

The Five Biggest Mistakes CEOs Make in Speaking

by **BEN DECKER**



Being able to speak well allows leaders to influence and inspire others. Unfortunately, not all leaders take the time to work on this critical skill and, as a result, their effectiveness as leaders diminish. Ben Decker covers some common mistakes leaders make when speaking and he offers suggestions that help leaders express themselves more successfully.



Most CEOs are not inspiring. After years of working with leaders in business, it's hard to come to any other conclusion. And of all the people who have to lead and motivate, they're it!

Leaders clearly rose in the ranks for a reason, but by the time they get to C-level, most have never received the right coaching to present their ideas brilliantly. It's hard by that point to get a training session where you can take risks and grow in your communication

without a bunch of handlers and support people around. But it's worth the effort, as those focused on getting the right training know - look at Steve Jobs, Chuck Schwab, and Bill Clinton for a few examples.

Here's a countdown of presenting tips for the top dog (and all the underdogs, too). Speaking and communicating is a learned skill, critical for leadership and motivation - the CEOs primary task.

MISTAKE #5 - CEOs READ SPEECHES

In short:

- Don't read speeches. Prepare with a method like the Decker Grid so you can speak authentically and extemporaneously.
- Pay attention to your nonverbal behaviors so you connect with and influence your audience.

In depth:

Surprisingly, this is still happening. Here's the thing - reading just doesn't work. People tend to think that speaking is just a form of the written medium. Nope - they are almost polar opposites in form and purpose.

CEOs probably lean towards reading speeches for a few reasons:

1. So someone else can write the speech
2. So they don't have to practice or
3. Maybe they insist on being precisely accurate in the exact words they say.

The problem is it's not effective. We are all taught that if we say the right words people will get the message, but it's not true. Not when your behavior doesn't match your message. When reading, you usually:

- look down too much to read and keep up with the content, only glancing up

at the audience. There's no way to really connect with your listeners with good eye communication if you're not maintaining it for more than a second at a time.

- ping pong back and forth to the podiums, if you're using teleprompters.
- become more monotone because you are reading, not speaking and expressing from the heart.
- get stuck behind a lectern, often holding on for dear life (if you fear public speaking), instead of moving around naturally and gesturing with enthusiasm.

Reading speeches can be perceived as inauthentic by the audience because it's clear someone else wrote the speech for you.

Don't read speeches! It may be easier and feel safer, but it does not communicate well, much less inspire or motivate. And it takes twice as long to prepare. So, if you're not going to write the whole thing out, or bullet all your points, how do you prepare? I'm biased, but highly recommend the Decker Grid. It's an easy, structured, organized methodology that allows you to put together a presentation quickly, and you'll never have to read a speech again.



MISTAKE #4 - CEOs DON'T TELL STORIES

In short:

- Get away from informing with facts, figures, and data, and start influencing.
- Cast a vision for your organization to motivate.
- Highlight common aspirations, efforts, and triumphs for memorability.

In depth:

Before email, before blogging, even before the Guttenberg Press, there were speeches. And those speeches had stories. They communicated with power and emotion.

CEOs, much like all of us, get continuously inundated with facts and figures. They are pressured with the minutiae of the day, so they tend to think in facts, tasks, concepts, numbers, etc. The problem is, in the spoken medium facts and figures don't stick. They are not remembered, and they are usually boring. People may need to know the numbers, but save them for the written medium and send out a document when you are trying to inform, not trying to influence.

Ironically, the CEO's real job is not to inform, but to influence. Leaders are the vision casters (or should be). Vision is made up of the collective aspirations, efforts, and triumphs of the organization. Guess what's overflowing vital, interesting, and compelling? Stories.



Plus, stories are easy to remember and tell. They make public speaking easier. I remember a newly elected CEO who happened to be at the headquarters about a month before he was to officially start, and there was an all-employee meeting going on. The interim leader asked if he wanted to drop by, and the CEO saw an opportunity - not for a formal address but to say a few words - just to get acquainted. He thought quickly. Spoke for eight minutes, six of which were a story about his first experience with the company. People loved it, and him. A story is not only easy to tell, it connects

with people. Sometimes that's the most important thing.

So become a storyteller. It's not just for CEOs, but for all of us. They are great conversation starters at lunches, conferences, and even parties. Stories are going on all around us - and we don't take advantage of them. Use your own personal stories and also tap in to stories of your employees and clients. You can make a point about someone else by lauding, building up, or highlighting them, rather than yourself. Keep your ears and eyes open for potential stories happening around you.



