Sure, presentations are about what a speaker says. But they’re also about how a speaker moves. By making adroit use of your body and the space around you, you can create a physical connection with the audience that will earn trust and inspire action.

by Nick Morgan

Can you believe how much time executives devote to speeches and presentations? Practically no one likes giving them—think of all the tedious hours spent preparing mind-numbing PowerPoint slides. Even fewer people like being on the receiving end—think of all those hours having said slides read aloud or explained in excruciating detail. And all for naught, really: study after study shows that presentations are a particularly ineffective way to transmit information, whether to colleagues, subordinates, or clients. People just don’t absorb much of what they hear.

So why do presentations persist? Because a good one, even if it ultimately conveys little detailed information, can have a powerful emotional impact. It can win people’s trust and motivate them to act, thereby sparking organizational insight and change. And on a personal level, the ability to move an audience can shape the trajectory of a manager’s career.
It's a pity, then, that few managers capitalize on the power of a speech or presentation, whether it's delivered to a large audience or to six people sitting in a conference room. The reason for their failure is simple but not obvious. After 17 years of working with hundreds of senior executives on their presentations, I have concluded that most speakers don't make the strong audience connection—visceral, personal, emotional—needed to inspire trust and action. Because of evolving cultural norms, audiences increasingly expect this kind of connection with business speakers. But they rarely get it, despite the adoption of techniques that have made speeches and presentations in recent years more conversational and engaging.

This powerful link with the crowd is what I call a "kinesthetic connection." Many good speakers will connect aurally with their audiences, telling dramatic stories and effectively pacing their speeches to hold people's attention. Others will connect visually, with a vivid film clip or with a killer slide that encapsulates an idea in a compelling way. Some do both. But few also connect kinesthetically.

What exactly do I mean by this? Kinesthetic speakers feed an audience's essentially primal hunger to experience a presentation on a physical, as well as an intellectual, level. Through an awareness of their own physical presence—their gestures, posture, and movements—and through the effective use of the space in which they give the presentation, kinesthetic speakers can create potent nonverbal messages that are consistent with and reinforce their verbal ones. At the same time, these speakers understand the audience's need to respond physically; they read those needs during a speech, and they react accordingly. By generating kinesthetic, aural, and visual stimuli, kinesthetic speakers create a rich sensory experience for their audiences. This is in sharp contrast to many presentations, which often send audiences into a state of what can feel like total sensory deprivation.

Many presentation techniques can help achieve the kinesthetic connection, but the speaker's very awareness of the kinesthetic element is the foundation for success. This awareness informs the entire process of giving a presentation, from content preparation to rehearsal and delivery.

The clearest immediate benefit of the kinesthetic approach is the increased likelihood that an audience will rally around and help implement the speaker's initiatives. But there are other benefits. For example, matching the audience's kinesthetic experience with the speaker's message infuses the presentation with a legitimate sense of authenticity, eliminating the watercooler cynicism that so often follows a senior executive's talk. Furthermore, an understanding of the kinesthetic aspect of speeches and presentations can be applied to a wide range of management communications—for instance, conducting a performance review with a subordinate or dining with a client—thereby enhancing an executive's overall leadership qualities.

Unrealized Potential

Think back for a moment to the last speech or presentation you gave. You may have stood behind a podium or, more likely, at the front of a dim conference room. In either case, you probably used visual aids such as charts or tables projected onto a screen from a laptop computer or an overhead projector.

You may have opened the presentation with a joke to get the audience's attention. Even if you had written out your entire speech beforehand, you undoubtedly worked to sound informal and conversational, possibly posing a few questions directly to the audience throughout the talk. You probably nodded and smiled, just like the speaking coaches and the how-to books suggest. You varied the volume and the speed of your delivery, and you paused for effect. And instead of standing stiffly in front of the audience, you moved back and forth between the podium and the screen, drawing people's attention to the key points of the slides.

At the conclusion, you may have tried to summarize the three or four points you hoped the audience would walk away with. After answering a few questions, you sat down, possibly to polite applause. Later, in the hallway, a colleague undoubtedly patted you on the back and said, "Good presentation this morning."

