

Presentation Emergencies ...

What to do When Things go Wrong

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Always hope for the best, however, be prepared for the worst. This is good advice for preparing for any presentation. By being prepared for things that may go wrong, your presentation will go on without skipping a beat.

Here are some common mishaps and how to overcome them.

- 1. Your computer or projector does not work.** If any part of your technology fails, don't spend half of your presentation time trying to fix it. When the attendees arrive for the meeting this is not the time for a dress rehearsal. They are in their seats and ready to go. Respect their time by starting on time. If your computer or projector fails, go on without it. You can always refer them to the handouts and/or offer to get them slides after the presentation. To overcome this situation, always have a backup of everything you will need. When we deliver our presentations we bring an extra computer, extra cables, extra clicker and even an extra LCD projector. If you don't have all of these, ask the meeting planner if they can have backups available. We also suggest you get to the room at least 2 hours before your presentation to have a run through with all the equipment. If something goes wrong you will have ample time to fix it and will be ready to start when the attendees arrive.
- 2. Your slides are unavailable or not working.** We suggest that you send a copy of the slides to the meeting planner in advance and suggest they put it on their computer. We also recommend that you have your slides on your computer, on a thumb drive and a CD. Also, have a hard copy of your presentation on paper. If all else fails you can have the attendees follow the handout. If you are traveling don't put all of your backups in the same place. Make sure to have one thumb drive on you, a CD in your luggage and your computer as a carry on.
- 3. Long winded speakers.** If the speakers in front of you tend to go over their time, be prepared to stay on time. You are a professional and it is important that you end on time. Adults are very focused on time and they will hold it against you. For example, in one presentation, Arnold was asked to deliver a one hour keynote for a large organization. The President of the organization said to Arnold before he went on that he would like to say a few words. His few words lasted about 30 minutes. Since Arnold's presentation was the start of an all- day meeting, everything needed to be on schedule. Since going overtime is a common occurrence, Arnold was prepared to shorten his presentation and quickly took out a couple of points. Needless to say the timing of the meeting was back on track and the meeting planner was very appreciative. Assume people will go overtime and be ready to adapt.
- 4. Venue Change.** The room or seating arrangement is different than what you expect. One of the advantages of getting to a meeting room early is that you can

make changes. There is a saying, “Ask forgiveness, not permission.” When you arrive at the meeting and the chairs are not set up the way you want just go ahead and change them. If they change the room on you at the last minute, be prepared in advance for this possibility and practice in small and large rooms.

5. **Hecklers.** These are people who have their own agenda. They want attention, want to prove you’re wrong, are insecure and want to look good or are just having a bad day. The best approach is to acknowledge them and their questions or comments. Then mention to them that it is either off track or give them a short answer if the comment is relevant. Offer to meet with them after the session to answer any questions or concerns they may have. Remember, if the meeting gets out of control because of a heckler the attendees blame the speaker for not keeping it moving along. See the chapter on Dealing with a Disruptive Audience for more tips.
6. **Surprise Interruptions.** This could be anything from a fire drill to a hastily called staff meeting to someone getting sick. Arnold had a situation like this recently where he was scheduled to deliver an all- day seminar. As he arrived he was told that there was a last minute all hands meeting scheduled for the day. Everyone would be out for 2 ½ hours. Instead of panicking, Arnold reworked his presentation and shortened parts of it. Also, instead of going over some of the things or doing an exercise, he skipped the exercise and told them to read specific chapters in his book... Interruptions are also a good place for humor. For example, if the fire drill goes off you can say, “I know it was one of you who pulled this to get out of this class” or if a cell phone goes off you may ask everyone, “Please raise your right hand, that’s the hand to slap someone if their cell phone goes off.”
7. **Someone is sleeping or needs to walk out.** Let it go. Don’t call attention to it. You never know what is happening in other people’s lives. They may have had a problem with their spouse or child and have been up all night. There might be a problem with a family member or they are awaiting a very important call. For example there was one instructor who noticed someone sleeping during his presentation. The instructor went over to the person and started shaking them, telling them to wake up. The person eventually woke up. However on further research they found that the person had narcolepsy, which is a sleeping disease.
8. **Only a few people show up.** If you are expecting a large group and only a few people show up there are a number of things you can do. As soon as you realize that this is going to happen, get rid of some of the chairs. You can also put tape around the seats in the back of the room so no one sits there. If you can’t do either of these and everyone is sitting all over the room, you can either ask them to move forward or move towards them. However, be careful about trying to coerce people to sit in the front of the room, or move closer to you once they have already been seated. One of the reasons some people do not move to the front of the room is the same reason that most people do not like making presentations. In the front of the room, they feel like all of the eyes are on them.

There is also the possibilities that they would like to situate themselves in the back of the room for close access to the bathroom, or they may be expecting several telephone calls during the presentation and don't want to disturb others. It could also be a matter of timing, location or a host of other reasons. The bottom line is that you don't know why they are seated in the back, and if you try to force them to the front of the room once they have already sat down, you run the risk of embarrassing them and turning them off before your presentation begins. Also, don't take it personally when people don't show up. It is not necessarily your presentation. It may just be the timing, location or other things that are happening at the same time. This is something to consider when you do not have time to cordon off the seats in the back of the room.

9. **You're late.** For reasons out of your control you may be late for the meeting. If this happens, make sure you have the mobile phone of the person in charge. Call them immediately. Give them suggestions such as putting on the next speaker in your place or explain to them about an exercise they can do when you are not there. To make sure this does not happen always give yourself plenty of time to get the location. If you are flying, leave early the day before your presentation. If your plane is cancelled or delayed you can still go out on a later plane. If driving consider leaving the night before. Even if the presentation location is close, this is a wise idea. For example, we live in the Washington DC area. Even when a client wants us to speak at a meeting in Washington DC we stay at the hotel where the meeting is located. It just takes one traffic jam or road closure to make you late. We also recommend that when you do get to your location, call the meeting planner and let them know that you have arrived. It will take off some of the stress from them.

Arnold Sanow, MBA, CSP (Certified Speaking Professional) is a speaker, trainer, coach and facilitator. He is the author of 6 books to include, "Get Along with Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere" and "Present with Power, Punch and Pizzazz." He was recently named by successful meetings magazine as one of the top 5 best "bang for the buck" speakers in the USA.

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