

THE 20 HABITS OF TRULY BRILLIANT PRESENTERS



“The only thing about a man that is a man . . . is his mind. Everything else you can find in a pig or a horse.” Archibald MacLeish

I guess that's why we don't see too many pigs or horses using PowerPoint.

We are unquestionably one of the planet's most successful creations because we are able to learn, recall what we have learned and share it with each other. We've been sharing what we know for centuries, and in business, it's more important today than ever that we do so effectively. We call it presenting. The good news is that everyone has the same intellectual potential to present ideas with power and impact.

That potential is only achieved through understanding how we use our brains to communicate with the impact we wish to make.

For decades, neuroscientists have been telling us that we have two distinct parts of the brain, each of which has its own specific functions. We've all heard of the left brain, which is said to be responsible for logic, analysis and detail, and we're also familiar with its counterpart the right brain, which drives emotion, intuition and creativity.

More recently much of that research has been challenged, and today many neuroscientists believe there is no solid science-based evidence to support the left/right brain theory we have believed for so long. Now we hear scientists talk about the relationship between the top brain and bottom brain.

Whether it's the left brain/right brain, top brain/bottom brain, conscious mind or subconscious mind or any other brain/mind relationship science cares to dispute, we can be certain that in whatever location they may be situated, our brain allows us the capacity for:

- ⚡ Analysis
- ⚡ Language
- ⚡ Logic
- ⚡ Organisation
- ⚡ Critical thinking
- ⚡ Detail
- ⚡ Reasoning
- ⚡ Emotions
- ⚡ Creativity
- ⚡ Imagination
- ⚡ Intuition
- ⚡ Belief

And more than we could ever begin to imagine.

Whichever part of our brain is responsible for each of these attributes may continue to be under scrutiny and open for debate for some time. In the meantime, most business presenters will continue to mistakenly believe that being professional means you have to present only the logic, analysis and detail to be taken seriously. They will continue to prepare and deliver presentations paying little attention to the emotional, creative and imaginative functions of the brain.

The end result of which is often a well-reasoned and structured but also dull and monotonous business presentation.

Why is that?

Regardless of age, gender, experience or status, we are all creatures of habit. Just beneath our cerebral cortex sits a small piece of neural tissue called the basal ganglia, and neuroscientists believe that once our brain encodes a habit into our basal ganglia, that habit never really disappears. That's the simple reason why so many of today's business presentations are so tedious: they have been created and delivered through nothing more than habit - bad habit.



The good news is that we can create new habits.

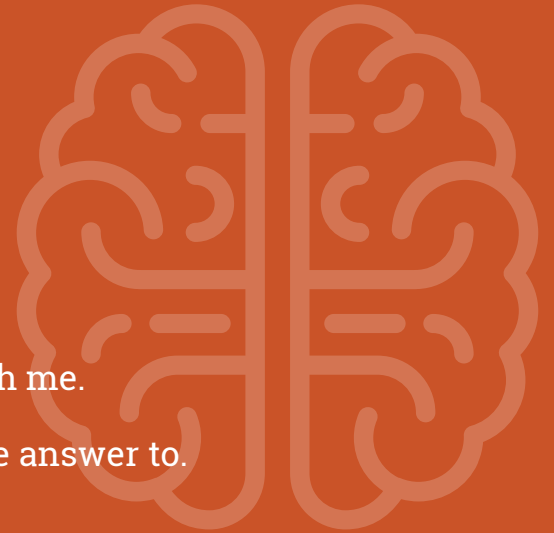
The best speakers have an understanding about how the brain works when it comes to public speaking because, after all, that's what they are doing – using the brain to influence, persuade and inspire a room full of other brains.

With that knowledge, they consciously create good habits.

The brain and stage fright

It always starts with a thought:

- ⚡ I'll forget what I want to say.
- ⚡ The audience will be bored.
- ⚡ They will see I'm nervous.
- ⚡ They won't like me, believe me or agree with me.
- ⚡ They will ask me questions I don't know the answer to.



It is always one or more of these negative thoughts that trigger the pituitary gland to secrete the hormone ACTH, which releases adrenaline into the speaker's blood. It's the adrenaline that produces most of the symptoms that we associate with stage fright: sweaty palms, increased heart rate, trembling and disturbed breathing.

The great presenter's brain is not immune to these negative thoughts but knows exactly what to do when they occur:

Habit 1

They acknowledge and reframe.

