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Using Improv Comedy's "Half-Life" Technique to Speak within Your Time Limit

Have you ever seen a speaker go over the allotted time limit? Or rush through the material when they realized they were running out of time?

What was your reaction to that speaker? Were you impressed?

I've seen speakers go over the time limit by five, ten or fifteen minutes and then look surprised when they have to be pulled off stage. And I've seen them speed up their rate of speech or flash through their last slides so fast that you can't see them.

I'm unimpressed. In fact, I'm offended. It's as if the speaker is saying to the audience, "What I have to say is much more important than anything else you might have to do or anything else any other speaker might have to say, so I'm going to blow the time limit and make you stay and listen to me."

If you are given a time limit, as a speaker it is your responsibility to cover your material within that time limit. In order to do that, you need to focus on your message and practice delivering your presentation within the time limit.

When I teach the "manage your time" topic in my workshops and coaching program, I use an exercise called "Half-Life," borrowed from my improv comedy team, World Class Indifference (www.worldclassindifference.com).

In this exercise, two people improvise a scene in 64 seconds, based on a suggestion of a location from the audience. Then the actors repeat the same scene in HALF the time (32 seconds) - rather than just talking faster, they have to cut out the extra material in the scene and focus on the essential elements. Then they do the same scene in 16 seconds and then in 8 seconds (and sometimes, if we're feeling lucky, in 4 seconds!).

In addition to the great fun of seeing pairs of people performing 8-second scenes simultaneously throughout the room, this exercise helps people see how editing can cut out the extra material so they can focus on the message within the time limit. When the timer starts beeping, there is no extra time.

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When I demonstrated this exercise with a class a few weeks ago, the 64-second scene was set in New York City, between a taxi cab driver and a potential passenger (me). We had a long discussion as to how I had arrived in New York, what sights I should see, whether I should take the cab or walk to the sights, how I was going to pay for the cab, what currency was accepted, etc. Yes, 64 seconds is a lot longer than you think!

By the 8-second version of the scene, we had edited it down to its essential elements: I had landed at JFK Airport, the taxi driver was going to drive me to the Empire State Building and we were going to stop at an ATM to get cash. The extra material, the fluff, had been cut out because there was no time to waste.

This Half-Life technique works so well that I use it for all my own presentations and workshops - and it's become a verb, as in "Half-Life my presentation" or "Half-Life my slides." I edit down to the essential elements - the message - and cut out the extra material so I don't go over the time limit.

The next time you have to speak in public, Half-Life it. Whether you have to present at a staff meeting, introduce yourself at a networking event or leave a voicemail for a potential client, practice cutting your material in half until you are covering the essential element, the message, within the time limit.

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