And it probably was a good presentation—one that squandered the opportunity of being a great presentation. You gave the audience an aural and visual experience designed to get its attention and hold it throughout the talk. A handful of people might even have remembered one or two of your key points the next day. But because you were unaware of the audience's kinesthetic needs and ways to meet them, you were unlikely to have made the strong connection that would win its confidence and commitment to act on your proposals.

The speech just described represents a presentation technique that is the product of continued refinement over the past 100 years. But that technique, evolved as it is, has never fully incorporated the change in audience expectations brought about 50 years ago by the advent of television.

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THE DOS AND DON'TS OF KINESTHETIC SPEAKING

DO...
- identify individuals who can serve as proxies for the whole audience.
- vary the distance between yourself and the audience, moving into the personal space of proxies to recount an anecdote or to make a plea.
- ensure that your physical moves are in harmony with your verbal message.
- prepare your own presentations so your physical moves don't betray inauthentic content.
- read and respond to the nonverbal cues of audience members.

DON'T...
- speak generally to the entire audience for long periods.
- repeatedly move back and forth between the podium or slide projector and the screen.
- turn away from the audience to cue up your next slide while still speaking.
- fidget away your nervous energy.
- count on the audience remembering more than one or two of your main points.

America's business presentations. The candid personal disclosure that people have grown to anticipate when they are so close to a speaker wasn't made part of most corporate speeches. After all, no self-respecting CEO was about to pattern his or her presentations after a Jerry Springer show.

This leaves us with some unsettling disparities. There is the disjunction between the trappings of traditional public speaking—the podium, the large auditorium, the stage, the lighting—and a style of discourse that is now more conversational than declamatory. Even more significant, a yawning gap exists between an audience's ingrained expectations, shaped by its experiences with television, and the behavior of most business speakers. Even in the relatively intimate setting of a small conference room, the typical speaker is kinesthetically disconnected, even if he or she isn't physically distanced from the audience. Instead of occasionally moving toward the audience to establish a personal connection, speakers usually move back and forth between the podium or projector and the screen in a hypnotic, solipsistic routine in which they might as well be talking to themselves. The audience sits in mostly suspended animation through this faux-kinesthetic routine until the question-and-answer session at the end, when attendees are offered a brief chance to move and perhaps even to speak.

Also, while the speaker's tone may be more conversational these days, the audience's intuitive expectation of a personal message delivered at close range usually goes...
unfulfilled. With the lights turned low so that slides can be seen, with little kinesthetic stimulation from the speaker, and with little opportunity for the audience to respond in turn, the crowd will gradually tune out. The overall, if unintended, effect is to disconnect the speaker from the message, the message from the audience, and the audience from the presenter's desired action—the main reason for the communication in the first place.

**Harnessing Kinesthetic Power**

The value of kinesthetic speaking can be illustrated by comparing the speaking styles of two well-known management thinkers and frequent speakers: Gary Hamel, author of such books as *Leading the Revolution* (Harvard Business School Press, 2000), and James Champy, coauthor of *Reengineering the Corporation* (HarperBusiness, 1994), among others.

Champy is an interesting case because he breaks most of the rules of good public speaking. His presentations are low-key, with understated gestures and a narrow emotional range. Given by almost anyone else, they might be considered downright boring. But his style is ultimately effective because he's one of the few speakers who combines one-on-one conversations with audience members and good kinesthetic choreography. Champy closes the distance between himself and the group at just the right times to reinforce the points he is making. He can do this in part because he's not hampered by having to walk people through a lot of slides, which he uses to a minimum.

Hamel, by contrast, is a high-powered and effective speaker—who fails to capitalize on the potential of making a kinesthetic connection. He is very good at taking an audience on an emotional journey—for example, convincing a group of *Fortune* 1,000 managers that they are "toast" because they can't adapt fast enough, then leading them from despair to possible salvation by adopting his ideas. But Hamel's only connection with the audience is his trenchant analysis of its plight. He makes virtually no effort to connect with audience members kinesthetically; he simply offers them the opportunity to listen to what he has to say. So his presentations are bravura intellectual performances—but not as effective as they would be if Hamel delivered his message with his body as well as his mind.