When they feel their palms becoming sweaty, the butterflies in their stomach or their heart racing, they understand they're nervous, accept the nerves as normal and tell themselves it's okay to feel that way. They remind themselves that the reason they feel that way is because they have something important to say and they want to get it right, but they also tell themselves that it's not a performance they are giving; it's a conversation they are going to have.





Habit 2

They focus on
the audience.

Mindful presenters take the attention off of themselves and place it on their audience, reminding themselves that it's how they make their audience feel that's important so that's where their focus is placed.

Habit 3

They don't try to be perfect.

Anxiety increases substantially when we strive for perfection. The great presenters know that so they don't try to go for an Oscar-winning performance. Instead, they know that their job is simply to be the best of who they are with the sole intention of making a difference to their audience rather than making themselves look like superstars.





Habit 4

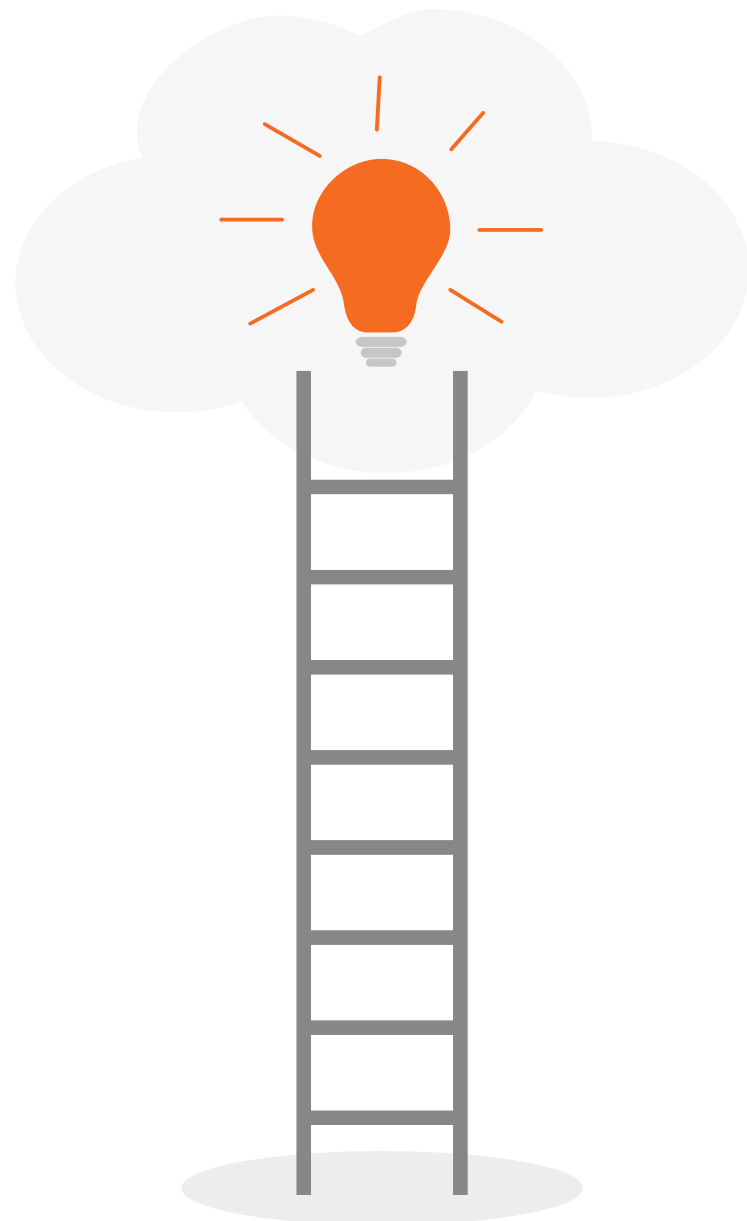
They stick to the point.

Nervous presenters want to tell their audience everything they know, and in the process, they worry that they will forget something or get something wrong. Great presenters tell the audience what they need to know, remembering that less is always more.

Habit 5

They see the opportunity.

Nervous presenters see the presentation as a performance where they will be judged. In that performance their audience is the predator whilst they are the prey. Great presenters see the presentation as an opportunity to help their audience and to add value to their personal or professional lives.



Habit 6

They 'anchor' themselves.

