

David Smorgon and the art of presenting

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Businessman and former president of the Western Bulldogs AFL club, David Smorgon, is one of Australia's most in-demand conference speakers. But it wasn't always so: at school assemblies he slouched in the back row to avoid public speaking. **Photo: Jesse Marlow**

Businessman and former president of the Western Bulldogs AFL club, David Smorgon, is one of Australia's most in-demand conference speakers and one of the most compelling. But he insists that it wasn't always so.

Smorgon recalls that his dread of public speaking almost made him decline the presidency of his beloved Bulldogs when he was approached to take on the then struggling Footscray Football Club in 1996.

"The first thing I thought was, 'How am I going to handle the media? How am I going to handle the speaking?' I thought about not doing it because, frankly, speaking was not something I enjoyed," he says.

"When I was at Brighton Grammar School, I was the guy who always sat in the back row at weekly assembly because I wanted to avoid being chosen to give a report. It was something I was afraid of."

Smorgon, a lifelong Bulldogs supporter, did take on the president's job. A scion of the Smorgon family dynasty, he had been a senior executive of Smorgon Consolidated Industries (SCI) for 25 years. The multi-billion dollar conglomerate of meat processing, canning, glass, paper and packaging, plastics and steel interests was a major employer in Melbourne's western suburbs, Footscray's heartland. When the family voted to sell off the business in 1995 – a move strongly opposed by David – the challenge of heading the moribund club's revival proved irresistible.

And his concerns about public speaking?

"You learn the hard way. I must have delivered 300 speeches at the Bulldogs over 16 years," he recalls. "One of the responsibilities as president of an AFL club is to show your emotions and your passion, and I did that every time I addressed the players, supporters and sponsors."

You are only as good as your last speech

As Smorgon commenced the process of winning back supporters, attracting new sponsors, rebuilding the club's finances and strengthening community relationships, his presentations became an important part of the rebuilding.

"It led me to an interest in public speaking and I became very self-critical. I took the view that you're only as good as your last speech and public speaking is the same as anything else: the more you prepare, the better you will be."

Smorgon's reputation as an impassioned, insightful and humorous public speaker spread and his experience as an SCI executive and AFL club president made him a popular keynote and motivational speaker at business conferences. Only duties at the Bulldogs prevented him from entering the lucrative speakers' circuit full time.

By the time Smorgon stepped down as Bulldogs president at the end of 2012 – Smorgon's predecessor as president is also his successor, prominent lawyer Peter Gordon – he was 65 and in no mood to retire.

So the kid who used to hide at the back of assembly to avoid having to speak in public, started PointMade, which represents him as a professional speaker and provides presentation training for executives and communications consulting to chief executives and company boards.

PointMade has just concluded an alliance with management consultant Hay Group which allows Smorgon to work with Hay clients to advise on communication strategies and presentation skills.

Presentation standards are poor

Smorgon remains executive chairman of Generation Investments, the investment vehicle he started with his three sons after the breakup of SCI. It was at Generation, as he received pitches for investment dollars, that he witnessed first-hand the poor standard of presentation skills.

“I’ve had hundreds of people in here seeking my business or my dollars,” he tells *BRW* at his South Melbourne office. “They go on about relationships and models and the features of what they’re offering, which is all well and good, but what I want to know is, ‘What’s in it for me? Why should I do business with you?’. You’d be amazed how rarely that came up.”

The managing director of Hay Group Pacific, Henriette Rothschild, says leadership effectiveness is an important part of Hay’s consulting work and Smorgon’s involvement provides clients with a “deeper and better understanding” of the role communication and presentation skills play, particularly for companies undergoing transformation.

“CEOs going through the transformation of their organisation who might already be good presenters need to go that extra step, and David has the voice of authority and credibility that helps them to do that,” Rothschild says.

“David challenges them in a way that a regular trainer in presentation skills can’t because he’s been there and done that. At this level, it’s not just about remedial help on how to speak in public, it’s how to put together a clear, concise, logical presentation that engages employees and other stakeholders, such as investors and analysts.”

Rothschild says there is a tendency for chief executives and senior managers to resort to complex explanations at the expense of clarity and simplicity. When executives “over-complicate the narrative” the reasons for change become difficult to follow and employees become disengaged.

“What CEOs need to be able to do is not just explain the logic behind the transformation of the organisation, but also to provide a simple and compelling story that engages people to move in that new direction as a critical part of future success,” Rothschild says.

“Implementing significant change is not just about planning. The theories, strategies and plans behind a new direction are one thing, but ultimately the communication between the CEO’s office and the rest of the organisation is ‘How are we going to make this work?’”

Be yourself

Leadership development trainer and coach, Ricky Nowak, believes some executives place too much emphasis on presentation techniques and too little emphasis on being themselves.

“Most people, when they stop worrying about presenting and start focusing on communicating, do really well,” Nowak says. “Employees resent when their leader or manager goes into formal presentation mode in a way that is perceived as being very artificial and doesn’t match how people have experienced communication from them in the past.”

Nowak says many executives take an “over-stylised approach” to formal presentations in the belief that “it looks professional”, but in reality has a jarring effect because it doesn’t fit their natural style or personality.

Whether presenting at a business conference or addressing staff in a formal presentation, Nowak urges clients to “leave their brilliance in their briefcase”. She is especially critical of “the fatal attraction of PowerPoint”.

“Presenters who depend on PowerPoint end up taking the story out of their message and replacing it with an analytical approach that is intent on demonstrating how clever they are or how important their information is, but people don’t want to be overwhelmed with information not relevant to them,” she says. “What people want is a connection between the data and their day-to-day work. When people can use the information they have received in their work, that’s the measure of whether a presentation is successful.”

Develop an authentic style

Nowak urges executives to “trust themselves” to present in a style that is authentic and consistent with their natural style of communication.

A principal of professional services consultant rogenSi, Dinah Eagle, a specialist in leadership effectiveness, says lacking presentation skills or leaving presentations to somebody else is no longer an option for managers and executives as they move through the ranks. “There are people who avoid presenting until they absolutely have to because they find it scary. At some point they will be told that this is not appropriate if they want to develop as a manager,” Eagle says.

“Depending on the organisation, people can get promoted due to technical expertise and they can be good at what they do technically, but [the lack of communication and presentation skills] shows up when they get into leadership roles.

“As the marketplace becomes more challenging and organisations flatter, leaders are expected to step up and lead. In this environment, effective leadership is about how to inspire and motivate and there’s a huge communications element in that.

“Just saying ‘I’m the sales director and this is what I want you to do’ doesn’t work anymore.”