

*Successful Oral Presentations for Government Contracts*

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**By Lawrence L. Tracy**

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# **Successful Oral Presentations For Government Contracts**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the Federal Government has placed increasing emphasis on the "oral presentation" in awarding contracts. Additionally, many Government agencies, in their *Request for Proposal* (RFP), are stipulating that only those who will be working on the contract are to be involved with the oral presentation. This is obviously intended to permit Government agency evaluators to have an "eye-to-eye" meeting with those with whom they will be working, thereby resolving issues and questions before the contract is awarded.

This new emphasis on the oral presentation has not been greeted with universal acclaim by companies. Most have developed a skilled cadre of proposal writers, and probably feel a bit uneasy about having their economic future riding not on the demonstrated ability of these writers but instead on the verbal skills of engineers and technicians who have not been called on in the past to make marketing presentations. Now, however, the "doers" must become "sellers."

Some Government agencies have also instituted changes in the RFP with respect to how visuals will be employed. These agencies, probably realizing the persuasive capability of "PowerPoint" and other graphics programs, often require that only black-and-white overhead transparencies be used. This may not be good news for Microsoft and other software developers, but it is actually a compliment to the effectiveness of such programs. Evaluators in the agencies imposing this restriction may believe they will be able to concentrate more on the substance and recommendations of the presentation if black-and-white overheads are used, and not be swayed by the remarkable features of computer-generated visuals.

Another restriction dealing with visuals can be counterproductive. The company bidding on the contract, or more likely the group of companies combining their talents into a consortium, are sometimes required to submit the overheads approximately two weeks before the actual presentation. Evaluators want to have a "heads-up" on the direction the presentation will take, and to see how it tracks with the already-submitted written proposal. Unfortunately, this early delivery may inhibit the synergistic creativity that can be generated in the run-up to the presentation by people from the diverse backgrounds found within a consortium. Thinking may

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be "frozen" to the submitted overheads. Both the Government and the consortium lose if this happens, as excellent ideas may not be included in the presentation if they were developed after the visuals were sent to the Government. A way to lessen the impact of this problem will be shown later in this essay.

### **THE "TEAM" PRESENTATION: INDICATOR OF COMPETENCE**

Delivering an excellent oral presentation does not guarantee a company that it will be awarded the contract, but an indifferent, disorganized and unclear presentation can certainly undermine a company's chances. Evaluators from the Government have a responsibility to get the "best buy" for the taxpayer's dollar, and may, at least subconsciously, see a correlation between the effectiveness of the team's presentation and how the consortium will accomplish the requirements stipulated in the RFP.

Certain key questions will be in the minds of Government evaluators:

- *What is the chemistry between and among team members?*
- *Does the team have a clear vision of what the Government wants accomplished, or does the presentation suggest the team is still trying to figure out what is required by the RFP?*
- *Do the skills of the different companies and individuals complement or clash?*
- *Is the prime contractor really in charge, or do there appear to be some Prima Donnas among the sub-contractors, suggesting later friction?*
- *Does the presentation demonstrate that the consortium has the experience to accomplish the project required by the RFP?*
- *Is there a willingness of team members to accept Government oversight, or an attitude of "give us the contract, then get out of the way?"*
- *Most importantly, does the company/consortium seem genuinely interested in, and demonstrate proven capability to solve, the Government's RFP-expressed problem?*

Technical experts placed in the position of making the oral presentation must strive to demonstrate they are a confident (but not arrogant), competent, and coordinated "team." Forging this unity and cohesiveness is achieved with thorough planning and rigorous preparation, elements that are the center of my *Presentation Skills in a Nutshell* workshop.

### **WINNING CONTRACTS THROUGH THE "THREE P's"**

The heart of this workshop is what I call the Three P's—Planning, Preparing, and Presenting. I use this teaching model for both corporations and Government agencies, such as the Department of State's Foreign Service Institute, where I conduct advanced communication workshops for diplomats preparing to go to U.S. embassies. It is a flexible model that can be adapted to situations ranging from presentations to supportive audiences to those made to hostile groups

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that would rather jeer than cheer.

Let's take a very brief look at how this three-step approach can be adapted to the task of making a successful, contract-winning oral presentation.

### **PLANNING**

Read the RFP from the Government's perspective. The Government has written the RFP to solicit a solution to a problem, and is looking to the private sector for that solution. The Government agency also believes it has the ultimate responsibility to the taxpayers, and probably will not look kindly at the consortium that appears resistant to such oversight.