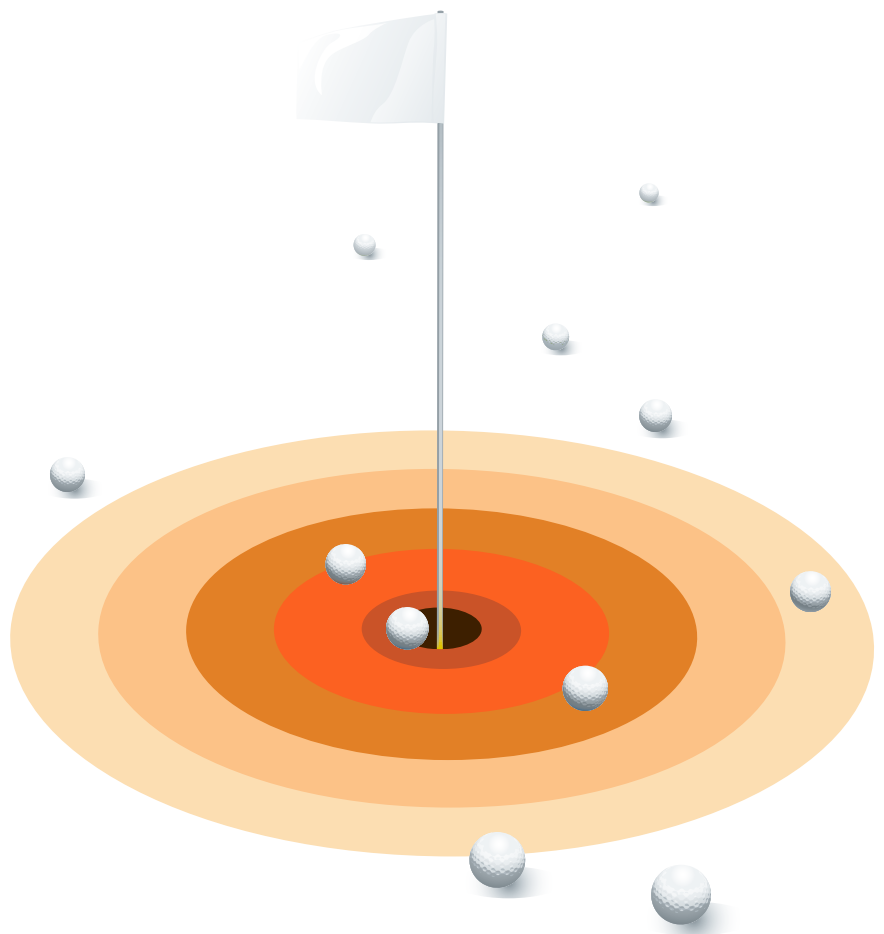
Anchoring is an NLP technique that can change your state of mind or mood easily. It works by simply recalling a time you felt happy, confident, calm and relaxed, breathing deeply and remembering how good that time felt, seeing yourself back there in that moment.



Habit 7

They practise.

Repetition truly is the mother of skill and great presenters know that only too well. Nervous presenters invest their time and energy worrying incessantly about the event whilst great presenters use their time to practise, practise and then practise some more.



The brain and learning

Every presentation is a learning opportunity because the speaker is always trying to educate the audience on some level. To be effective, it's far more than just an intellectual process.



Neuroscience tells us that when it comes to learning, we need to engage all of the senses and connect the emotional side of the brain.

Great presenters achieve that emotional connection through the next habit - telling stories.

Habit 8

They tell stories.

The great presenters know just how powerful and compelling a well-constructed and relevant story can be in influencing people's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Neuroscience has provided us with ample evidence that well-told stories not only let us into the speaker's world and create empathy, but they actually change our brain chemistry. If you're in any doubt as to the potential power and impact of storytelling, the research demonstrated by the leading pioneer in neuroeconomics, Dr. Paul Zak, will change that. His short video, *'The Future of Story Telling'*, explains it perfectly.

"Variety's the very spice of life." –William Cowper

It may well be a saying we have all heard and used in the past, but it's one that the great presenters live by.

Dr. Bruce D. Perry, the internationally recognised authority on brain development, claims that our *neural systems fatigue* within a few minutes of sustained activity as our neurons become less responsive.

In other words, the brain doesn't like the tedium of sameness; it likes to be stimulated. Think about your average business presentation where the speaker presents the same slide templates he always does in the same way with the same tone. The bottom line is the brain experiences neural system fatigue, which is why so many of us end up switching off and our mind drifts elsewhere.

