

# 4

## Working With A Team

### **Draft the Best Team**

Years ago I was getting a team ready for a big presentation. A sizeable piece of new business was at stake, so the client company was pulling out all the stops. For two full weeks I practically lived with the presenters. I even flew with them to the potential customer's headquarters and holed up in a hotel for a final round of rehearsals.

My mandate was simple: get this team to the point where it could win that contract despite exceptionally strong competition.

Early on it became clear to me that one of the team members was not going to improve enough in time for the main event. He was a weak link with decades of bad habits and little inclination to change. Unfortunately, he was the senior team

member and slated to oversee the new business if it was successfully won! You could say the situation was “politically touchy.”

With a mandate to win, I felt compelled to go to my main contact at the company and express my concerns. The next thing I knew I was shut up in a room with the company president, who had only been told I had something to tell him. Nobody in the company wanted to leave fingerprints on this situation.

I spoke my piece and the team leader had his role in the presentation dramatically reduced. To his credit he graciously accepted the change and continued to work hard on refining the proposal.

The team went on to win the contract, even though it was learned later that one of the competitors—the incumbent—had been assured of the business. Taking the lead manager off the presentation team was not *the* deciding factor, but it was definitely an important factor in the win.

Just as with sports teams, successful presentation teams depend on a strong player selection. The more skill, talent, and experience you take into a presentation, the higher the performance potential you have. This potential is particularly critical in fast-paced corporate environments where limited time is available for preparation and rehearsal.

This is not a controversial concept, but its application is controversial. The makeup of a presentation team is often driven by office or departmental politics. Even when the politics can be navigated, there is a playground sense of

fairness that calls for everybody to get a chance to play and show their stuff. And, finally, there is my favorite: “He has to be the lead presenter, he’s the boss!”

Be smart about the politics.

Give people a chance to gain experience whenever possible.

Don’t make the boss prove who has more power.

But *do* look for every opportunity to assemble high-potential teams. In the long run success creates more opportunities for everyone.

### Plan Together

The last time I had my car inspected there was a big banner on the inspection station wall that said “Together Employees Accomplish More: **TEAM.**” Teamwork has become such a popular concept that even the guys who check our car exhaust are expected to team together for success.

This teams-are-better philosophy is behind many presentations. But often the “team” in “team presentation” is on the surface only. In reality, three or four solo artists prepare individual messages and then appear together on the day of the presentation. Their planning teamwork was limited to working out how they would divide up the overall topic.

Even if contradictions and inconsistencies are caught and repaired in a rehearsal, the presentation is not going to be as good as it could have been.

Plan your team presentation as a team. Together, work out the overall flow and then make sure everybody knows what everybody else is developing. Touch base regularly as content ideas develop.

With close coordination each part can complement the other parts. Ideas can build across segments. References to the other segments can be planned, built in, and rehearsed. The end result is a more integrated team presentation than people are accustomed to hearing.

#### Plan the In-Between Parts

The best team presentations come across as a single, unbroken message. The best teams speak with one voice. That is why I emphasize planning together.

You might say: "We do plan together! We work closely through the whole process."

Excellent! But I suspect there may still be some places in your team presentation that you and your associates have not consistently coordinated. I call them the "in-between parts." Specifically, I'm talking about the handoffs from one speaker to the next.

If you have ever watched a relay race at a track and field event, you know how important the handoffs are. If a runner fumbles handing the baton to the next runner, the team loses its rhythm and momentum.

A poor handoff in a team presentation causes a similar loss of rhythm and momentum. Instead of a smooth transition from

one portion of the narrative to the next, the audience experiences a clunky break in the flow. *So, that's pretty much all I had to say about the market research. Now, aahh, I believe we planned to have John talk about strategy. So, aahh, John, why don't you pick it up?*

Then, the presentation becomes suspended in air while the speakers change places in an awkward dance. The next presenter shuffles about getting comfortable and checking to see how the remote control works. Finally, with an equal lack of eloquence, this presenter makes some unplanned, useless comments about the previous segment. *So, I hope you found that interesting about the research. I know I did when I first heard it. It's amazing what studies can reveal.*

Imagine the same kind of message break in the middle of an individual's presentation. Your first thought would be that something is wrong. The speaker has had a brain lapse or the projector is acting up. Whatever it is, the flow of the message has been broken.

