make sense of the complex ideas you are discussing. For instance, if you are talking about differences between corporate entities, offer an example of a type of business that might choose to use a particular organizational model. This helps the audience later think, “Oh, I remember, the shoe company did xxx.” You can also return to examples throughout the presentation. “Now let’s consider how this could have affected the shoe company…”

- **A visual.** Whether you provide a handout, write on a blackboard or overhead or use PowerPoint, a visual helps guide the reader through your presentation and increases retention of the information. If you have printed PowerPoint slides or a detailed outline, consider handing out a single-page outline before the presentation and then provide the larger handout at the end, so that the audience is not reading during your presentation, having assumed you will be saying what is in the materials.

C. Drafting the Presentation

- **Know your audience**
  - Who is this group of people?
  - Why have I been asked to speak?
  - What is this audience hoping/expecting me to say?

- **Know your parameters**
  - How long will you have to speak? Be sure to respect the time limit.
  - Are you one of several speakers? If yes, what are others speaking about?
  - Will you have a microphone? Access to a screen and computer projector?
  - Should you plan to offer time for questions?
• Brainstorm your presentation
  o Spend some time considering what you would like to address.
  o Write down anything that comes to mind—don’t try to impose structure right away.
  o After brainstorming, begin to draft your presentation using the basic structure. Many speakers suggest developing the main points before adding the introduction, statement of core message, and roadmap.

• Writing word-for-word or outlining? People approach the writing process differently. Three common approaches include:
  o Write it out word-for-word. Practice it a lot so that when you deliver it, you can look more at the audience than your script. This approach is frequently used when every word is crucial. Can you imagine the President giving a State of the Union address where he or she is simply speaking from an outline? Of course not—every word is carefully chosen. But can you imagine reading a closing argument to a jury? You’d have trouble sustaining the jurors’ attention. Thus, the key is to consider carefully your audience, your topic, and how much the precise choice of language matters.
  o Write it out word-for-word, practice it, and then reduce your speech to an outline. Using this approach allows you to carefully develop the structure and word choice, and then rely on your memory to retain the most important phrases, with the outline guiding you through your presentation.
  o Write a detailed outline and practice giving it. Without entire sentences written on the page in front of you, you’re more likely to speak extemporaneously, using the “heightened conversation” style that many audiences find engaging and effective.²

• As you are preparing, keep in mind that to be your most effective, you must do the following seven things when you give your presentation:³
  o Seize your audience’s attention
  o Establish your authority
  o Connect with your audience
  o Present a roadmap of your message
  o Deliver the content of your message clearly
  o Provide memorable takeaways
  o End decisively


³ This helpful list is included with the permission of the Honorable James D. Peterson of the United States District Court for the Western District of Wisconsin, who created it for use in his lectures on public speaking techniques.
D. Practicing the Presentation

Practicing aloud is absolutely crucial. And yet, so many lawyers don’t do it! They spend 99% of their time preparing materials and an outline, and then read it through a few times before they speak. This is a missed opportunity. There are numerous benefits to practicing aloud:

- Allows you to test the order of your presentation and the time you have allotted for each component
- Allows you to practice the sentence structure
- Allows you to practice explaining complex ideas that are often not explained perfectly the first time you try
- Allows you to learn how long each part will take, so that you adjust and finish in the time allotted, without having to rush through final points

If at all possible, videotape yourself giving the presentation. It can be uncomfortable to watch, but you will undoubtedly notice things about your presentation style that you want to change.

Finally, try to give the presentation to someone else at least a few days before your presentation (so that you have time to make adjustments if needed). Seek feedback on content, structure, and presentation style. Often, objective listeners can alert you to acronyms they do not know, points that were confusing, etc.

