

SKIP LEVEL

strategic leadership for leaders ready to think two levels up

EPISODE 138 · WORKSHEET

EPISODE 138

Tell the Story, Not the Spreadsheet

Victor, a director, walks into his quarterly review with the best presentation he has ever built — every number by heart, every chart clean. Ninety seconds in, the room is gone. This episode shows you what the top table actually decides on: not your slides, but the story your slides live in. Four steps: contrast, proof, ask, and repeat.

KEY STRATEGIES & IDEAS

1. Ninety Seconds In, the Room Was Gone

Victor is a director, and he walked into his quarterly review with the best presentation he had ever built. He had rehearsed it twice and knew every number by heart. Every chart clean. Ninety seconds in, the room was gone. The numbers were good. But a room full of senior leaders does not decide on numbers. It decides on a story. And Victor had not told one.

2. The Sparkline

Nancy Duarte found the shape. She studied hundreds of great speeches for her book Resonate, and underneath the great ones she found the same shape. She calls it the sparkline. You move back and forth between what is and what could be, and you end in a new bliss. The audience is the hero. You are the mentor. The contrast is the tension: what is hurts a little, what could be pulls a little, and a room leans forward into a gap it wants closed. A list of numbers has no gap. A story does. Duarte found the same shape in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and in Steve Jobs' iPhone launch. Same arc, every time. The gap stays open. Close it too early, and the room relaxes. Keep it open, and the room leans.

3. Proof in a Cereal Box

Here is the proof, and it comes in a cereal box. Three founders were forty thousand dollars in credit-card debt. Fifteen investors had passed. So they designed election cereal, Obama O's and Cap'n McCain's, and sold roughly thirty thousand dollars' worth at forty dollars a box, to stay alive. At Y Combinator, Paul Graham was skeptical — until one of the founders pulled out a leftover cereal box. His conclusion was simple. If they could get strangers to pay forty dollars for a four-dollar box of cereal, maybe they could get strangers to share a home. Y Combinator put in twenty thousand dollars for six percent. The story was the pitch — they brought the proof into the room.

4. One Sentence Can Carry the Shape

Sometimes the whole story is one sentence. Steve Jobs, recruiting John Sculley to run Apple, framed it as a choice. Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want a chance to change the world? What is, a life selling sugared water. What could be, a chance to change the world. It moved a decision — it did not guarantee the future. Two years later, the board sided with Sculley, and Jobs was out.

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5. The Story That Didn't Win the Room

A good story does not always win the room, and here is the honest counterweight. Howard Schultz went to Milan and saw espresso bars on every corner, baristas as craftspeople, regulars greeted by name. He came home and pitched the owners of Starbucks on serving coffee by the cup. They let him test it. Then they said no. He left, founded Il Giornale — Starbucks put a hundred and fifty thousand dollars into it — and bought the company back two years later. The story was right. The room still said no. The lesson is not that a good story always wins. It is what you do next.

The picture: Victor walked into his quarterly review with the best presentation he had ever built. He had rehearsed it twice. He knew every number by heart. Ninety seconds in, the room was gone — the senior leaders were checking their phones.

ACTION & REFLECTION STEPS

- [ ] **Step one — open with the contrast.** Say what is, in one sentence, then what could be, in one sentence. No background first. The contrast is the hook.

What is:

What could be:

- [ ] **Step two — bring the proof.** One piece of evidence the room can hold. Stephen Denning told a short, true story to the senior leaders at the World Bank. A highway team in Pakistan asked for help, and within forty-eight hours the best the Bank had was on its way back to the government. No plot. No turning point. A change already made, small enough to believe, big enough to imagine in your own world. Denning calls that a springboard story. That is the proof. One true story, already done.

The proof I will bring:

- [ ] **Step three — state the ask plainly, and early.** Not at the end, when the room has already decided. Say it in the first minute. The ask is the new bliss with a price on it. Here is what I need, and here is what happens when you say yes.

The ask:

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☐ **Step four — make it repeatable.** After you leave the room, someone else has to tell your story for you. If they cannot retell it in three sentences, it will not travel. So test it that way. Tell it to one person, and ask them to tell it back to you.

The three sentences:

Think two levels up. — Maya & Marcus

Joe Dutkiewicz

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