



The following is excerpted from *THE MILLION-DOLLAR TOOLBOX: A Blueprint for Transforming Your Life and Your Career with Powerful Communication Skills* by Ty Boyd.

Tool One: Connecting With Your Audience

Eye contact is a powerful tool. And when it isn't used effectively, it can also create a powerful problem. Here are some of the pitfalls of inappropriate eye contact:

- **Multi-tasking:** One of the toughest aspects of using effective eye contact is learning to think and look at people at the same time. A key to success here is to become so comfortable with your material that you can keep your focus no matter what the distraction.
- **The Stare:** Learn to recognize the fine line that separates the intense gaze from the overpowering stare. It's partly a matter of timing-several seconds in a group setting is plenty to make the connection. And it's also a matter of facial expression. A lengthy, stone-faced stare gets uncomfortable very quickly. Put a smile on that same face and the entire tone of the exchange shifts.
- **Narrow focus:** When we first begin using more eye contact, some of us have the tendency to direct too much eye contact at one or two people in the audience. It might be someone you like the most or feel the most comfortable with, or at the person who is acting the most interested. Or, and this one can be fatal in a number of ways, at the boss or decision maker. That can be a turn-off both to the one receiving the eye contact and to the others in the audience who perceive that you don't value their attention and presence. Work on moving your eye contact around the entire room at regular intervals throughout your presentation. And work on letting your gaze land on someone different each time.
- **Glaring back:** Of course, one reason we avoid eye contact is because we're afraid of what we'll see out there. We're afraid of coming across the guy who's nodding off, communicating to us very clearly that we're not exactly enthralling everyone. Or, worse yet, we're afraid of landing on an intimidating face. In reality, that happens very rarely. Most people in our audience are predisposed to like our message and us. But it does happen. (Chapter Eleven in the book suggests how to handle a hostile audience.)

How to Connect with an Audience?

If you're looking for a few simple but effective ways to instantly connect with an audience, even a tough audience, try these:

- Ask a couple of meaningful questions. Don't make them difficult questions, of course. Questions literally get you into an active dialogue with your audience, even if you're simply asking a yes or no question that requires nothing more than raised hands or nods.

Even more effective in some situations are questions that require real answers from the audience. For example, at ESI we always begin by asking attendees what common traits they see in effective speakers. We begin a list on a blackboard or flip chart. This loosens people up every time. It gives us information about our audience, and begins to acquaint us with their personalities, too.

- Know what you want. Look at your audience, see them, realize they're real people and decide what you want from them. Do you want to surprise them, stir them, interest them, inspire them, make them change, amuse them, make a friend of them? Define your goal then go after it.
- Use facts and feelings. Individuals respond differently, learn differently and it is our job as communicators to meet them where they are. Communicate in a variety of ways. One of the broadest differences in our audience members is between those who learn from facts and those who learn from feelings. You can reach them both. Everybody in the room connects with the statistics or the storytelling, the facts or the feelings. Use both and you'll discover you connect with everyone in the audience.
- Look them in the eye. If you listen to your audience, sooner or later you're going to hear what you don't want to hear: You've lost 'em. They're restless, stirring about, whispering to one another instead of listening to you. The signs are impossible to ignore if you keep your focus on the audience. If you listen to them, they'll tell you when something isn't working. And if something isn't working, something's gotta change. And it won't be the audience. You're in charge of the situation and you're the one who'll have to adjust.

What To Do When You Are Losing Your Audience

When you're losing the audience, it's time to shake 'em up and there are countless ways to do that:

- Change volume. Be loud if you've been soft, soft if you've been loud.
- Change pace. Speed things up or slow things down.
- Disrupt the pattern. Storytellers call this "creating a train wreck." Tell a funny story, ask a question, assign a group activity, and seek feedback. If all else fails, take a short leg-stretcher break. You must change gears in order for them to change gears. Remember, the enemy of a great presentation is monotony. And it's not that one person is monotonous and another isn't. We all become monotonous. And it's our responsibility to determine whether it's in our energy, pace, cadence, gestures, or movement. If any or all of those become predictable we will become monotonous.
- Be colorful, not pastel. People today are accustomed to being stimulated all the time. We are responsible for keeping their attention and words alone won't do it. So we must excite people the same way in our presentations. We have no license to be black and white or pastel in our presentations. We must be colorful, exciting, energized, and entertaining. Yes, that sometimes means using visual aids effectively in our presentations; but mostly it means we must be colorful ourselves.

Here's what you'll see when the audience is with you:

- They're leaning forward.
- There's a hush in the room.
- They return your eye contact.
- They react quickly to your suggestions (laugh more quickly, get out their notebooks more quickly).

Here's what you'll see when the audience is no longer with you:

- They move around, either in their seats or in and out of their seats.
- They make a lot of trips to the coffeepot or the rest room.
- They whisper to one another.
- They rustle papers.
- They don't make eye contact.
- They doze off.

Checklist for researching your audience:

- Go to the Internet for information on the company, industry and area of interest. Google.com and Northernlight.com are especially good research sites
- Go to the library. Read the local newspaper
- Ask for trade association publications
- Immerse yourself in the language and culture of your audience
- Pin down details on age, politics, the competition, the burning issues affecting their industry, their lives, their communities
- Find out how much they already know about your topic
- Ask previous presenters about their experiences with the group to whom you will speak. Talk to insiders

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