The great presenters work hard to stimulate the brain of their audience and provide that all-important 'spice of life'.

Habit 9

They use colourful, creative and compelling images.

The reason the saying 'a picture paints a thousand words' has been around for over a hundred years is because it rings true, and every great presenter knows it.

Well-chosen images offer that much needed variety and stimulation to make an audience curious, surprised and enthused. They help people to use their own imagination and can be invaluable in making your message more memorable.



Habit 10

They involve their audience.

There is really no better way of engaging your audience than getting them involved in the conversation, and that is easily achieved by asking them questions, getting them talking to each other and using their imaginations.





Habit 11

They use videos and props.

Short, relevant and compelling videos are always well-received by an audience. They can evoke the emotions and imagination of an audience that could otherwise be very difficult to do with just the spoken word alone.

Props have a physical presence, texture and feel, and can make a great impact in a presentation if used well and can have the effect of making your message far more memorable.

Habit 12

They use their voice.

The greatest gift presenters have is their voice, which can be used to put an audience to sleep or create an engaging, entertaining and persuasive experience.

That means consciously using your voice to vary your pitch, tone, volume and pace. It also means learning to pause.

Pausing just before or immediately after an important statement adds significant impact to your point.

A well-placed pause not only gives you time to think, but it gives your audience a moment to absorb and reflect on your message.



The brain and mindfulness

When it comes to presenting, especially in business, I've long held the view that many presentations are prepared and delivered mindlessly rather than mindfully.



When you consider the fact that mindfulness refers to a state of being fully present in the moment, accepting each moment as it arises, and then acknowledge the reality that most presenters are anywhere but in the present moment, it's easy to relate to this premise.

Neuroscience suggests that the benefits of a practise in mindfulness include:

- ⚡ Increased attention
- ⚡ Greater clarity
- ⚡ Increased focus
- ⚡ Enhanced creativity
- ⚡ Improved decision making
- ⚡ Greater calmness and control

Consider your typical business presenter who is asked to speak at an upcoming conference. It's not at all unusual for that presenter to begin to craft the presentation based on everything she knows and wants to say on the subject. It's also not uncommon that when the moment comes to deliver the speech, she does so oblivious to the audience, as her prime concern revolves around herself.

The great presenters know how to be present in the room, in the moment and with their audience.

They achieve that by focusing exclusively on the needs of their audience rather than the desire to make themselves look good.

Habit 13

They stay in the present.

The mindful presenter practises the art of not making continuous judgements and assumptions about their audience as they present.

One way to begin is to spend some time throughout your day taking a minute to stop whatever you are doing, sit back and focus your attention on your breath by feeling the sensation of each breath that you take in and the experience of letting each breath go.

Practising being fully present whenever you are in a conversation with a partner, friend or colleague can be extremely helpful in this process.

The brain and persuasion

All great presenters know that at the heart of their presentation is an inherent need to persuade their audience of something. It may be to think, feel or do something, but whatever it is, in essence it revolves around the word 'yes'.



That means getting your audience to say “yes I agree with you” and from that point, the change in behaviour will likely follow.

With the advent of brain imaging technology, we now have a very clear understanding about how the brain processes information and how we influence and persuade each other to make decisions. In his book *The 7 Triggers to Yes*, author Russell Granger shares what I believe are the remaining seven habits that great presenters employ.



Habit 14

They know how to make friends.

- ⚡ They make it their business to make friends with their audience.
- ⚡ They find things they have in common with them and talk about those things.
- ⚡ They tell them great stories.
- ⚡ They smile, empathise with them and show them they care.
- ⚡ They pay them compliments.
- ⚡ They listen to them.
- ⚡ They ask them questions.
- ⚡ They add value to their lives.

Habit 15

They know what they are talking about.

