

8

SCIENTIST AND PERFECT HOST

Puzzling title. Aren't the organisers of the conference the hosts? Isn't the chairperson the host? The organisers are hosting the conference, and the chairperson is hosting the day sessions. But you are the one hosting your presentation. If you have hosted people, you must have experienced the tingle of excitement before their coming, the expectant glance outside the window to check for their arrival. But you would not have been filled with fear. Then why is it that people say that presenting in front of an audience is feared even more than death? Surely, this applies to irrational people who cannot control their emotions, but not to you, the logical level-headed scientist.

Somehow, you wished it were so, but fear still manages to test your confidence. This is because fear has deep roots. The first root of fear is fear itself. Fear has a way to fuel itself. It needs a starter, but once turned on, it feeds itself on your awareness of it being there. Here are six common presentation fears: 1) fear of facing an anonymous audience, 2) fear of not being able to communicate clearly, 3) fear of forgetting something important when presenting, 4) fear of being questioned, of not being questioned, and of not being able to answer a question, 5) fear of being investigated, probed, scrutinised, and possibly rebuked, and 6) fear of being rejected on the grounds of sex, race, skin colour, body height, body weight, accent, or nationality. This short list is far from complete and you could probably add one or two fears of your own. Combatting these fears is actually not as difficult as it seems. This and subsequent chapters offer ways to make these fears disappear.

Much fear disappears when you realise who you are. You are not a victim about to bleed under the razor-sharp tongues of prosecutors. You are not the accused standing without a lawyer in front of a jury determined to deliver a guilty verdict. You are not the foreigner appearing in front of an audience of linguists determined to find fault with your accent. You are not the graduate

facing an unpredictable panel during your dissertation defence. You are the scientist who accepted to host scientist guests. Indeed, your name and invitation to your talk were inside the program sent to all meeting attendees.

Unless the conference has only one track attended by all, the invited guests have the choice to accept your invitation or to attend someone else's presentation. Therefore, in front of you, the audience is composed of all the people who accepted your invitation to come and benefit from your talk. They are your guests, and that makes you their host. So how does a host behave, and will people say you are a good host?

Mrs. Toldoff receives her guests

Vladimir's wife, Ruslana, had invited Vladimir's manager and a few colleagues to her home on Sunday for a blini party. The French have their crêpes, and the Russians, their blini. Of course, the Russians claim that blini are better than crêpes, and the French, don't claim anything because they have never seen a blini in their life! Blini are small thin round pancakes made with milk, egg, flour, but also yeast. The yeast makes them very light. Blini are stuffed with fishy things such as caviar, cod, smoked salmon, smoked or salted sturgeon, and with sour cream. Vladimir's blini party was popular in his neighbourhood because he made sure there was plenty of vodka to wash down the copious sour cream that coated the delicious fish. Ruslana had arranged the table where everyone would sit. Several plates, each with its towering stack of blini, were placed at regular intervals along the long table. She had dusted and cleaned the house thoroughly before the guests arrival. She was conscious of her reputation in the neighbourhood. That morning, she had even chosen the clothes Vladimir would wear. And he was too smart to argue with his wife on the day of a blini party!

The first one to arrive was Vladimir's manager. It was the first time he had come to the house and, not exactly knowing where the house was, had left home early. Ruslana heard the car door closing and was waiting at the front door, with a warm smile. At the same time as Vladimir (still in his bedroom) was shouting "Dorogaya, where is my Sunday shirt?", his manager entered and asked "Where is Vladimir?"

“Hanging in the closet...”, she shouted.

“Really”, responded the manager with a grin, “I am sorry to hear that!”

The Attentive Host

All of us remember our parents having guests. How did they host them? Chances are that prior to receiving the guests a lot of preparation took place. If it was a barbecue, someone (maybe even you) went to buy the charcoal. They bought the meat, skewers, lighting fuel, buns, beverages, ice for the drinks, paper plates, napkins, plastic cups, etc. They made sure there were enough chairs for everyone and made contingency plans in case the weather was not clement. Of course, they cleaned up the house (and themselves) and made sure the restrooms had fresh soap, towels, and toilet rolls. And at the last minute, just before the guests arrived, they checked that everything was in order and that they looked “presentable”.

The first quality of a host is preparedness. It is also the first quality of a presenting scientist. There are many things to prepare. In fact, the host will often make a checklist prior to the event to make sure nothing is missing on the big day. There are just as many things on the checklist of the presenting scientist. Let us compare checklists.

The location: your lawn, next to your swimming pool, the public park barbecue pit...