How can a speaker like Hamel connect with his audience kinesthetically—how can he walk the walk, as well as talk the talk, of persuasive communication—and thereby elevate an already powerful presentation?

The most obvious place to start is with basic body language. For example, the kinesthetic speaker should use gestures that create a connection with the audience, ones that reach toward the crowd and open up the speaker to his listeners. Conversely, the presenter should avoid any gestures that might inadvertently set up a barrier. Two obvious examples are spreading the arms in receptiveness or crossing them in defensiveness; experienced colleagues and books on public speaking are good sources for other examples. The kinesthetic speaker must also become aware of unintentional or nervous mannerisms. Given the powerful impact of all things kinesthetic on an audience, annoying activity of this kind will not only distract the audience from the speaker's message but also fray whatever connection the speaker has made with the group.

Posture is also important. I recently saw the chief executive of Qualcomm's Japanese division, Ted Matsumoto, speak to a small group of industry analysts and customers. The subject was the company's controversial position on third-generation wireless phone standards, which is at odds with the rest of the industry. Absolutely passionate about his message and aware he was facing a tough crowd, the CEO delivered his forceful and animated speech while leaning so far forward into the audience from his position at the front of the room, he looked like he might fall over. The kinesthetic message was, "I really want to reach you." While attendees may not have been immediately converted to Qualcomm's position, Matsumoto had won their trust and had established with the audience, at the least, that Qualcomm was a serious player in the standards wars.

But the speaker uses more than just his body to create a kinesthetic connection, he also uses the space in which he is presenting. This involves more than simply walking back and forth across the stage or diving into the audience like an afternoon talk show host. Although the aim is to make a personal connection with the audience, the speaker clearly doesn't achieve this by spending the entire presentation talking right in the audience's face.

Rather, he needs to choreograph the speech and delivery so that any movements are appropriate to the content in that portion of the presentation. Research has found that people behave and relate to one another differently depending on how close they are to one another. In Western culture, if there is more than 12 feet between people, that is considered public space; anywhere from 12 feet to four feet is considered social space; and the area from four feet to roughly 18 inches is considered personal space. Anything closer is considered intimate space. Thus, the personal parts of a presentation—for example, recounting an anecdote or making a plea for each individual's support—will be reinforced if the speaker moves into the audience's personal space.

Clearly, the speaker can't have a personal encounter with an entire audience. So he should choose one or more

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**ALIGNMENT OF A SPEAKER'S ACTIONS WITH HIS WORDS REINFORCES THE MESSAGE HE IS TRYING TO CONVEY.**
"proxies"—individuals throughout the audience who serve as representatives for the others. When he breaks into the personal space of this proxy and makes a one-on-one connection—possibly even intensifying the movement through an action, such as handing that person something—the entire audience feels it.

A classic example of this from the political realm was Elizabeth Dole's extraordinary speech in support of her husband Bob Dole's presidential nomination at the 1996 Republican convention. She began her speech in a traditional way from behind the podium. But she electrified the crowd by leaving the stage and going down to the front row of the audience to hug a few friends strategically placed there. Those friends became proxies for the rest of the audience and gave her presentation a power that few other convention speeches have matched since. Indeed, talk of her own candidacy for president gathered momentum after that night. Note that her speech did not affect the TV audience as profoundly, because close-up camera work already gave those viewers the illusion of a personal relationship with Elizabeth Dole.

The social space is used to deliver somewhat less personal messages, such as the description of a problem shared by the entire audience, while the public space is even more impersonal and might be used, for example, to lay out the overall topic of the presentation. Speakers typically shouldn't violate the audience's intimate space, which people usually limit to family members and loved ones.

Choreographed movements throughout a presentation, like changes in the volume of a speaker's voice or the variation in a series of slides, provide the stimulation that helps keep an audience engaged. They also punctuate the presentation by signaling changes in content and by highlighting the most important points, giving the audience the helpful signposts so often lacking when words are spoken rather than written.