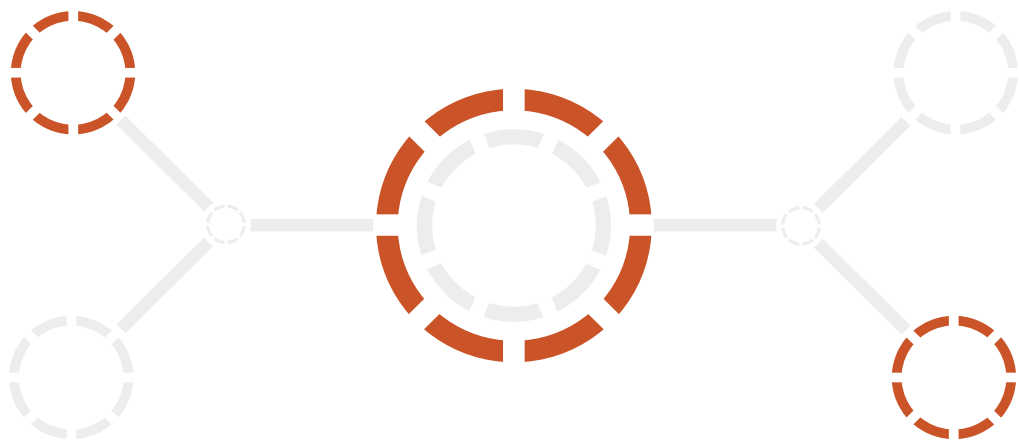
The human brain responds with unthinking compliance to presenters who speak with gravitas, authority and credibility. Great presenters connect with their audiences because they have done their research and have something important to say that they are very knowledgeable about.



Habit 16

They are consistent.

Great presenters do their homework and know a great deal about their audience's background, experiences, values, beliefs and feelings and speak within a framework that is consistent with who they really are. Consistency makes people comfortable because they don't have to think too hard, they feel understood and they feel good that they are making the right decision.



Habit 17

They are generous.

The great presenter believes in the law of reciprocity, which is based on the very simple but powerful principle that if you give me something, I will feel obliged to give you something in return.

That doesn't necessarily mean you have to give a physical gift. As a speaker, you have a wealth of gifts to share generously: your passion, energy, undivided attention, smile, eye contact, etc. In our training workshops, I give away copies of my book and a promise to offer ongoing help and support to delegates free of charge for upcoming presentations.



Habit 18

They help them to see the contrast.

It's quite rare to come across a presentation designed to persuade an audience to maintain the status quo. Most presentations are aimed at getting our

audience to see that what we have to offer them is far better than what they are experiencing now. Our brain makes decisions based on what we are comparing things to and that's where the great presenter knows how to use contrast to powerful effect.

That means great presenters make it absolutely clear how their proposal is better than all of the other options. They magnify the differences and accentuate the contrast to make things easy for their audience.





Habit 19

They give them a
good reason.

Why would anyone want to change the way they think or feel to do what you want them to?

The answer may be a little disappointingly obvious, but it's true: You've given them a really good reason that makes perfect sense.

Habit 20

They give them hope.

We all live in hope.

The great presenters know how to put themselves in their audience's shoes and think carefully about everything they may hope for. Then they demonstrate their understanding by providing that hope in the context of their presentation.



Create a checklist for these 20 habits, and the next time you're sitting in the audience being presented to, see how many of these good habits the presenter has and then get someone to do the same for you when you next present.

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|-----------------|--|-----------------|--------------------------------|
| Habit 1 | Acknowledge and reframe stage fright or nerves | Habit 11 | Use videos and props |
| Habit 2 | Focus on the audience | Habit 12 | Use your voice |
| Habit 3 | Don't try to be perfect | Habit 13 | Stay in the present |
| Habit 4 | Stick to the point | Habit 14 | Make friends |
| Habit 5 | See the opportunity | Habit 15 | Know what you're talking about |
| Habit 6 | 'Anchor' yourself | Habit 16 | Be consistent |
| Habit 7 | Practise | Habit 17 | Be generous |
| Habit 8 | Tell stories | Habit 18 | Help them to see the contrast |
| Habit 9 | Use colourful, creative and compelling images | Habit 19 | Give them a good reason |
| Habit 10 | Involve your audience | Habit 20 | Give them hope |

Habits are routine behaviours, many of which are unconscious as we don't even realise we are doing them. When it comes to presenting and speaking in public, the good news is we can create new habits. Don't try to include all of these new habits the next time you present as you will quickly revert to your default style of presenting.

Instead, focus on introducing two or three of these new habits each time you present and notice the difference.



About the author:

Maurice De Castro is a former corporate executive of some of the UK's best loved brands. Maurice believes that the route to success in any organisation lies squarely in its ability to really connect with people. That's why he left the boardroom to create a business helping leaders to do exactly that. Learn more at www.mindfulpresenter.com

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