

The key to connecting with others: Stop, look and listen

Charlotte Business Journal - by [Lou Solomon](#)

A large troupe of improv artists recently pulled off a stunt at Grand Central Station. More than 200 people were scattered across the main concourse, bustling like busy New Yorkers when, at exactly the same time, they became frozen like manikins. For the duration of the five-minute stunt, commuters stopped in their tracks and became mesmerized by that suspension of time.

When things stop, we notice. When there's a gap in the noise, we pay attention.

You have an opportunity to stop time as you step to the front of a room to speak. It is a crucial moment in which people perceive who you are. Here you can choose to stop, look people in the eye and make a connection before you open your mouth.

Or you can run to the front of the room, glance at the people nearest to you and hurry into the content. You can run your mouth through your entire presentation. With that approach, you can even do a so-so job.

But what if you're interested in making a real connection? You will do it by first learning to stop. In the crucial first moment, stop and look at the room. See the space. See your relation to the space. Look people in the eye.

Researchers have found that people begin to form a first impression of us within a matter of seconds, and most of the information about our sincerity and authenticity comes from our eyes, faces, body language and attitude — not the actual words we say.

Eye contact is a form of silent communication that has no rival. But many of us have fallen into the habit of diverting our eyes as though we are always on a crowded sidewalk.

Most people assume they have pretty good eye contact, but they actually look around the room like a pinball, bouncing off one person to the next. Or they sweep the room from side to side — attempting to see everybody at one time.

When you stop and hold the gaze of one person at a time for just seconds, you create a personal closeness that makes people want to stop and pay attention. This takes

practice. Begin by noticing how you make eye contact throughout the day — at work or at the grocery. Do you really look people in the eye?

Ronald Reagan said, “If you talk to everybody, you talk to nobody, but if you talk to one person, you talk to everybody.”

Stop, look and listen. Once you’ve stopped in the first crucial moment, don’t simply begin to talk — begin to listen. Start a conversation with the audience, and create places where the audience can respond.

The best news about listening to your audience is that in order to do it, you have to stop obsessing about yourself. The best advice for the self-conscious speaker is to focus on transmitting a message of value to the listeners.

When you do that, the audience can feel the focus and will return in kind. It’s a dynamic of mutual admiration. Together you create a medium of communication that is highly effective.

You “listen” by knowing who you’re talking to, showing up with a relevant message, asking questions, giving listeners time to have a dialogue with one another and conducting an honest Q&A session. Before you rush to answer a question, listen. Consider closely what is being asked. Let people know you value their time and their opinions.

There are many moments worth stopping for in a given day. Not only when we give a presentation, but also when we meet a friend at the coffeehouse or step into a small meeting — when we run into our neighbor on the sidewalk or an employee in the hall.

It’s easier to glance at the person before averting our eyes and moving by. Crucial moments of being truly receptive to others require courage. Courage, because it is hard to stop under pressure and look people in the eye. Crucial, because making an authentic connection in a human moment takes a bigger muscle than the one attached to our jawbone.

QUICKINFO

Make a connection

- Stop:** When you step into the presence of the audience, stop and see the room. See your relation to the space.
- Look:** Hold the gaze of one person at a time to create a personal closeness.