When I'm asked to coach a presentation team, I will typically ask to hear the whole presentation in its preliminary form. I need to assess what has been done and determine what needs the most attention. Inevitably, as each speaker finishes he or she will say something like: "With that, I turn it over to Harry/Mary/Larry." I'll then ask what the "turn it over" sounds like. Maybe one in a hundred presenters can tell me what they are going to say. It's just assumed that some impromptu comments will be sufficient. *You know. Blah blah blah. Blah blah blah. Whatever.*

As I push to learn what the "blah, blah, blah" is going to

consist of, clients will act surprised. *You really want us to work out what we are going to say. Yes, I do.*

Just as a single presenter needs to smoothly transition from one part of a presentation to the next, multiple speakers on a team need to transition smoothly from one speaker to the next. It's essential if the presentation is going to come across as a single, well-coordinated message.

Each presenter should summarize what he or she has covered and then link it to what the next speaker is going to cover. *So as you can see, both divisions have planned their part of the project so as to make efficient use of common resources. Now, I would like to turn it over to Bob, who will detail these savings along with the proposed budget.*

With a good transition it's not necessary for the next presenter to begin with a reference to the previous speaker. Enough has been said. However, the next presenter can reference back if it's not redundant. A good clue that something is going to be redundant is that it begins with "As my associate just said." Usually it's better to start right out with an attention getter for the new segment.

In addition to working out the transitional wording, thought must be given to how the slide show will be handled. It's not going to look professional if the previous speaker's last slide lingers on the screen while the next speaker gets positioned. One option is for the departing speaker to put up a highlighted agenda slide or a title slide for the next section as part of the transition. Another option is for the departing speaker to blank out the screen. The latter approach is advisable if the new speaker is going to have to walk in front of the projector in order to get positioned.

Some teams will attempt to minimize the break between speakers by having the next speaker get positioned while the current speaker fields questions. Usually this involves the current speaker moving to the center of the room while the next speaker gets situated at the lectern. While it sounds good in theory, it rarely works well. Often the next speaker becomes a distraction: first by shuffling around papers and testing the remote control; then by standing there and giving the impression that the previous speaker's question period is holding things up.

It's possible to minimize the break between speakers with just a small amount of logistical planning before the presentation. Make sure all the speakers are seated close to where they will be speaking from and then make sure there is a clear path for changing positions. Familiarize everyone with the equipment and have all notes and materials sorted out and easily accessed. It's a bit like stage planning for a Broadway play. *Exit stage right. New speaker enters stage left.*

Remember, the objective is a team presentation that is so seamless and smooth the audience experiences it as a single presentation.

### Plan the Q & A

If you go to a conference and attend a panel discussion, you will typically see a lot of fumbling around as the panel members try to work out who will answer each question. They exchange glances with one another, trying to see if anyone is going to take the initiative and volunteer. If no one does, a negotiation ensues. *Sam, that sounds like something you might want to handle. Well, I've got some thoughts,*

*but it might be better if Susan addresses it from the viewpoint of a specialist.* Eventually, someone answers and the process repeats itself with the next question. It's annoying to sit through, but audience members typically accept the lack of coordination. They understand that these people were thrown together by the conference planner.

Teams do not enjoy the same understanding. When they fumble around handling a question it reflects badly on the whole team. Audience members expect *both* the presentation *and* the Q & A period to be well coordinated. There should be no hesitation, no debating, and no talking over one another.

The two main options for coordinating a team's response to questions are: 1) team leader control, or 2) assigned topics.

If the team leader is going to control things, then he or she takes each question, answers it, or directs it to another team member. It is up to the leader to decide who is going to answer. This person acts as a facilitator and the single point of focus for audience members who have a question.

With the assigned-topic option, it gets worked out in advance who on the team will handle which question categories. *Jim, if there are any questions on pricing, they're yours. Judy, you should jump in if they ask about distribution issues.*

Even with the assigned-topic approach, some leadership control may be needed. Obviously, not all questions will fall nice and neatly into predetermined categories. At the slightest hint of hesitation, the leader needs to jump in and determine whose area a question best falls into.

Whichever approach is decided on, it will need to be explained to the audience at the start of the Q & A period.

One other thing to think about is whether or not the team member answering a question is going to stand up. If the team is in front of a large audience, standing is typically a good idea. If everyone is seated around a conference table it makes more sense to stay seated unless the answering team member has one of the seats along the wall. Then it may be better to stand up.

There are multiple variations of the two approaches I've described. The important thing is not so much *how* you coordinate the Q & A, but that you, in fact, somehow coordinate it. Include this often-neglected issue in your planning and practice sessions.