

Tracy Presentation Skills

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Two Essays on The “Murder Board”

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Biography of Larry Tracy

Larry Tracy has been cited in publications such as the Information Please Business Almanac and What to Say When You're Dying on the Platform as one of the top presentation skills coaches in the country. He brings not just theory to his training, but very real "been there, done that" experience.

His book, The Shortcut to Persuasive Presentations, published by Imprint Books, Charleston, SC, and available for purchase from his website, distills the techniques he teaches in his executive workshops, including how to conduct a Murder Board to ensure delivering winning presentations responsive to the needs of the audience. It has been selected as the primary text for the Oral Presentations Course taught at the Center for Leadership Education of Johns Hopkins University.

President Ronald Reagan described Larry as "*An extraordinarily effective speaker.*" At the time, he was an Army colonel assigned to the State Department, debating controversial foreign policy issues throughout the country before skeptical and frequently hostile audiences. He formerly served as Chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency's Presentations Branch, the Pentagon's top briefing team, responsible for daily intelligence presentations to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Secretary of Defense, other Defense Department officials and Congressional staffs.

His photo was the cover of the July 2005 issue of Douglas Publication's American Speaker magazine, the leading publication on public speaking in the country. His speech "*Taming Hostile Audiences: Persuading Those Who Would Rather Jeer Than Cheer*" was the centerpiece of the issue, and described by editor Aram Baskian, Jr. as "*an outstanding speech...teaching a number of invaluable lessons in how to give a winning performance, even to the most hostile of audiences.*" The speech had originally been delivered in January 2005 to the Washington, D.C Chapter of the National Speakers Association, and was subsequently published in the March 1, 2005 Vital Speeches of the Day, along with speeches by President Bush and then-Federal Reserve Chairman Greenspan.

Larry's website, www.tracy-presentation.com, as of July 2006, has been in the number one position on Google for 21 consecutive months in response to the search for "Persuasive Presentations."

The Ultimate Presentation Practice: The Murder Board

By Larry Tracy
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What a name--the Murder Board! It 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 and 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 his 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.

What is a Murder Board?

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, and 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 or 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 are 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.

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 frequently includes 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 question the Chairman was likely to ask.

Why have a Murder Board?

This painstaking practice session is just as important in a business presentation with millions of contract dollars at stake. It 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 assuming they 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.

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."

In a follow on article, I'll outline the seven steps for a successful Murder Board.

Seven Steps to a Successful Murder Board

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In a previous article, I described the Murder Board, a rigorous simulation which allows presenters to hone speaking skills, and anticipate questions and objections. I compared it the pilot's flight simulator, in that it provided the presenter the opportunity to make mistakes when they don't count.

To have a successful and productive Murder Board, I teach in my executive workshops a seven step process to ensure a productive Murder Board. They are:

1. Recruiting
2. Sharing audience Intelligence
3. Role-playing by participants
4. Video-taping and/or audio-taping
5. Critique of presenter's Style and Substance
6. Recording on cards of all questions asked
7. Revision of the presentation

Let's take a look at each of these steps.

1. Recruiting

In recruiting people to be on your Murder Board, the best place to start is with knowledgeable colleagues. Request no more than four of these colleagues to be your simulated audience. Keep in mind, however, that if these colleagues think that the objective of the Murder Board is only to help you look good, they probably will not want to give up their valuable time. You must give them an incentive tied to their self-interest.

They will have their own priorities. You should frame your request in such a way that these colleagues see a potential dividend accruing to them by investing their time. Remember from earlier in the book, and from your own experience, that "What's in it for me?" is the prime motivator for people to take action. You must find a way to have these colleagues believe they will gain by being in your simulated audience.

Reciprocity is the key. My advice is to recruit only people who themselves must make presentations. Then you say, *"If you will be on my Murder Board now, I will be on yours when*

you must make a presentation." Presto. They see a potential benefit in the future by spending some time with you now.

Why only four people? One reason is to limit the debts you will have to pay in the future. You do not want to be spending all your available time being on the Murder Boards of others, and you certainly do not want to go back on your word. Another reason is that most audiences you will face have no more than four key people. Having more than four colleagues helping you could result in a less-than-productive bull session, not a question-anticipating Murder Board.

2. Sharing Audience Intelligence

Because the purpose of a Murder Board is to create an environment for the presenter similar to the actual situation to be faced, it is important that those playing the members of the audience be armed with as much information about this audience as possible. That is where the intelligence collection discussed in Chapter 6 comes into play.

Participants must be steeped in the details of the issue being presented so they can put themselves in the mental framework of these participants. Information on the personal styles, idiosyncrasies, temperament, etc. of these audience members provides insight into how they will react to certain comments or proposals. Your colleagues can better role-play if they have this information. The more you know about personalities, the less surprised you will be in the presentation.

If the presentation is to be made internally, say to a Board of Directors or a Committee, participants in this practice session are likely to have valuable information to share with the presenter and other participants. One of the reasons it is beneficial to recruit participants who present regularly is that they may have had the opportunity to present to the same people you are preparing to address. Colleagues can provide first-hand information on how your actual audience listens, questions, reacts, and interacts with fellow audience members.

3. Role-playing by participants

The success or failure of a Murder Board ultimately depends on its realism. The closer it is to the real thing, the better prepared will be the presenter. This realism, to a great degree, depends on the ability of your colleagues to get into the heads of the key players in your audience. This does not mean having a great gift for acting or mimicry; but it does mean trying to think like the people in the audience so that statements made by the presenter will provoke questions likely to be asked by the actual audience.

