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Four communication lessons we learn from Casey Affleck's Oscar speech

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2017/02/27/four-communication-lessons-we-learn-from-casey-afflecks-oscar-speech/

February 27, 2017



Casey Affleck has delivered fine performances in the past, many as supporting roles. He was nominated eight years ago for “The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford,” but he has never portrayed a lead with such sadness, anger and depression as in “Manchester By the Sea”.

I watched his acceptance speech intently. It was a valedictory that serves as a reminder of Aristotle's lessons of rhetoric —the art of persuasive speaking and writing. Not commonly known, Aristotle was one of the first documenters of the communication techniques used by actors, identified as elements of persuasive communication that play out in three acts.

The first convinces an audience about your credibility and authority and therefore the veracity of your proposition, and helps your audience to **listen**. The second evokes a stirring emotional connection with what you're discussing and helps your audience to **care**. The third uses persuasion based on logics and facts and helps your audience to **believe**.

Now in 2017, we call these acts by many different names but the pattern remains the same according to a recent study from Transform Performance International. One says, “You sell to the gut of the audience, the heart, and then the brain—in that order.” Another tells us, “Before I can sell the logic, I must sell the emotion. To do either, I must sell myself.”

These three Aristotelian pillars support the chilling yet graceful elegy of loss and grief that *is* “Manchester By the Sea”, yet they can also make for a good business pitch; that the art of rhetoric is not only for Hollywood actors. If the templates and aids you use to prepare for your sales calls, presentations or negotiations don't remind you about Aristotle, you're missing a key part of the communication process that differentiates the best from the rest.

1. **Customers allow themselves to be influenced by people they like and trust**

Showing empathy is a foundation for building any type of social rapport. Smile when you walk in the door. Look your customer in the eye. Use the power of touch—even a handshake increases their perception of empathy. Listen actively. Continue eye contact, lean forward as they talk, making noises to acknowledge their words and head tilts to *show* you are listening. Remember the ‘silent movie’ of nonverbal communications often conveys more than the ‘talkie’. If you find it difficult to relate to a buyer, look for a common interest. Bonding with colleagues is why office workers talk about weekend sports, weather, or television on Monday mornings—these common experiences serve as a social leveller, identify you as being part of the same tribe, and build empathy. Do the same with your prospects and customers to be more influential.

2. **Be authentic and customer-centric.** Some office cultures hype salespeople into a narcissistic focus on awards, accolades and other bragging rights. It’s great to celebrate your own importance, but when you walk across the threshold of the customer’s lobby, you must engage the attitude that doing the right thing for your customer is your number one priority. Develop a genuine curiosity for how their business works. A good litmus test is to look back at your last client call, email, or presentation, and count the number of sentences or slides that started by talking about you and your opinions compared to the customer and their needs. It’s not uncommon to see sales presentations weighted 80 percent on the side of talking about the vendor. Flip that around and see what a difference it makes to the customer’s attitude. When you’re talking about yourself, the customer may feel you’re the most boring part of their day and keep checking their watch. Let them talk about themselves, however, and it’s not uncommon to see them extend the meeting. Remember it’s not your silver tongue that drives the sale—the tongue is merely a rudder to steer the conversation. Your ability to listen is the real engine that takes you places. The more you speak, the more you hear what you already know. The more you listen, the more you hear what you need to know. In the meantime, as you speak about the customers’ expectations, ensure that those have been well-understood because the only thing that is worse than a customer that does not feel heard is a customer that feels mis-heard.

3. **Influencers spend their time, emotion and energy focused on the things they can affect.** They don’t waste their reserves fretting over matters outside their control. When they experience obstacles and disasters, they step back, break the situation into its component parts, and sort it into four groups: what they can change using their own abilities (self-sufficiency), what they might change through the favour of another (asking for help), what they might do by combining resources with people (partnership), and what can’t be changed (force majeure). The first three approaches will solve most problems. Focus on what you can change. Make your influence felt there. You might not be able to stop world hunger, but you *can* buy a meal for the next beggar you pass on the street. You might not be able to win the whole sale today, but you *can* say or do something to nudge it nearer to the finish line. Influencers know that yard by yard, the sale is hard, but inch by inch, the sale’s a cinch.

4. **Apply the rule of reciprocity.** This is a tenet of social psychology that says people will give something back when you give something of value to them. The waitress who draws a smiley face or leaves some mints with your receipt is more likely to win a tip than one who doesn't. It's the old idea of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours", which the Chinese call *guanxi*—an informal system of looking after each other's interests by giving and receiving favours, which stops short of any impropriety. There are many things you can ethically give a customer that that holds value to them, such as saving them time, offering useful information, opening up resources to get things done, helping them look smart in front of superior or peers, or making introductions to people they want to know. Building reciprocity builds influence, and influence wins Oscars.

So the next time you watch "Manchester by the Sea", take a moment to consider how Affleck's performance can improve your technique, but be sure to credit Aristotle when you land that next successful deal!



Notes:

- *This blog post includes insights from the authors' book The Sales Persons Secret Code (LID, 2017)*
- *The post gives the views of its authors, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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Ben Laker is a Visiting Professor at Audencia Business School and the co-founder of the Centre for High Performance. He works with Apple, NASA and the New Zealand All-Blacks among others. His research has been featured in *The Harvard Business Review*, *The Economist*, *Forbes*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent* and on *BBC Newsnight*. Twitter @DrBenLaker