But perhaps most important, the alignment of the speaker's actions with his words reinforces the message he is trying to convey. The advice of Shakespeare's Hamlet to the traveling players—"Suit the action to the word, the word to the action"—is as valid today as it was 400 years ago. And when there is a disconnect between the speaker's verbal message, no matter how clearly conveyed, and his or her kinesthetic message, the audience always takes away the primal, more powerful kinesthetic communication. That is why employees often respond so cynically to business presentations by their leaders: even

The illusion of physical closeness conveyed by television has created in all audiences an expectation of intimacy from a speaker.

if a manager is sincere in what he says, a clashing kinesthetic performance will make his words feel inauthentic. In such a case, the speaker certainly won't have won the audience's trust, much less an enthusiastic response to his call to action.

Connect with the Content

It is tempting to reduce the notion of kinesthetic speaking to a checklist of speech-making gimmicks: button your suit jacket in a commanding way as you approach the podium; occasionally pause for two seconds as you eye the crowd confidently; keep your palms pointed toward the audience to increase credibility. In fact, people often cite research concluding that an audience primarily uses visual cues to interpret a speaker's message. But using such research to argue that the speaker needn't worry about what he says as long as he looks good doing it misinterprets the findings, which actually assume that the audience has absorbed the literal meaning of the speaker's words.

Indeed, while specific presentation methods like those just mentioned have their place, they have little impact when they aren't linked to the content of a presentation. And gestures and actions should not only be used to
reinforce content, they should also inform its development. When preparing a presentation, the speaker should be aware of the kinesthetic needs of an audience and then structure his speech with them in mind.

Because an audience is most open and eager to make a personal connection at the beginning of a presentation, seize that moment. Don't waste this opportunity with a joke or a rhetorical question, which may serve as an attention-getter but is unlikely to forge a connection. Instead, open with what I refer to as a personal parable. This is an anecdote, preferably involving the speaker, that embodies in miniature the presentation's overall theme. And it needs to be told in the personal space of selected audience members—both because it would seem awkwardly distant to tell it from behind a podium and because at this point in the presentation the audience wants to feel the speaker's physical presence.

The parable must be crafted with enormous care so that it is personal without being intrusive or mawkish. I once worked with a management consultant who lectured to audiences about the need for agile workplaces that could respond quickly to fast-changing business conditions. His presentations were not very effective. Afterward, attendees would say, "It's all very well as an idea, but it's one thing to talk about it and another to do it." Then the consultant incorporated into the presentation a personal story about his father being laid off late in his career as a banker in small-town Connecticut. The consultant's father just couldn't adjust to being unemployed; every morning, he dressed in his three-piece suit and drove downtown as though he were still going to work.

The shame and misery that the consultant experienced watching his father's near-delusional behavior created a powerful image of a danger we all face: not being able to adapt as the world changes around us. After the consultant had modified his presentation so that it began with this story, told at close range to individuals, he always established a strong and immediate kinesthetic connection with his audience. And there were no more questions about talking versus doing, even though the rest of his speech remained the same.

After establishing a kinesthetic connection at the beginning of a presentation, the speaker needs to respect the audience's need for a varied kinesthetic experience. Besides providing a physical ebb and flow, a choreographed presentation helps delineate for the audience what could be an undifferentiated mass of information.

Typically, the speaker needs to draw back after the intensity of the opening and lay out—in the public or the social space, depending on the issues involved—the problem that the presentation addresses. This gives the audience some almost literal breathing room. It also gives the speaker the chance to provide selective data—not so that the audience will retain it but so that the group will trust that the speaker is well versed in the topic and has information to support the solution that he will propose. Having established a personal connection with the presenter, the audience is likely to be more tolerant of efforts to outline what may be fairly complex or even somewhat dry information. And that information will, in any case, be enriched by the overtones of the speaker's earlier personal story and by the residual energy of the speaker's previous close interaction with the audience.