MISTAKE #3 - CEOs ARE TOO STIFF

In short:

- Loosen up and show energy.
- Step away from the lectern and use the stage or meeting room space, let big gestures happen, and smile once in a while.

In depth:

Way too often we have seen a CEO making a major speech, with both hands hanging on the lectern for dear life. Not good. First of all, why is the CEO hanging on? He or she is the CEO and should not be nervous anyway, so why isn't he or she showing energy, enthusiasm, and excitement about the message?

One of the primary problems I see in most leaders is they are too stiff, too mechanical. Communication and influence rides energy, and too many people lose all their natural

and expressive energy when it counts most - when they are leveraging their time speaking to hundreds or thousands at once. They emphasize their content, thinking "if I just say the right words, people will get it." Nope.

When you give an inconsistent message, people will trust and believe what they see and hear, not so much what you say. At the very least, you need to move, gesture, and smile.

What do you do, exactly?

Forward lean, like an athlete. If CEOs thought more like athletes, they would habitually be in the ready position - on the balls of your feet, ready to move. If you're forward, you want to move forward, both physically and psychologically. Then you can get out from behind the lectern and move around the stage or room. Naturally. Not standing stiff and wooden in one place.



Let your hands work for you. In personally coaching thousands of leaders, I've seen maybe a handful who over use their hands and gestures. The problem is we all tend to have a nervous gesture that we are comfortable with, like fiddling with a wedding ring, that shows our nervousness. Don't let your comfort be your guide, help the audience be comfortable with you by showing confidence and certainty in your gestures.

Lighten up. Your audience is drawn to passion. Smiling makes you approachable. Just try adding some lightness next time.

MISTAKE #2 - CEOs ARE NOT ALWAYS CREATING

In short:

- Conduct your own brainstorming instead of relying on everyone else's pitch, perspective, push.
- Resist the temptation to let someone else draft your presentation. It won't

sound like you, and you won't feel the enthusiasm that you need to exude to your audience.

- Cut down on bureaucracy where you can - if there's nothing coming out of this formal, scheduled meeting, then why have it?

In depth:

We're all too busy. CEOs are way too busy, but that's life, and no excuse to not accomplish one of their primary functions - creating a vision, a culture, and fostering a climate of creativity in their companies and organizations. The lesson applies to all of us. There are a few main problems we're dealing with here:

Problem #1

CEOs are caught in the traditional academic, analytical, linear way of thinking. Facts and figures, financial pressures, decisions and tasks, people clamoring for decisions.

Solution

Expand your thought process beyond your comfort zone. Conduct personal brainstorming on problems - and even more so on the blank slate of possibilities. Unfortunately, we are rarely taught true brainstorming in school, and there isn't enough in business.

Here are the three rules of brainstorming:

1. Quantity, not quality - get it all down instead of judging your ideas.
2. Set a time limit of three to five minutes to force the mind to create fast.
3. No pre-editing in the moment - let one idea trigger another.

It is amazing what you can come up with in a short period of time, and there are ideas that you never would have thought of if you had stifled the creative process. Brainstorming also prevents writer's and messaging block. Using Post-Its when brainstorming is a cornerstone of the Decker Grid System in creating speeches, presentations, and messages because you can easily move them around. Mind Mapping is another creative technique, which is most useful in taking notes.

Problem #2

CEOs have other people create their speeches. Not good, although it is fine to have other people give feedback, do additional research, and augment the CEOs original ideas. The key point here is the CEO (and all of us) must

originate our key points out of our passion if we want to be authentic and effective.

Solution

Always create your own messages, use your own ideas. Be on the alert for SHARPs. Jot down ideas continuously. Keep a notebook.

Problem #3

The larger the organization, the more bureaucratic the mindset. That environment can be stifling for new ideas. And too many CEOs are leading the bureaucracy, protected by underlings from the energetic hubbub of where the business (and vitality) is really happening.

Solution

- Lead the creative charge. Motivate others to continuously create.
- Cut down on unnecessary meetings
- Advocate brainstorming in regular meetings
- Have unconventional offsite meetings
- Create a culture where your team questions, "Is this the best we can do?"
- Model creativity, not bureaucracy

It's not easy being busy, but it's just as easy being creatively busy as being boringly busy. Plus it's more successful, and more fun!

MISTAKE #1 - CEOs ARE NOT ALWAYS COMMUNICATING VISION

In short:

- Synthesize your vision to a sentence or two so it's easy to remember.
- Make sure to have contact with clients and customers, employees from the top to the bottom, to stay in touch with all facets of the organization.

In depth:

Communicate vision, all the time, relentlessly.

