

PREFACE

Vladimir's backstage exit

Vladimir brings the last slide on the screen, a bright white “Q&A” on a dark background. Finally moving his eyes away from the computer screen, he says, “Thank you for your attention. Any questions?”

About ten to fifteen people are scattered in a room too big for an audience this small. Most of them are sitting either in an aisle seat or in the last row, ready to make a quick exit. Some already have. As he waits, he feels quite uncomfortable. Not one hand goes up. In the front row, his supervisor is packing up, ready to leave. After an unbearable four-second silence, Vladimir looks sideways to the chairperson who, after glancing furtively at his watch, rescues Vlad with a loud “Thank you Dr. Toldoff”. Vladimir presses the spacebar one last time. The screen goes dark, Microsoft PowerPoint exits front stage, and Vladimir exits backstage.

Outside the conference room, during the coffee break, Vladimir approaches his supervisor, a burning question on his mind.

“How did I do?” he asks.

“You did fine”, responds his supervisor while avoiding eye contact.

To get an honest answer, Vladimir changes his question.

“Did I do as well as Dr. Sorpong?”

The supervisor now looks at him, condescendingly.

“As well as Dr. Sorpong? Not quite. I think it would be good if I added presentation skills as an objective in your upcoming performance review. Quite frankly, you need more confidence, more dynamism, better slides,

and you need to work on that Russian accent of yours. I am used to it, but the audience clearly isn't."

Vladimir sighs.

"Are you sending me to a presentation skills class?"

"That could be arranged."

"In Hawaii?"

"Don't push it, Vlad."

Greetings! Your name may not be Vladimir, and you may not be Russian, but you are a scientist, and that tells me a lot about you. You are someone who is not satisfied with status quo situations. You suspect there is no such thing as a presentation skills gene in anyone's DNA and you are convinced that these skills are acquired and improved through learning and doing. You have seen great presenters tackling the most difficult topics without effort and with great result. If they can do it, so can you! Great!

Your future skills are sleeping, waiting to be brought to life in this book and the companion DVD. They are here for you, ready to serve you, ready to turn you into a great presenter. How do you access them? Just rub your mind against the words of these pages, and review the media on the DVD. These skills can become yours.



Where there are exercises, do them; where there are checklists, follow them;



where there are videos, watch them;



where there are podcasts, listen to them;



and where there are websites, visit them.

But most importantly, apply these newfound skills as early as possible.

In this book, we will imagine that your task is to present your paper at a scientific meeting. If all goes well, your presentation will end up being quite different from your paper. It cannot be otherwise because the paper is no longer essential this time, but you are. Danish professor Peter Sigmund of Odessa University, a man who must have seen many bad presentations, wrote a tongue-in-cheek column in *Physics Today* entitled “Fifteen Ways to Get Your Audience to **Leave You**”. The eighth point of advice recommends that you “*ignore the inherent difference that exists between oral and written communication*”. Since you want your audience to **stay**, you want to know the difference. That is your first task. For this task, consult the first four book chapters as well as the DVD. They reveal how to select the contents for your slides and prepare you for the slide design and creation stage covered in chapters five and six. The DVD provides what the book cannot: dynamic media rich in colours and PowerPoint/Keynote DIY (do it yourself) techniques. The final task will be for you to visualise yourself presenting and answering questions from the audience. This part is essentially dynamic. Book chapters 7 to 10 as well as DVD tutorials build up your personal skills and confidence.

This book is great, as an *in vitro* tool. It is up to you to make it come alive *in vivo, in situ*, not in the test tube of a classroom, but in a real conference setting. The good news is that presentation skills can be learned. Among the hundreds of talented research scientists from A*STAR Research Institutes (Singapore's Agency for Science, Technology, And Research) who attended the presentation skills class based on this book, not one felt hopeless. And yet, the challenge they had to face was colossal. The presentation of each paper was only 7 minutes long. It took place in a large auditorium in front of scientists from different institutes. Engineers presented to Biologists, Chemists to Computer Scientists, Immunologists to Technologists. They had to be clear and interesting to people from extremely diverse background and convince the audience of the worth of their scientific contribution. As if that was not difficult enough, each had to go through a gruelling 8-minute Q&A after their presentation, where their authority, competence, knowledge, and nerves were tested to the limit. Under such harsh conditions, success was far from being guaranteed. But succeed, they did. It was possible in parts thanks to the many live rehearsals each had in front of a smaller audience made up of experts and non-experts. It was also because they spent close to a full day simplifying and illustrating the one point each of their slides made until it was understandable and legible to all. It was because they understood that, in scientific presentations, the presenter's role is to be a host who keeps a tight rein on the computer co-host. Finally, it was because they had been coached on how to face the audience, rephrase and answer questions from experts, non-experts, and troublemakers; questions that were sometimes relevant and sometimes not, sometimes hostile or incomprehensible and sometimes over-friendly.

It is their success that gives me the confidence that you can succeed too. To make learning fun, I pepper the pages here and there with the story of my scientist friend, Vladimir, a fictional character who excels at being a bad presenter. Actually, Vladimir is a mosaic, a montage, a collage, made up of hundreds of little bits and pieces of things presenters do that they shouldn't. He is the ultimate counter-example. If you sometimes recognise yourself in him, it is through pure coincidence, of course. And if your name happens to be Vladimir, don't feel bad, my Vladimir does not have the same last name. Have fun. It's time to turn the page to chapter 1. Happy reading!