In the next stage of the presentation, the kinesthetic speaker makes selected forays back into the audience's personal space. There, he lays out a solution to the problem described and, by tentatively reentering that personal space, encourages individual audience members to own the solution. Finally, the kinesthetic speaker deliberately confronts the audience at close range and challenges each person in the group to work to implement the solution. This may involve asking audience members to actually take immediate physical action—for example, introducing themselves to their neighbors and pledging to do three things in response to the speaker's call to action.

**Delivering a Compelling Q&A Session**

There are some specific techniques that kinesthetic speakers can use in the question-and-answer session that follows many presentations. As audience members pose their questions, move toward them to establish a personal relationship. After a question has been asked, move away and repeat or rephrase the substance of the question so that everyone understands it.

Then, from your position at some distance from the questioner, make eye contact with her and answer.

This basic plan can be varied. For instance, you might want to stay in the personal space of the questioner if you see the need for a follow-up question or a dialogue involving a series of questions and answers. But moving away from the questioner is usually important because it broadens the question and helps to keep the entire audience involved with your answer. Moving away also allows you to control the ebb and flow of questions and to cut off an unruly or unrelenting questioner by moving on to someone else.

One minor but essential point: don't cross your arms defensively as soon as you say, "Thanks. Any questions?" I have seen literally hundreds of speakers do that because they no longer have the security of their prepared remarks.
In the above scenario, when the speaker is in the audience’s personal space, the message is personal, involving either the presenter or audience members. Because few business speakers are trained actors, that message must be sincere if it is to come across as authentic and have an impact. For example, if a speaker’s personal parable isn’t one that he is truly passionate about, kinesthetic cues will betray his lack of comfort with it. If the speaker is sincere, the audience will know it. Because the parable told by the consultant whose father was laid off was heartfelt, he did more than get the audience’s attention; he won its trust.

For a speaker to feel personally committed to the content of a presentation, he must develop it, if not actually write it, himself. The business speaker who takes remarks and slides crafted by the corporate PR department, replete with the latest buzzwords and corporate clichés, typically will get from the audience the same degree of commitment that he devoted to developing the presentation.

**Walk the Walk**

Just as you can’t be an effective kinesthetic speaker in a content-free vacuum, you can’t prepare a kinesthetic presentation alone in front of a mirror. You need a flesh-and-blood audience, usually consisting of a few trusted colleagues or subordinates, who can react viscerally to your presentation and respond with suggestions. Often businesspeople don’t rehearse their presentations because, used to working with their minds rather than their bodies, they don’t see any need to. If there’s a run-through at all, it typically focuses on the mechanics of slides and lighting and so on.

A rehearsal audience can immediately spot problems, some of them fairly mundane: nervous tics, aimless pacing, too few or too many hand gestures. An inexperienced speaker may revert to a kinesthetic default mode when the adrenaline kicks in. For example, an executive may tend to shift his weight from one foot to another. But if he knows he’s doing it, he can figuratively nail his feet to the floor and convert all the energy going into this Saint Vitus’ dance into effective gestures, an urgent speaking tone, or simply a highly animated presence.

A dry run can also highlight inconsistencies between the speaker’s verbal and nonverbal messages. For example, a rehearsal audience will quickly point out that the speaker doesn’t need to be right on top of people to say, “Production of widgets is up 8% this year.” But he does need to get closer to say, “I need your help to turn things around, and I want you to do the following.” Furthermore, actually rehearsing the presentation rather than merely thinking it through can uncover moments of kinesthetic truth: instances when words and actions are aligned in such a compelling way that the only response from an audience will be awed silence.

Sometimes rehearsing can go beyond fine-tuning a presentation to rescuing what might otherwise be a disaster. A consultant brought in to provide marketing advice to a faltering European division of a multinational company was several days away from delivering a presentation to the division’s top management team. The chief executive, a man who made it clear that he believed a woman’s sole role in the workplace was as a secretary, had so far refused to take advice from the female consultant. Moreover, he had mercilessly criticized her in meetings with the management team. During rehearsals of her presentation, a colleague played the chief executive. It soon became clear that the female executive was telegraphing her discomfort with the man by not facing him directly, avoiding eye contact, and sometimes even sitting down so as to be physically lower than he was. When this was pointed out to her, she replaced her submissive kinesthetic behavior with strong, confrontational behavior. During the live performance, the chief executive crumbled quickly, as most bullies do, and ultimately took her advice quite weekly.