The location: The meeting room, hotel ballroom, boardroom, etc.

Your high quality, appetising, fresh or defrosted food

Digestible, attractive, and novel slide contents

Enough skewers with marinated meat and brochettes of food for the guests, and some in reserve just in case they are very hungry

Enough slides for the time you have to present and some only to be shown if needed during the question and answer session

Your barbecue pit, cleaned, oiled, and with enough charcoal, and lighter fuel

The computer in the meeting room. You checked that it had all you required to present (software, fonts, players, codecs...)

Knowledge on how to operate the barbecue without having to call the fire engine for extinguishing your brush fire or the ambulance for treating your third degree burns

Knowledge on how to use the computer, microphone, presentation remote, and light control equipment without needing to be rescued by the technical staff

Alternative plans in case of rain (board games instead of ball games)

Your own PC, USB drive, paper handouts, shorter presentation

Your welcoming words and smile while looking directly at your guests as they arrive

Your welcoming words and smile while keeping eye contact with the audience

Prepared, organised, good-looking, knowledgeable, friendly

Prepared and rehearsed, organised, good-looking, knowledgeable, friendly

The host is familiar with the hosting location: home. The scientist host is rarely familiar with the hosting location. Indeed, sometimes it is only known just before the beginning of the first session on the first day of the conference. That is also the time when you meet the chairperson, and discover the room and the computer used for presentations. You have much to do then. You have to check how to control the audio and lighting equipment, tell the chairperson how to pronounce your name correctly, check the operating system and the software (PowerPoint version and video codecs — for example QuickTime for Windows), install your presentation on that computer if required, etc. One cannot imagine a good host not being intimately acquainted with the hosting location!

After a last check to see whether all is in order prior to the arrival of the guests, the host checks his or her appearance one last time, and then starts to relax, confident that everything is well prepared. The host is not under any stress while eagerly awaiting the guests. Their arrival fills the host with pleasure. These people have accepted the invitation and are honouring his house with their presence. They had a choice to do something else, but they instead decided to come. The happiness of the host is visible. He or she smiles while greeting them and thanking them for coming, and so do you. While smiling, the host looks at them (not sideways or above their heads) and greets them, conveying the pleasure their presence brings. The host remains attentive throughout the time shared with the guests. Do they need more food, more drinks? Do they have special requests? Are they smiling and happy?

Similarly, you remain attentive during the whole presentation. Is the audience interested? Are you clear? Are you going too fast? Frequent eye

contact with the audience provides the required answers. People may be noisy, shuffling uncomfortably in their seats, distracted, frowning, or on the contrary they may be still, returning eye contact, smiling, silent, looking interested. Taking the cues from the audience, you adjust contents and pace to maintain interest. A good scientist host builds in a safety time buffer for situations that require adjustment during the talk. If you need to slow down the pace and summarise what has been presented (with the screen behind you blanked), do not let that be at the expense of having to rush through the rest of your presentation. Keep time available for occasions such as this.

When the time comes for the host to interact directly with the guests, the attentive host does not let one guest monopolise all the attention and keeps watch to see whether other guests are discretely waiting to have a word. Similarly, during the question and answer session, you do not let anyone monopolise your attention at the expense of others. As host, enlist the help of the chairperson to deal with situations that reduce the effectiveness of a Q&A session.

The Visible Host (and the Co-Host)

Sleep little scientist, don't you pry

Vladimir zipped past his title slide to his second slide, the classic “outline” slide. He had seen it in all the previous presentations that morning apart from one (the one where the audience had clapped at the end). He turned his back to the audience and proceeded to read every single bulleted line in the outline, after which he turned back to his computer screen, clicked the mouse, and brought a text heavy objective slide, which seemed to be a downsized version of his abstract. He mostly read that too, this time looking at his computer screen. Somewhere at the back of the room, the door, which had been left ajar to let late participants enter, silently closed after two people had left the room. He was now in semi-darkness. The beam of hope, which inhabits any attendee at the start of a presentation, was rapidly dimming: this was going to be the usual presentation. The beam turned into candlelight glow when Vladimir brought the next slide entitled “*Methodology*”. The complex black and white diagram covered

with font size 11 serif text had one attendee remove his glasses to wipe them on his shirt. Pasted from a PDF file original, the diagram suffered from the blurring that accompanies a combination of anti-aliasing technology and misaligned low resolution VGA projection. The blurring and Vladimir's lifeless tone unfocussed the attention of people as he pointed here and there to places on his computer screen to explain the various intricate algorithms used in the simulation model. The explanation lasted and lasted, to no avail. Cruising at high altitude, Vladimir had left his audience behind. Had he listened, he would have heard the noise of feet shuffling and seats creaking as people rested heavily against the backs of their chairs in preparation for a nap. The chairperson, sitting upright in front of the reclining people, looked like a watchtower. He had managed to keep one eye half opened for a few minutes, but resisting was futile. The volume of Vladimir's static voice hypnotically oscillated as he swung his head back and forth from the mike to the screen with the regularity of a pendulum. The audience was now comatose. Unknown to Vladimir, he had not just lost people's attention; he had lost all chances to get questions at the end of his talk.