The number one job of any leader is to continuously communicate vision, mission, goal, and purpose of the organization. This seems obvious, but there are reasons why too many CEOs make this mistake.

They get insulated. In Mistake #2, we talked about the bureaucratic mindset stifling creativity. That same atmosphere, along with layers of people between the executive and the

customer, can satisfy the visionary mind of the executive if you doesn't actively work against it. The best CEOs live and breathe their vision. They are the vision.

Jim Collins wrote two books that emphasized this. In Good to Great, he wrote about the Level 5 Leader who might not have been charismatic in the traditional sense, but was passionate about the vision

of the company. In his first book, Built To Last, Collins drove home the point that companies without vision

simply don't last. Just as people without vision do not accomplish much.

Too many CEOs think the formal one-page Vision Statement that every employee may have to memorize takes care of the whole vision thing. It doesn't.

What do you do about all this?

Shorten the vision to a sentence. Two at the most. The essence of a company or organization.



VISION



Examples:

- Starbucks: *“Starbucks will be the premier purveyor of the finest coffee in the world while maintaining our uncompromising principles while we grow.”*
- Henry Ford: *“We will build a motor car for the great multitude.”*
- Pixar Animation: *“To tell stories. To make real films. To make the world’s first completely animated feature film.”*

Lead by walking around. Get out there. Although Tom Peters saw “managing by wandering around” as the basis of leadership and excellence, and called it the “technology of the obvious,” very few CEOs actually do it. What better way to communicate vision than to walk around - have lunch in the company cafeteria, walk the halls, be seen on the floor.

And think of all the time we spend on the phone - use it creatively. Keep your vision top of mind and you’ll be surprised how many opportunities there are to mention it. And remember that the phone can convey emotion, enthusiasm, energy, excitement far better than an email.

Big visions are great, but even a small vision is better than none - whether it’s customer or employee based, benefit or feature based, micro or macro based, local or national based, price or quality based, etc.

TO WRAP THIS ALL UP

Ask most people in business and they will not know the vision of their company. Ask most CEOs and too often there will not be a precise, distinctive one-sentence answer. And there is always a vision - it just needs to be thought through, honed down, and articulated.

Bonus: Here are some classic vision castings to stimulate your vision casting - for, after all, we all are CEOs of something or someone, if even ourselves:

To start off, one of the great vision casters was Theodore Roosevelt who said this on national greatness: *"Like all Americans, I like big things; big prairies, big forests and mountains, big wheat-fields, railroads - and herds of cattle, too - big factories, steamboats, and everything else."*

Thomas John Watson, Sr. was the founder of IBM and he said, *"The great accomplishments of man have resulted from the transmission of ideas of enthusiasm."*

"If we are to survive, we must have ideas, vision, and courage. These things are rarely produced by committees. Everything that matters in our intellectual and moral life begins with an individual confronting his own mind and conscience in a room by himself." - Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.

"A vision is not a vision unless it says yes to some ideas and no to others, inspires people and is a reason to get out of bed in the morning and come to work." - Gifford Pinchot

"The very essence of leadership is that you have to have vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet." - Theodore Hesburgh

"The mind is the limit. As long as the mind can envision the fact that you can do something, you can do it - as long as you really believe 100 percent." - Arnold Schwarzenegger

"People ask the difference between a leader and a boss. The leader leads, and the boss drives." - Theodore Roosevelt

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth." - John F. Kennedy



Leading business communications expert, **Ben Decker** bridges the gap between executive leaders and their teams. As CEO of Decker Communications, Ben has worked with hundreds of leaders in Fortune 500 companies to strategize and implement communications solutions that are practical, direct and attainable.

Ben coaches C-level executives from major organizations, including Charles Schwab, McKesson, Cisco, Bacardi, US Coast Guard, JP Morgan Chase, AT&T and Kaiser Permanente, as well as start-ups and portfolio companies seeking to raise capital. He has also been featured at large conferences and kickoffs for companies such as Marriott, Robert Half International, Hewlett-Packard, Million Dollar Roundtable, Christus Health and Exponent.

At Decker Communications, Ben consults and trains businesses in communications - both in what they say and how they say it. Here, the programs are transformational, creating focus and confidence to help leaders close the deal, launch an initiative or motivate action. Prior to joining Decker Communications, Ben spent several years in strategic sales roles in the high tech and medical industries.

He has been quoted in many top publications, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Forbes* and *Business Insider*. Ben holds a BS in Psychology, California Polytechnic State University at San Luis Obispo, CA.

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MOTIVATE ACTION.
CLOSE THE DEAL.**

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