E. Presentation Style

- Connecting with your audience is crucial.
- Strive for “heightened conversation” so that you are speaking as yourself, but your most prepared, enthusiastic, knowledgeable self.
- The first minute is key. Nail the introduction, hopefully without any references to your notes. Look at the audience. Then, even if you have to refer to notes during the main presentation, you have already grabbed the attention of, and established rapport with, each audience member.
- If you are referring to notes, make sure you are temporarily glancing away from your audience, rather than occasionally glancing up from a reading. It’s a subtle point, but this can greatly affect whether you’re interacting with your audience. You should not be looking down more than you are looking up.
- Eye contact. If you tend to rely on reading, or if you are nervous about looking at the audience, start slow. Below is a progression of eye contact skills:
  - Looks at the audience every few seconds.
  - Looks at the audience most of the time.
  - Looks at the audience most of the time and scans the entire room.
  - Looks at the audience most of the time and spends several seconds at a time speaking directly to individuals throughout the room. Example: says first sentence or phrase to person on right, then second sentence to the left, etc., varying where speaker is looking.
- While you are speaking, try to remain aware of how your presentation is going. Imagine you’re sitting in the back row—what do you see? Are you speaking loud enough? Looking around the room enough? Hanging on the podium? Make adjustments as needed.
• The more you practice speaking and get feedback on your presentation skills, the more you will begin to develop a set of permanent skills that you can rely on whenever you’re called upon to speak. You will think less about gestures and eye contact—those will come naturally, which will allow you to focus more attention on your presentation content and organization.

• See also: components of effective in-person oral communication, above.

F. Room Management

Sometimes, what makes or breaks a presentation is ensuring that the room environment is operating properly before you begin. Be sure to:

• Check the volume on the microphone. Is it too loud? Soft? Adjust it or your own volume as needed.

• Check the podium. How is the height? Do you need to make any adjustments?

• Consider whether you’ll move around the room. Is this an option with the microphone you have been given?

• If you’re using PowerPoint, see special notes below. Be sure to arrive early to ensure that the technology is operating correctly.

• Think carefully about the notes you’re bringing. You don’t want to be rustling papers too much, and you don’t want them to fall off the podium. You definitely don’t want to flip legal pad pages over the top of the podium as you speak! Suggestion: If your notes are four or fewer pages, staple the first and last pages to a folder. Then, only pages two and three need to slide from one side to the other when you speak.

G. PowerPoint

Many audiences have come to expect PowerPoint or similar programs for educational presentations. It has its benefits, but also its challenges.

• Benefits
  o Visually appealing.
  o Allows you to show pictures and play audio files as examples.
  o Helps underscore your structure and main points.
  o Seeing and hearing a presentation can improve retention.
  o Provides a “workbook” for the audience, to which they can add notes as they listen to the presentation.

• Challenges
  o Many speakers alter their presentations to fit with PowerPoint, which can remove nuance.
  o Many speakers can’t help but look at the screen a lot, and tend to read from the screen.
  o Most audiences will look at the screen, rather than the speaker. They may glance at the speaker, but they are drawn to the bright light and pictures of the screen.
  o There are frequently technical glitches, which interrupt your speech or cause you to scramble to change your presentation.
  o Audio/visual fees by the conference center can be expensive. Costs can include a few hundred dollars to set up a screen and power cart, and even higher if you need the site to provide a computer and projector.
If you do decide to use PowerPoint, consider the following techniques:

- Do not use too much text on each screen. Your written materials should provide the detail.
- Make sure that your oral presentation provides more explanation and examples than are in your PowerPoint slides. If they could simply read it, why should they spend time listening to you read it to them? Add value.
- Take advantage of what PowerPoint does really well: show pictures and graphs, and play audio when appropriate.
- Use the “B” key. This blacks out the screen. Consider starting with the screen black, or turn it off during your presentation when you want to emphasize a point. The audience will focus on you, allowing a great opportunity to emphasize a point, provide an example or tell a story.
- Invest in a “clicker” that allows you to scroll through your slides with the push of a button. You will be able to roam the room and not be tied to your computer, or have to tell someone to keep hitting the next slide. Most clickers also have a button that blacks out the screen.
- Have a backup. What will you do if the projector fails? Have some copies of your slides available, or simply be prepared to do the whole presentation without PowerPoint. Assume there will be at least one technical glitch—how will you fill the time as someone fixes it? Can you avoid becoming flustered?

H. Overcoming nervousness

Most speakers will admit to some degree of nervousness. For some people, the fear of public speaking is nearly enough to keep them off the stage. If you fall in the latter category, you will need to think carefully about how you will approach the speaking engagement, designing strategies (such as those below) that work best for you. For everyone, using the techniques below can help calm nerves.