Little scientists don't pry when they are sung a lullaby.

In the old times, presenter hosts were presenting alone in front of an audience. Today, they share the stage with a co-host: the computer. That co-host is so attractive, colourful, and animated that most of the people spend their time looking at the co-host, not at the host. Facing an information-rich screen, the brightness of which is enhanced by the dimmed lights in the room, the co-host reduces the role of the host to that of a narrator, a voice-over as they say in film production. The presenter, reduced to a disembodied voice, is now downgraded to the function of co-host whilst the co-host takes front stage as main host. Let not that be your fate. You deserve better than the computer co-host: **YOU ARE THE HOST.**

To retain your host qualities, you need to keep the co-host under control and here is how.

- 1) Remain in the limelight. Keep all the lights on. Be in charge of controlling the light level. If a slide requires dim lighting to be readable, ask the technician to bring down the lights and to bring them up with the next

slide. That way you can keep eye contact with your audience without being blinded by any light.

- 2) Whenever you can, use the “B” key, or blank the screen with a black slide; then engage the audience face to face. Deprived of its co-host, the audience only has you, the host, to look at! Do not rely on the slides to tell your whole story. Keep some parts for your one-on-one with the audience.
- 3) Be animated. Move. Use gestures. Reveal the dynamic person in you. There is nothing like movement to recapture audience attention. For your gestures to work, however, you must be seen, hence keep the lights on.
- 4) Keep needless gif file animations out of your screen so as not to distract your audience. Animations are great, but only if necessary to your purpose.
- 5) Emphasise your words using tones and gestures that re-centre the attention on you. Reveal the communicator in you. Use that disturbing silence that brings the audience back to you as it wonders why you stopped talking.
- 6) Simplify and trim down what is on your slides so that the audience absorbs their contents quickly and clearly. Do not let the audience linger on your slides because they are difficult to read, or because there is so much in them that it takes all their attention (leaving you, so to say, “outside of the picture”).
- 7) Face the audience. Keep eye contact, as direct, honest, and authoritative people do, and as the direct, honest, and authoritative person you are. Do not turn your back on your audience. Use PowerPoint’s custom animations or Keynote’s build inspector to build layers of explanations and emphasis so that you do not have to turn and move a distracting laser beam across the screen.
- 8) Do not let the co-host say thank you! You are a responsible and polite host. Thank the audience yourself!
- 9) Do not fight with your co-host. When you bring a new slide, let the audience absorb its title. If you have prepared your transition, this should be fast and easy. If the audience does not know what to expect next, it will figure it out independently, and in the process only pay marginal attention to you. The co-host wins; you lose. Therefore, always prepare

your audience for what comes next. After a brief attention-focusing silence allowing the audience to read the title of your slide, guide the audience along a carefully prepared path through your slide contents.

- 10) Let the co-host help you if you have a language problem (heavy accent or stammering). In that situation, say less and show more, particularly in visuals.



Listen to the “Presenter’s mistakes” podcast on the DVD

Being visible has its advantages; chief among them is a more subdued role for the computer co-host. It also allows the audience to put a name to a face, and a face to a scientific contribution. Being visible is not just a matter of lighting, or a matter of seeing your physical body, as the points above make clear. The audience also needs to discover your personality. If someone becomes a different person when presenting (and I have heard that comment many times — often in admiration), it means that that person’s personality was exchanged temporarily with that of another role-playing person — the professional. Is that wrong? If that serious “professional” look contributed to project a positive, and authoritative image, do make sure that the Q&A session reinforces that perception — otherwise you will be pegged as a “fake”, a superficial person. Also, use the Q&A session to reveal more traits of your personality, such as humour, honesty, kindness, or respect for others. In the end, these soft qualities influence the way your audience perceives your work as much as your hard scientific arguments.

