

The Murder Board: The Ultimate Practice Presentation

By Larry Tracy

Author of The Shortcut to Persuasive Presentations

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What a name--the Murder Board! Sounds like something Tony Soprano might convene, doesn't it? But, despite the macabre name, it has nothing to do with a criminal act and everything to do with becoming a better public speaker, a more persuasive business presenter.

The Murder Board is a realistic simulation of the actual presentation to be made. Colleagues role-play the audience, asking the type of questions this specific group is likely to ask. It is intended to be more difficult than the actual presentation.

If you want to become an effective and persuasive presenter, this realistic practice session is the most effective shortcut to speaking excellence. It allows you to make your mistakes when they don't count, increasing the odds that you will shine when the actual presentation is made.

The Origin of the Murder Board

The term Murder Board has its origins within the U.S. military, specifically within the extensive training system of the U.S. Army. When a person has been selected to be an instructor at an Army school, he or she must go through a demanding instructor training program.

Graduation and designation as an instructor is dependent not on a written test, but successful delivery of a 50 minute class from the curriculum of the school.

The audience for this crucible can be instructors who have gone through their own Murder Board, and are determined that this would-be instructor will experience the same frustration and humiliation they did. They ask tough, realistic, questions, the type of questions their students are asking.

At the end of the 50 minute class, the aspiring instructor gets a thumbs up--meaning he or she can now join this band of brothers and sisters as an instructor, or a thumbs-down, meaning another "opportunity" to go through a Murder Board.

Lessons from the Pentagon

This realistic simulation has permeated the military culture. As an example, when I ran the Defense Intelligence Agency's (DIA) briefing team, we had three Murder Boards before the daily briefing to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The first one was at 5:30 AM, the second at 6:30 AM, the third in front of two General officers, one hour later. By the time my briefer or I was standing in front of the Chairman, those intense sessions had provided the right answers to virtually any conceivable question the Chairman was likely to ask.

Why have a Murder Board?

This painstaking practice session, no less important in a business presentation with millions of contract dollars at stake, has two overriding objectives:

1. Hone delivery skills
2. Anticipate probable questions and objections so succinct, accurate answers can be developed.

Many presenters, while accepting the need to sharpen delivery skills, reject the idea of a Murder Board, confident they can anticipate the difficult questions likely to be asked, and need not practice in front of others, especially their peers. These people may actually be displaying a false bravado to mask their discomfort at speaking in front of a group, perhaps exposing their lack of skill in the presentation art.

They are also very mistaken. I have given more than 2000 presentations, and always find it beneficial to conduct a Murder Board before an important talk. No matter how hard we try to think of tough questions that may be asked, a little censor in our mind generally provides only questions to which we already have answers. We need other minds to assist us.

I am in good company in believing in the need to have such a practice session in front of others who are role-playing the audience to be faced. The man who possessed perhaps the greatest mind of the 20th Century, Albert Einstein, realized that even he needed help. He once said:

"What a person does on his own, without being stimulated by the thoughts and experiences of others, is even in the best cases rather paltry and monotonous."

The Murder Board is the presenter's version of the actor's dress rehearsal, what lawyers do in preparing a witness to face cross-examination in a trial, what the flight simulator is to the pilot.

Just as with the actor, the witness, and the pilot, this simulation permits the presenter to learn from his/her mistakes, so that the actual presentation is (1) more responsive to the informational needs of the audience,(2) answers are developed for likely questions to be asked, and (3) overall speaking confidence and competence enhanced.

The Murder Board enables you to visualize the presentation in advance. Not only is proficiency in speaking increased by such a meticulous practice, so too is self-confidence.

Public speaking ranks high in the pantheon of phobias because of apprehension that one is going to be embarrassed by not being able to answer questions from the audience.

If you have been able to anticipate questions, then you can develop answers ahead of time. Think back to when you were in college or graduate school. Your GPA would probably have been higher if you could have seen the questions before the final exams. The Murder Board permits the presenter a look at the audience's probable "exam questions." The only obstacle to developing a question-anticipating simulated presentation is your imagination and willingness to take hard hits in practice so you can be more effective in the actual presentation.

Seven Steps to a Successful Murder Board

To have a successful and productive Murder Board enabling you to sharpen your skills and anticipate the difficult questions and objections, seven steps must be followed, and I teach them in my executive presentation skills workshop.. The steps are:

1. Recruiting
2. Sharing intelligence on the audience
3. Role-playing by participants
4. Video-taping and/or audio-taping
5. Critiquing of presenter's style and knowledge
6. Recording questions on 3x5 cards
7. Revising of the presentation

Let's take a brief look at each step.

1. Recruiting

Recruit people who also make presentations. Why? Because they will be able to relate to the challenge you face, and because of the principle of reciprocity. Tell those you wish to have in your practices session that if they help you now, you'll help them when their turn comes. The time they spend with you will then not be considered an expenditure; it will be viewed as an investment.

2. Sharing of intelligence on the audience

The people you've recruited need every bit of information you have collected on your audience—attitudes, prejudices, biases, knowledge of subject, listening style, tendency to interrupt, etc. If the presentation is within your organization, then the people you have recruited will have insights into the audience, and you must elicit this to add to your intelligence data base.

3. Role-playing by participants

Armed with this intelligence, your Murder Board is now ready to play the parts of key members of your audience. Assign the roles carefully; if a member of the actual audience is an aggressive questioner, pick a person with similar tendencies. You'll find that

participants will enjoy playing other people, and much more realistic, tougher questioning will be the result.

4. Video-taping and/or audio-taping

You want to be able to review the results of your Murder Board, and a video will give you a game film of your performance. You will be able to assess how you present, including mannerisms that may be distracting-- gestures, movements, expressions, etc. You'll also learn where to cut so you stay within time limits. Most importantly, you'll hear your voice as your audience will hear it. Are you speaking in a monotone? Are you saying "Uh" and "Y'know?"

5. Critiquing of presenter's style and knowledge

Before adjourning the Murder Board, ask for a critique of your performance and knowledge demonstrated of the subject. Keep the video-camera and tape recorder rolling during this session.

6. Recording of questions on 3x5 cards

When you review the video tape/audio recording of the session, place all the questions asked of you on one side of 3x5 cards, and the answers you gave on the other sides of the cards. Then play a version of flash cards. Select a card at random, read the question, answer it and then turn the card over to see how you originally answered it. Once you have tweaked and improved your answers, place them in a more permanent data base.

7. Revising the presentation

You'll undoubtedly find that questions from the Murder Board elicit vital information needed by your audience. You must include this new information, To avoid dropping out original data, place a time limit on your Murder Board that is less than the time you have been allocated for the actual presentation.

Follow the advice in this brief essay, as thousands of executives attending my workshops have done, and your audiences will think of you as a silver-tongued orator who can deliver brilliant and extemporaneous presentations effortlessly.

Let them think that. You will know that you are drawing on the "blood, sweat and tears" that went into your Murder Board.

Larry Tracy, author of *The Shortcut to Persuasive Presentations*, (Amazon.com), is a retired Army colonel described by President Ronald Reagan as "an extraordinarily effective speaker." He now conducts executive presentation skills workshops. Contact at him at (703) 360-3222, info@tracy-presentation.com. For free tips on presentation skills, visit www.tracy-presentation.com.