After sharing all the intelligence gained on the audience, and eliciting from participants any insights they have on these people, assign specific roles to participants. If you are presenting to senior executives, you most certainly want a person to play the key decision maker. If the CEO, for example, is an assertive person, try to have an assertive person play this role. If you know that the CEO tends to interrupt presentation with questions, request this role-player to do the same.

Remember that role-playing is very dependent on participants having, or having been provided, the most accurate and up-to-date intelligence on this audience. If they do not have this information, the Murder Board could degenerate into a joking session which may relax you somewhat, but will not help you as much as a rigorous, no-holds barred simulation of that moment of truth when you stand in front of the real audience.

4. Video-taping / audio-taping

The actual conduct of the Murder Board is likely to not run smoothly, with various interruptions and discussions. Moreover, the presenter cannot be expected to remember all the comments, bits of advice, and questions asked. Consequently, much of the spontaneous, valuable information could be lost, even if someone is taking careful notes. Consequently, it is beneficial to have both a video camera and a tape recorder running, during the practice presentation. This will provide a game film enabling you to see and hear yourself as your audience will see and hear you.

From the videotape you will learn if you are shifting from one side to the other, or grasping the lectern so your knuckles are white from pressure. Only when you see for yourself will you take corrective action. Having an audio tape of your presentation allows you to focus on those vocal qualities such as monotone, inflection, pitch, speaking rate, "uh's" and "you knows," discussed in Chapter 18. Because the eye is so powerful, you may not notice any vocal problems when looking at the video tape. The audio tape will allow you to concentrate on your vocal qualities.

Perhaps the fundamental benefit of recording the practice session is that you will have a record of the questions asked in the give-and-take of the presentation, as well as your answers. Without an electronic record, the questions provoked by your presentation, and your answers, could be lost, thereby negating the benefits of the Murder Board.

5. Critique of presenter's Style and Substance

You have now completed your Murder Board, and, in the process, have used the valuable time of your colleagues. Now is the time to ask them for a robust critique of the substance of your presentation and your delivery style. Keep the video camera and tape recorder rolling. These colleagues may be more expert in certain aspects of your presentation than you are, and you certainly want to tap into this expertise.

Additionally, they have just seen you presenting in a stressful environment -- presenting before your colleagues may be more difficult than before a Board of Directors -- and their comments on how you looked, how you sounded, and your overall presence can be invaluable. Thank them for giving up their time, and remind them that you are ready to pay back when their time comes to make an important presentation. You may wish to point out that you have indeed kept within the time limit promised, so that you establish a precedent for when your turn comes around to be a Murder Board participant.

6. Recording all questions asked on cards

Now it is just you, a VCR, a tape recorder and a stack of 3x5 cards. Why the cards? Because you are now going to go through the painful process of listening to how you answered the questions posed by your colleagues. Place each question asked on the front side of a 3x5 card. On the back - in pencil - place the answer you gave, or a better one if it occurs to you now, and it probably will. Why pencil? Because you are going to come up with better answers the more you think and research.

Reviewing the cards. When you are at home watching television, have that stack of cards nearby. When a commercial comes on the screen, select a card at random, look at the question, give an answer, and turn the card over. If your new answer is better than the one on the back of the card, make the correction. Go through this procedure a few times, seeking each time to improve your answer so that you not only address the specifics of the question, but also find ways to reinforce your main points.

Following this procedure will do much to remove the fear of the unanticipated question, which has such a direct influence on fear of public speaking. Keep the cards. Do not discard the cards after the presentation. They can serve as the foundation for your next presentation. If possible, catalog them by subject matter and place them in your database. When you are called on at the last minute to make a short presentation, this card file can be a lifesaver and a career-enhancer, as you can quickly build a new presentation around one or two old questions.

People will think that you are indeed a silver-tongued orator who can put together a well thought out and extemporaneous presentation at the last minute. Let them think that. You will know that you are drawing on the "blood, sweat and tears" that went into your Murder Board.

7. Revision of the presentation

Having completed your Murder Board, you are now faced with a dilemma. What do you do with all the new data generated by this most intense practice session? What if the audience doesn't ask the questions for which you have developed such great answers? Do you just leave this information in your files?

The answer is a resounding NO. Remember, your responsibility as a presenter is to provide maximum relevant information in minimum time in the clearest manner possible. You must make a judgment as to which information best fits your objective and the informational needs of your audience. Some of the material you had originally had in your presentation may well have to be dropped, replaced by information that surfaced as a result of questions and discussions in the Murder Board.

An approach I have found useful is to time the Murder Board to be somewhat shorter than the time allocated for the actual presentation. This permits a time cushion that allows you to add new material without deleting too much of your original presentation.

It is best to schedule the Murder Board at least two days prior to the actual presentation so you have enough time to revise it to reflect the changes dictated by the questions and comments of your colleagues. This will allow you to integrate the new information and answers that came about as a result of your practice session, and to develop new visuals, as well as giving you the opportunity to practice delivering the revised presentation.

The bottom line on the Murder Board

You need to conduct a Murder Board for the same reason that professional football teams, despite having injured players who could benefit from a rest, go through physically demanding practice sessions before the next game. These athletes and their coaches realize the team will be better prepared by having practiced against what the coaches have anticipated, through scouting reports, the game plan of the opposing team. Presenters must follow the same logic.

It is foolish to deliver a "chips on the line" presentation without going through an intense Murder Board. The wise presenter realizes that he or she should put as much effort into the presentation as has been put into the product or service being sold.