Being visible from head to toe also has its potential problems. When you are behind the lectern, only the upper part of you is seen moving. Outside of that zone, everybody sees the whole of you moving. And that is exactly the place where you are reluctant to go for many reasons:

- 1) You are self-conscious about the way you look. You find yourself too fat, too tall, too ugly, or too skinny. You think people perceive you the way you

perceive yourself and feel that the less people see of you, the better. My advice is to forget about your self-image, because people have not come to a beauty contest, they have come to learn about you the scientist and your science. They see you as healthy, above average height, with strong facial features, lightweight, not as fat, tall, ugly, or skinny.

- 2) You are self-conscious of your body. Usually, you rarely stop life to look at yourself (men do this less often than women), but when you are standing on an elevated platform, or when you are caught by a spotlight, you become self-conscious of everything about you: the way you sound, the way you speak, the way you move, the way you stand. Your arms become real, your nose tip comes into view (it never did before), your empty hands seem to dangle aimlessly, your knees lock your legs straight, your immobile body starts feeling the pull of gravity, and your feet start complaining. Your new shoes bring themselves to your attention by squeaking and pinching your big toe. Your new tight skirt or leather belt that gives you the waist of a wasp is winning the battle against your rebelling abdominal muscles. At the same time, because your adrenaline is trying to turn you into a live wire presenter, your own physiological functions, normally a background noise, come into the foreground: strong heartbeat, fast breathing, sweaty palms, stressed bladder, cold hands, and shivering muscles. To find release, some unconsciously move the body into action. They move back and forth in a “bear dancing” pattern, resting on one foot and then the other, gently oscillating like a reed in the breeze. Others play with their footwear (high heel shoes), their presentation remote, their glasses, or with a marker pen that they cap and uncap 30 times a minute. Others hide their awkward hands in their large pockets (men) or their thumbs in tiny jean pockets, cowboy style (women). Some look away, or look down, or look at the screen... hoping that the audience will do likewise and not pay attention to them.

Effective release, however, comes from a good body position and comfortable (used) clothing. With your feet shoulder-width apart, feel the ground (you cannot do that with air-cushioned shoes, or soft rubber soles). Unlock your knees, as if ready to move. Take a deep slow breath. And then forget about your body to concentrate on your message. Let the message activate your body and do not let your body deactivate your message.

To enhance visibility, moving is good. It attracts attention. However, moving should have a purpose. No idle movement. No scratching. No

rubbing. No distracting movement. No playing with objects — pens, glasses, laser pointers, remotes. Moving should be highly visible. Therefore, if you move your legs, walk at least one metre (several steps). If you move your arms, move the whole arm, as preachers or lawyers did in the past so that their words could be amplified by their broad sleeves flapping in the air like bird's wings (the French call it "*effets de manche*"). Do not restrain your arm movements to the lower arm while the upper arm remains stuck to your side. It shows you are tense, and it makes you look caged in and lacking confidence. There is a certain amount of exaggeration in the way you communicate on stage, compared to the way you communicate in a conversation. Your voice has to be louder so that you can be heard at a greater distance and your movements need to be amplified so that people sitting far away can see them. If you use large movements in a conversation at close range, you may hurt somebody!

Your clothing also attracts attention. However, if what it enhances visibly distracts, it is counter-productive. The colour of your clothes carries a message, but the message varies because different cultures interpret colours differently. It is therefore safer to dress in pastel colours, or black and white clothes, rather than to make a fashion statement with saffron, scarlet, or indigo coloured chiffon. Different countries with different climates also have different dress codes. Europeans tend to dress more formally and wear a suit and tie. People from California dress more casually than people from the East Coast do. Different professions follow different dress codes. People from engineering sciences tend to dress more casually than people from life sciences. Follow the smart casual dress code adopted by most people in your profession, and take into account the climate of the area where the conference is taking place. Remember also to wear clothes that allow the use of clip-on wireless mikes, and get rid of your uniform and your badge holder when you present. Your research centre jacket looks dull on stage, and the badge holder never won an award in beauty contests. Put them aside during your presentation.

Everything in and around your face, from its ornaments to the moustache, from the make-up to the colour of your teeth, has an effect on the audience. Your hairstyle attracts attention. Its colour makes a statement. Its neatness makes a statement. Its length makes a statement. And its cut makes a statement. Your glasses attract attention. Their style makes a statement. Your earring(s) and tie make a statement. Observe yourself and determine what it is you want to convey to the audience through the way your face looks, and make sure that your appearance helps you achieve your goals.

Dressing appropriately is therefore not just a matter of personal taste. You should also respect the audience and avoid anything that might be seen as offensive or deviant. Instead of creating a difference through your physical appearance, your baseball cap or your gadgetry, consider creating that difference by the clarity of your slides and by your “stage presence”. Presenters who are clear, friendly, respectful, and professional hosts are different.

