



ABOVE ALL ELSE:
How to Identify and Achieve your Intention when Speaking
by Deborah Shames

In December of 1914, when his vessel became lodged in the Antarctic ice flow, Ernest Shackleton was determined to bring all his men home safely... Martin Luther King was committed to integrating African-Americans into mainstream America... And Dennis Tito, the first civilian space tourist, compared the trajectory of stocks, to the path of a satellite to Mars and created the Wilshire 5000 Index. All three leaders shared one thing in common. They had a singular intention that drove their actions.

To be an effective speaker, whether in business or informal presentations, you also need a singular intention to achieve your goal. Think of intention as the engine that drives every presentation or communication. An intention is active, powerful, and laser focused. I simply do not have the patience to sit through another boring, rambling presentation where the speaker has no intention, or only wants to educate the audience. Imagine Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech if he wanted to *educate* us on the history of segregation in America, rather than *persuade* us to live together in peace.

As a communication specialist, I can tell in the first few minutes whether the speaker has applied this basic principle of persuasion. Without it, I feel like the wolf in a trap who would rather chew off my paw than waste another hour of my life! With it, I am carried along on a journey to uncharted territory. I'm sure Shackleton's initial intention was to reach the South Pole. But when circumstances intervened, he changed his intention to make sure his men survived the trip. If Shackleton had allowed the obstacles of weather, equipment, and isolation to affect him, he surely would have failed. In much the same way, if a speaker allows distractions to throw him off course—from a malfunctioning PowerPoint or lunch being served in the middle of his speech, to a sudden reduction in allotted time, he will also fail. Instead, a clear intention will ensure the speaker prevails, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Financial titan Dennis Tito came to my company, Eloqui to improve his speaking skills. After returning from the International Space Station, Dennis wanted to share his passion

for space exploration with young people. When the topic of intention was first broached with Dennis, he put up his hand. “Say no more. I never go into a business transaction with institutional investors, or negotiate a deal without being clear on my intention.” It is no surprise that Dennis represents an international clientele of \$12 trillion (that’s with a “t”), or that he paid the Russians \$20 million out of his own pocket to fulfill his dream of orbiting the earth.

I learned the concept of intention from working in the Entertainment Industry as a director of film and television. Actors will frequently ask a director “What does my character want?” No director worth her salt would give actors direction, approach a storyline, or block the action in a scene without first knowing their intention. And because the scenes in a dramatic movie are shot out of order, both the actors and director need to know what the movie is driving toward, so that each individual scene is integrated successfully into the final whole. Whether the product is a 30 second commercial, an animated short, or a full length feature film, directors often use a storyboard to map out the sequence of shots. This strategic, big picture view allows the director to better assess the story’s pacing and momentum.

The same is true of verbal presentations. Take a big picture or storyboard view when structuring content. The first step is to determine your intention, or what you would most like the outcome to be. In our bestselling book, *Own the Room: Business Presentations that Persuade, Engage and Get Results*, we dedicated the entire first chapter to the concept of intention, because the choice of intention affects how to open your presentation, which talking points to include in the body, and the best method of closing. Even the ‘role’ or delivery system of how a speaker conveys their material is linked to intention. For example, if your intention is to convince your audience to buy a hybrid when they purchase their next car, you would probably choose the role of a motivator or seasoned veteran, rather than a facilitator—unless you owned a car dealership. Literally, every decision in a presentation is impacted by the speaker’s intention.

To avoid confusion or dilution of your message, **pick only one** intention as your primary objective. After asking clients for their intention, I frequently hear responses like “I want to congratulate the sales force for making their numbers, describe the challenges currently facing them in the marketplace and have them commit to increasing sales going forward.” When a presenter has multiple intentions, the audience is never quite sure what is expected of them. Another problem is that everything has equal weight or value, and nothing stands out as memorable. At Eloqui, we like to say, “Better to go deep, than wide.” Make your one clear intention vivid, colorful and visual. Include examples. Give your own perspective. And make sure your audience knows what it is you want them to take away.

Next, make your intention **active, rather than passive**—so that you are strategic in reaching a conclusion. An example of an active intention is “they will see me as critical to the success of their project, business, or (fill in the blank).” Another example is “I will convince these volunteers to increase their fundraising efforts by 20%.” An active intention is powerful and puts the speaker on the balls of their feet.

Another favorite phrase at Eloqui is “if you educate people, you get them to think. If you persuade them, you get them to act.” A passive intention, like “I will inform the audience of our research findings” requires the speaker to deliver as much content as possible to be thorough and accurate. Without framing the information in a persuasive package, this speaker risks overwhelming or losing their audience. And without injecting their recommendation or perspective, why have a speaker at all? Why not simply distribute a handout?