Involve senior management to gain commitment of resources/personnel. Both the prime contractor and the sub-contractors must be willing to expend resources necessary to win the contract. This commitment must be made by senior management of all involved companies, and include making key experts available when required for brain storming and practice sessions, even during the June-August vacation time frame.

Develop an overall theme that is responsive to the RFP. Think of this theme as the lead paragraph in an article in The Washington Post describing the program to be undertaken. In my workshop, participants learn to do this with the "3-1-2" method of "backward planning" that helps to develop focus and thematic unity. When this theme is developed, all presenters must coordinate their presentations with this theme to produce clarity, cohesiveness and consistency.

### **PREPARING**

*Get professional help.* The purpose of the Government's new emphasis on oral presentations is, of course, to have the people with in-depth knowledge make the presentation, not polished speakers who possess less-detailed knowledge of the RFP requirements. Still, the team of experts making the clearest and most professional presentation certainly increases its prospects of winning the contract. An outside speaking coach should be brought in to show the technical experts how to make a clear and effective presentation that focuses on the Government's needs. In addition to providing knowledge of the speaking art, this coach will be much more frank in providing constructive criticism to presenters than will co-workers, who, wanting to maintain positive working relationships, may be "kinder and gentler" in their critiques of presentations in the various "Murder Boards" (see below). The coach's objective is to blend the techniques of effective presentation skills with the expertise of the presenters. The fusion of these two elements produces contract-winning presentations. (Modesty precludes me from making a specific recommendation as to who this coach should be!)

*Solve the "early visuals" problem.* If the RFP stipulates that visuals must be delivered early, the potential problem of having the thinking and recommendations/solutions "frozen" to the overheads already sent to the Government agency must be taken into account at the outset. When the visual are being "built," they must (1) have the specificity to permit the evaluators to follow

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the presentation's general theme, main points, and recommendations, but (2) are sufficiently broad in scope to permit "fitting" in new ideas generated after the overheads have been submitted. One person should be the coordinator of the visuals to assure consistency.

*The "Murder Board,"* a realistic practice simulation with colleagues role-playing the Government agency evaluators, is the key to winning competitive presentations. These intense practice sessions permit presenters to improve their delivery skills and anticipate questions and objections of the actual evaluators. Some presenters will probably resist participating in such intense practice sessions, saying they do not require such play-acting. These confident (or fearful) people should be reminded of words of Albert Einstein: "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. If Einstein believed he needed outside stimulation for his best work perhaps these reluctant presenters can be convinced they may benefit from the crucible that is the "Murder Board." The various "Murder Boards" should be videotaped, and the videotapes critiqued with little mercy. The following four areas, concentrated on in the "Murder Boards," will pay-off in the presentation:

1. ***Hone the delivery skills of all speakers.*** The purpose of the oral presentation is to transmit, clearly and persuasively, the vision of the consortium as to how it intends to accomplish the RFP-expressed requirements. The technical experts making the presentation will concentrate on the What of the presentation, while the outside coach provides valuable insight into How the speakers communicate their ideas to the evaluators. Poor eye contact and body language, as well as poor vocal inflection, especially monotone delivery and "uh's" and "Y'knows," can negatively impact on the way a message is received. We like to think the lucidity of our presentation is more important than how we look and sound. Research has shown, however, the overriding importance of non-verbal communication on audiences perception of messenger and message. The outside coach earns his or her keep in showing how to blend Substance with Style.

2. ***Don't read from a script.*** One of the greatest speaking errors of people not accustomed to presenting is to read from a script. Little eye contact is made with the audience, and the thought may occur to the evaluators that this person is reading words written by someone else. Note cards—3x5 cards are best because their size precludes writing too much—with memory joggers can certainly be used, but speakers should show they "own" the material.

3. ***Don't read the visuals.*** The evaluators are literate and do not need you to read the words on the screen. Few things alienate people more in any audience than to have the speaker read verbatim the words on the visuals. Speakers should reduce to a minimum the text on the visuals during the various "Murder Boards." In my workshop, we spend considerable time learning how to streamline visuals. To avoid falling into the "reading from the screen" trap, try this drill that we practice in the workshop: Position yourself with your feet pointing at the audience, and at such an angle from the screen that turning to read will cause you discomfort. Don't make the pivot; keep those feet pointing toward the audience.

4. ***Use rhetorical devices to reinforce your message.*** Use of rhetorical devices can add impact to the intellectual content of the message, as well as increase retention by the audience. Start using them in the practice sessions, and you'll be quite comfortable in the actual presentation.