By the time a speaker gets in front of the real audience, the difficult kinesthetic work has been done. Now comes a crucial shift: in the presentation itself, the kinesthetic speaker must forget about himself or herself and focus on the audience’s physical presence. The speaker must read the audience’s nonverbal cues along four continua: open/closed, engaged/disengaged, allied/opposed, and committed/uncommitted. By closely reading the audience, the speaker can adjust to it accordingly. He might stay in the “statement of the problem” section of his presentation if he sees that the audience is not yet allied with his point of view. Or he might try to engage the audience more personally if he sees signs of disengagement, such as people stirring in their chairs. Of course, the audience’s signals can be positive, too. When a speaker is connecting kinesthetically, the audience’s delight at getting something it so rarely does will become plainly apparent. This can actually create a virtuous cycle in which the speaker, encouraged by the response, becomes even more effective in creating a connection.

But the speaker can do more than read an audience’s cues; he can allow the audience itself to become active. This is usually most effective when, at the end of the presentation, the speaker underlines his call to action by requesting an immediate response from the audience, such as the pledge described earlier. But the speaker can also offer the audience—or a proxy for the audience—the chance to move, perform a task, or simply hold an object at any time during a presentation.

Consider one consultant who advised companies on the challenges of integrating two distinctly different corporate cultures following a merger. He knew that huge problems typically loom in such situations but that managers usually don’t appreciate the magnitude of the integration process. So when the consultant addressed these executives at a presentation, he sought a way to deliver his message kinesthetically as well as verbally.
When audience members arrived at their seats, they found individually wrapped presents on their chairs. The audience was told not to open them, and the consultant began his talk. After laying out the problem for the executives, he asked them to unwrap their presents. Half of them were toys made by Mattel, many of them garishly painted action figures, reflecting the hard-driving company’s aggressive marketing focus. The other half were toys made by Fisher-Price, many of them teaching toys designed in primary colors, reflecting the cautious company’s quieter educational focus.

These were the products of two companies—two cultures—that merged in 1993. The managers were asked to work out an integration plan for the two organizations, including the new toy lineup for the first year of the merged enterprise. Giving the executives the kinesthetic experience of opening the presents and handling the toys provided a vivid illustration of the problem facing the companies and immediately engaged them in thinking about the issues involved.

A Matter of Trust

Many principles of kinesthetic speaking can be applied outside the auditorium or conference room. As people become better speakers, they become increasingly aware of their own repertoire of kinesthetic messages, which they constantly send out in their dealings with others. And good kinesthetic speakers learn to avoid sending mixed messages in all their communications, removing a significant obstacle to their achieving management goals.

But in the end, the principles have their greatest impact during formal presentations. That’s because it is usually harder to connect kinesthetically with an audience than with an individual sitting on the other side of a desk. Furthermore, the stakes are usually higher in presentations, where dozens or even hundreds of people will walk away with an impression of the speaker that could linger in their minds indefinitely—sometimes for all the wrong reasons.

This observation isn’t meant to sow widespread panic among business speakers. In fact, the general standard of speaking is currently so low that presenters can make nearly every kinesthetic error short of bursting into tears and still be seen to have given a workmanlike performance. But a weak presentation does represent a lost opportunity.

Trust is the basis of nearly any enduring business relationship, and it is a powerful force for motivating colleagues and subordinates—certainly preferable to the most obvious alternative, fear. A speech or presentation is a good vehicle for winning such trust from large numbers of people. It gives audiences a visceral feeling about a leader’s integrity and competence—something that can’t be reproduced in a teleconference or an exchange of e-mail messages. For a business executive to walk away from the chance to acquire something of this much value, when it is essentially there for the asking, is simply a shame.

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"In your present employment as general manager, have you ever given someone the evil eye, hexed someone, or voodooed anyone?"