An educational intention also requires the speaker to be an expert, which can create enormous pressure and is the basis for much speaker anxiety. The critical voice inside our heads starts planting seeds of doubt, like “what if I leave something out?” or “Dan in I.T. knows more than I do on this topic, and is going to judge me harshly. I’m going to feel like a fool!” resulting in “Why did I ever agree to do this talk?”

If the first thought that comes to mind when determining your intention is to educate or inform your audience, ask yourself “If I educate them, what will happen?” Keep going down a level, until you reach your true intention. This does not mean that you will discard all the compelling data, statistics, or findings that would have comprised your educational talk. It does mean that you will include *only* the information that propels your active intention forward.

Most speakers have more content than they can possibly deliver. Yet we know from cognitive science that humans can only absorb a limited amount of material at a time. So a clear intention is also a terrific **editing device**. Directors have the same difficulty editing out scenes in our movies. The process is excruciating, especially when we have grown to love beautiful shots, character reactions, or whole scenes which we have carefully crafted. But whatever doesn’t advance the storyline has to go! Likewise, it is our responsibility as speakers to decide what is most important, make it come alive and edit out any content that doesn’t support or advance our intention.

A speaker with an active intention will employ whatever means necessary to engage their audience. These include asking questions, acknowledging people in the audience, changing up the delivery of material, and telling stories that bring the content to life. I can always tell when a speaker has a clear, active intention. Rather than striving for

polish and perfection, they are immediate and present—even though they may be rough around the edges in their delivery.

But taking a page from psychology and impression management, when a speaker is concerned with how best to connect with me—I am usually persuaded to their point of view. Dennis Tito once asked us why Hitler was a great speaker. Upon reflection, we responded that Hitler was immediate, present and passionate. He had total conviction and committed to his material. Regardless of the hideous nature of his speeches, he was able to persuade thousands of people to his point of view. Being Jewish, I cannot imagine how audiences believed or followed the rants of a tyrannical dictator. But knowing what I do of the powers of persuasion, it truthfully doesn't surprise me.

Consider the reverse. What is your reaction when you hear a polished, professional speaker who has memorized their material and clearly delivered it a number of times? Personally, I don't trust them. And I'm irritated to hear a canned, generic or overly rehearsed presentation that isn't targeted to me or addresses my needs. At Eloqui, we encourage our clients to go for authenticity, rather than polish; to target their intended audience, rather than being generic and include everyone; and to focus on engagement techniques, rather than a predictable and orderly delivery of material.

Here's another trick about intention. **Don't say it out loud.** Right before you speak, repeat your intention to yourself, and again whenever you fear the presentation is getting off point or rambling. This is one of the reasons to make your intention short and focused. It is strictly for *your* benefit and to keep you on track!

The traditional business presentation starts with an agenda slide that clearly states the speaker's intention. There is no creativity or engagement. But the presenter has followed the rules, used the PowerPoint Wizard and done the expected. I've also heard speakers say "I need to get right to the point." Although the agenda slide *will* orient the listener, the speaker has also lost the opportunity to engage the audience with their opening remarks or colorfully frame their content. Also, an agenda slide is not persuasive, and probably means what follows will be a data dump and too often, a speaker bored with presenting their own material.

When considering your intention, make sure it is **achievable**. For example, if you are presenting to a room full of potential clients, it is not realistic that 100% will approach you afterward and ask to set up a meeting-- or that you will draw everyone to your point of view. But let's say you are a set designer and a friend has introduced you to a producer at HBO. It may not be realistic that the producer himself will hire you. But an achievable intention is to have the producer refer you to someone in their production department, who can hire or refer you.

A similar intention at a trade conference would be to qualify a prospective client to see if the fit is right—rather than having the intention that every prospect will contract for your services. By *not* saying your intention out loud, you will ask questions, be a good listener, and when the time is right, give examples of your work-- all posed to determine if the fit is right. The other advantage is that achievable intentions will move you away from 'selling' your services, and towards building a mutually beneficial partnership.

Finally, the value of intention is giving speakers a **barometer to gauge their success**. With a specific, clear intention, you know whether or not you have achieved your goal, and can change course or modify your intention next time, if you did not. Common pitfalls I see with speakers is that they fail to narrow their intention to one; they educate rather than persuade their audience (their intention is passive, not active); or their intention is not achievable. What action would you like to achieve? It all starts with your intention.