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Repetition of key points, done adroitly in cadences of three, has a remarkable ability to cause audience members to remember the speaker's remarks. The Pause, especially if it is used as a substitute for "uh" and "Y'know," likewise tends to reinforce the speaker's words and message. In my workshop I put special emphasis on learning these and several other techniques I call "Shortcuts to eloquence." Even inexperienced presenters, when they add these weapons to their speaking arsenal, will appear polished and articulate.

### **PRESENTING**

***"Case the Joint."*** If possible, the entire team should visit the room where the presentation will be made before the big day. Observe where the evaluators will sit, where the electrical outlets are located, if there are easels for flip charts (if permitted by the RFP.). If the room lacks curtains or blinds, will sunlight at the time you are scheduled to present wash out the visuals? Because you wish to neither wash out the visuals nor plunge the room into total darkness, can lights immediately in front of a built-in screen be turned off separately? If driving, determine the traffic and parking availability at the time you will be arriving for the presentation.

***Bring your own projector (and screen if necessary).*** Overhead projectors vary in how they operate. A team that shows up with its own projector (and a spare bulb) sends a signal that it "has its act together," and certainly will know how the projector works. Conversely, a team that does not know how to operate the Government's projector, or that is faced with a blown projector bulb, will appear unprepared. Be ready for the little problems created by visuals, as Murphy's Law has not been repealed. Bringing your own portable screen will permit you to avoid being forced to project your overheads on a built-in screen in front of a bank of lights.

***Handling the "I forgot what I was going to say" problem.*** One of the reasons that speaking in front of a group is the number one fear in America is the certainty many people have that their mind will go blank at a critical time. That is why so many make the mistake of reading their presentations. You can control this fear with just two 3x5 cards. On one card place an anecdote, quotation or statistic relative to the problem posed in the RFP. On the second card, place an outline of your presentation. If your mind goes blank, merely reach for the two cards together, and relate the information on the first card. You will probably recover from your temporary amnesia. If not, slide the second card to the front, and use it to see where you should pick up. The cards are "life preservers" when you are drowning in panic.

***Beware the perils of PowerPoint.*** If you are permitted to use PowerPoint or a similar program, don't let yourself or your team be carried away by ringing all the bells or tooting all the whistles available. Keep these visual as simple as possible so you gain the advantage they provide, while avoiding having the brilliance of the visuals overwhelm the substance of the presentation. You want the audience to remember your recommendations, not how arrows flew in from different sides, and the "creative" use of colors.

***Stand while presenting.*** Inexperienced presenters will prefer sitting while making the presentation. It may be more comfortable, but the presenter who stands has better presence, better voice control, better eye contact. All "Murder Board" presentations should be made

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standing to help presenters get used to "being on stage."

***The Question & Answer session.*** The RFP generally calls for a Q&A session for clarification purposes after the formal presentation. Unless the evaluators say they wish to direct their questions to specific team members, the team leader from the prime contractor should quarterback this session, directing questions to team members according to their respective expertise. The stress level on presenters will probably be less during the Q & A session because it will take place within the more familiar conversational context. But don't be lulled into a false sense of comfort. Practice Q & A sessions should be an integral part of the "Murder Boards" so as to anticipate the type of question likely to be asked. The Q&A session is where the evaluators' doubts and questions can be resolved, key points driven home by the presenters in their answers, and the confidence level of the evaluators with the ability of the team to "do the job" increased.

### **SOME FINAL ADVICE**

The information included in this brief article is a bare bones outline of the training I provide in my workshop. Despite its brevity, the advice provided, I am confident, will help you to be more effective, persuasive presenters, a vital skill in business. Two statements, written many centuries apart, underline the eternal importance of speaking skills:

In his 1984 autobiography, Lee Iacocca wrote:

*"I've known a lot of engineers with terrific ideas who had trouble explaining them to others. It's always a shame when a guy with great talent can't tell a board or committee what's in his head."*

About 2500 years before Iacocca's observation, the great Greek statesman Pericles wrote:

*"Those who can think, but cannot express what they think, place themselves at the level of those who cannot think."*

Iacocca and Pericles have a warning for companies competing for contracts: "Terrific ideas" can easily be trumped by those who can "express what they think." If your competitors are improving the presentation skills of their technical experts because of the importance they attach to oral presentations, while you rely on your "superior" ideas, programs, and experience, you may find your firm losing millions of dollars. A small investment in presentations training, therefore, can pay large dividends when lucrative contracts are awarded.