The Hospitable Scientist

A speaker hosting a scientific presentation knows and prepares what the guests come for. If they do not know you, they come for knowledge. If they already know you, they may also come because they know your presentations are well prepared and interesting. They remember you from the last paper you presented at a previous conference. Your presentation created a benchmark. They expect a repeat performance. Consistency in quality presentations is the hallmark of great presenters. Your guests may even come because others told them you are a good presenter. Through word of mouth, your reputation grows. You are known as a talented scientist and an approachable speaker. You have a pleasant personality and great listening skills. Your willingness to share your knowledge with others is palpable. Your honesty, fairness, and respect for the work of other scientists are indisputable. You may be Italian, Russian, French, Chinese, American, Korean, Brazilian, or New Zealander ... your accent or your country no longer matter. Even your affiliation to a prestigious research centre no longer plays a major role in the way people perceive you. You are you: a caring host, and a caring scientist, someone with scientific skills, interpersonal skills, and communication skills.

The world of science is competitive. Unscrupulous scientists, people you may even consider friends, may plagiarise, steal, and make false claims to establish antecedence in discovery. Publish or perish is all too real a saying. To survive or to remain in the same league class-conscious scientists may break ethic rules. Therefore, knowledge sharing needs wisdom as a companion. Sharing or not sharing (public domain or protected intellectual property) is a choice you rarely get to make because it is dictated by your employer. By publishing, you are putting your knowledge in the public domain. When you present to a public audience, even an audience of one, you are putting your knowledge in the public domain. There are rooms that a host does not

open to unknown guests, rooms with valuable objects or untidy rooms. Similarly, during a public presentation, it would be foolish to disclose intellectual property that is not yet protected, or research results that could be the object of your next paper. You would not serve your guests half-cooked food. Similarly, it is not appropriate to disclose early results that are part of your ongoing research before thorough validation. You would not (some do) claim credit for preparing a dish that other people have made or that you bought at the store. And if you do use catered food and get compliments, you would mention the name of the caterer. Similarly, you would display intellectual honesty by disclosing the sources of the information displayed on your slides. This disclosure is vital to how other scientists perceive you.

You know that science is not done in a vacuum or in an ivory tower. Break-throughs often occur when working in teams at the frontier between domains. Therefore, the presenting scientist often has an ulterior motive: that of finding research collaborators or partners. The host who throws an open invitation to a party often discovers several guests of interest. Such a host would be foolish to part from them at the close of the party without at least exchanging business cards to further develop a potentially fruitful relationship. The host scientist can only identify the people who have a genuine interest in his field through the questions they ask during or after the Q&A. Therefore, to benefit from a full or extended Q&A time, do not exceed your allotted presentation time. It is essential that information on how to reach you is made easily available to all attending the presentation (handouts, business cards, email address on slide, etc). It is also essential that you remain available outside the meeting room at the end of the talk so that interested people can approach you. Do look around you before going too deep into a lengthy dialogue with one person: others may be waiting on the side for a chance to talk to you. You may want to start distributing your business card first, before engaging in conversation. Some may be in a hurry to go to the next presentation.

A presentation is only successful if the Q&A is successful because the Q&A leaves the audience with its last impression of you. Hosting qualities are essential to a successful Q&A. The qualities respected in hosts worldwide are similar: they show respect toward their guests; they do not start an argument that discredits a guest; they are humble servants, attentive to the remarks or requests of their guests; they do not ignore what seems like minor requests; and they do their utmost to satisfy someone's requests without giving the other guests the impression that they are ignored. The same qualities apply

to the presenting scientist. Whatever the question or the tone of the question, the scientist host respects the person who has had the courage to express doubts, lack of knowledge, or personal interest through a question. It is always better to be asked one question than to be asked none. Demonstrating respect toward other people's feelings and views is indeed possible so long as you continue to display an unshakable confidence in your own accomplishments. Remarks, or constructive comments from your audience, may be the way to personal scientific breakthroughs. Thank the person who offers the comments and do acknowledge your sincere interest in exploring the matter later. Give priority to no one. Any member of the audience is worthy of the same respect, regardless of social status or academic level. According to that principle, answering questions comes on a first come, first served basis*, and no question is worthless or regarded as such. You are relaxed, confident, never anxious, and always pleasant toward the people who accepted the invitation to attend your talk.

*See the entry "Who you're gonna ask" on the author's blog "*When the Scientist Presents*", at www.scientific-presentations.com