- Be prepared. If you are changing text in the taxi on the way to the venue, or worrying because you know your speech is too long and you’re not sure what to cut, your nervousness will increase. In contrast, if you’ve carefully prepared your presentation and practiced it aloud, you can reassure yourself that things will go well.
- Get to the venue early. Look around the room and familiarize yourself with its width, length, and setup. If possible, go to the podium and look out at the audience. Seeing the audience from the podium for the first time can be jarring; looking out ahead of time helps prepare you to see a large group of people.
- Another benefit of arriving early: you won’t be out of breath or flustered from running around trying to locate the room.
- As noted in the Room Management section above, check out the microphone and any other audio/visual equipment you’ll be using. Make sure they work and that you know how to adjust them for your height. This will help prevent problems during your presentation that can fluster you.
- Try to talk to a few people in the audience before the presentation, whether they are people you know or people you’re meeting for the first time. Then, when you give your presentation, look at those friendly faces for reassurance.
• If you get flustered by having all eyes on you for a long period of time, help them focus elsewhere. Consider using PowerPoint, a whiteboard, a flipchart, or a handout to break up the time the audience spends looking right at you.
• Be confident. Remind yourself that:
  o You have a compelling story to tell and an important message to share.
  o There are people in the room who are eager to hear your message.
• Be sincere. If you are truly trying to connect with your audience and are convinced of your core message, the audience will perceive that, and will forgive your um’s and ah’s. If instead you make comments that suggest you did not take your role seriously, the audience will not be so forgiving.
• Breathe! A few deep, calming breaths before you start will calm your nerves and help prevent you from running out of air during your presentation.

I. Summary Points

Whether you are speaking to an individual, a small gathering, or a large group of people, you will incorporate your general oral communication skills, which you can continue to develop over the course of your career. Practicing those skills, and seeking feedback on your presentations, is essential. Consider the following tips—discussed in detail in these materials—before your next presentation.

Be confident.
• You have a compelling story to tell and an important message to share.
• There are people in the room who are eager to hear your message.

Be prepared.
• Plan your presentation. It should include:
  o Introduction
  o Core message
  o Overview of structure
  o Main points
  o Conclusion
  o And don’t forget: facts and statistics that support your core message, storytelling, and examples
• Practice your presentation aloud at least three times.
• If possible, give your presentation to another person and ask for feedback.
• Plan a presentation that fits within the time you were assigned, and then pace yourself so that you do not run out of time.

Be yourself.
• There are many effective communication styles. Some people are serious, some are humorous. Some walk around while they talk, others stay at the podium. Try different ways of communicating and see what is most comfortable and effective for you.
• Be your most prepared, sincere, enthusiastic self.
Be sincere.
- An audience will forgive your um’s and ah’s if they believe in you and your message. If you are considering putting in statements or arguments that you do not really support, reconsider doing so, because the audience can sense if you do not really believe the words you are saying.
- Be aware that the entire time you are in front of the audience, you are being watched. Show sincere interest in the other speakers and that you fully support the program.

Be heard.
- Your message and words may be amazing, but if they are not heard, the communication is not effective.
- Slow down, especially if you are reading. Most speakers speak too quickly when they read.
- Make sure that you are loud enough. Practice with a microphone if you’re going to be using one. Consider holding it in your hand so that the microphone does not miss words when you move your head up and down and side to side.

Connect with the audience.
- Reading a presentation is less effective than talking to the audience using “heightened conversation.”
- It’s often more effective to speak from an outline than to read a speech.
- If you do write it out word-for-word, practice it many times so that you can still have good eye contact. Also, try to have a story or two that you can tell without reading; that gives the audience a break from watching you read.
- If you’re using notes rather than a script, glance down at your notes if you need to, then look up and speak.

IV. Other Resources

Butler, Sarina A., 2013 ABA Bar Leadership Institute article, “Five ‘Rules of The Road’ for Effective Messaging,”
https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/events/bar_services/2013meetings/March%20Meetings/2013bli/butlerfinal.authcheckdam.pdf


