

A series of

Thought Papers from Brookings Executive Education

A Critical Question for Public Leaders: ‘Why You?’

By Allison Shapira

In my role as a public speaking expert, I travel around the world helping professionals find their authentic voice. Although people everywhere are afraid of public speaking, government leaders often have an advantage when it comes to oral communication. They are frequently driven by motivations greater than themselves: a sense of purpose in their work, service to their country and commitment to their community. These values are powerful, persuasive forces in a speech.

I ask public-sector leaders fundamental questions. “What gets you out of bed in the morning?” “What made you choose your line of work?” “Why do you do what you do?” In other words, “Why you?”

To answer the “Why you?” question honestly, professionals must put aside the bureaucracy of their job, politics of their cause and dysfunction of their office. They must determine the sense of purpose that guides their actions.

“So I can make more money.” “So I can get promoted.” “So I can look good in front of my boss.” Leaders don’t settle on these answers. Once they dig deeper for underlying motivations, their responses become more introspective and service-driven.

I once helped a midlevel manager prepare for an upcoming presentation. We engaged in a back-and-forth on “Why you?” that resulted in an aha moment.

“Growing up, my parents ran their own business,” she finally said. “Every single day, I saw them get up early to serve their customers and put other peoples’ needs before their own. I want my children to learn from my parents’ example. That’s why I do what I do.”

A lot of “Why you?” answers relate to family and early childhood. Some individuals may think it’s unprofessional to share a personal story in a business setting. People aren’t robots, however. They are human beings interacting with other human beings. When speakers share their personal stories, they connect with their audience.

One of the best places to address “Why you?” is in the beginning of a speech or presentation. Anecdotes encourage listeners to believe, “Yes, this person understands where I am coming from. I can trust this person.”

Establishing a “Why you?” has many advantages. For example, it enables individuals to speak in a language that sounds genuine — instead of parroting bureaucratic jargon. When people personalize their message, their sense of purpose animates their body and voice naturally.

Both young professionals and experienced executives confess to a lack of confidence when speaking. They worry, “What if others in the room know more than I do?” “What if the audience is questioning my authority to speak?” Voicing “Why you?” reinforces their credibility and authority.

A participant in one of my Brookings Executive Education courses said to me, “Even though I’m an expert, I’m constantly second guessing myself. I’m a scientist. All I can see is what I don’t know.”

Drawing on “Why You?” enabled her to build her confidence and, in turn, her courage to speak.

“Why you?” is the most critical question a leader should ask when preparing a speech, presentation or conversation. Answering the question centers, calms and helps leaders prioritize what’s most important.

Sometimes, “Why you?” can be hard to find. I coached a man who worked in real-estate development. He was an engaged, passionate individual with a fabulous sense of humor. But when he stood up to practice a presentation to a community board, he changed completely. His shoulders slumped. His smile drooped into a grimace. He sighed loudly while leaning on

one hip, and he weakly gestured at the slides behind him. He was afraid that he was a boring speaker. And, actually, he was.

Answering the question “Why you?” resulted in a startling realization.

It turns out, he hated his job. He mistrusted his boss. He didn’t like his industry. He wasn’t a boring speaker; he was just bored.

If speakers are bored with their subject or hate their job, they will have a difficult time delivering a heartfelt, authentic speech. They can change careers, as the man I referenced did. He quit his position and pursued his dream to revitalize an abandoned building in his city. Yet quitting a job isn’t always an option for individuals with kids to support and a mortgage to pay. For these professionals, a better way forward may be considering what they *like* about their work.

People can find their “Why you?” by reflecting on the following:

- Why they care about their audience or the occasion of the speech.
- Why they care about their subject or organization.
- Why their work makes them proud.

Sharing their sense of purpose helps speakers connect with their audience in more meaningful ways, establish trust and enhance the reputation of their agency.

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