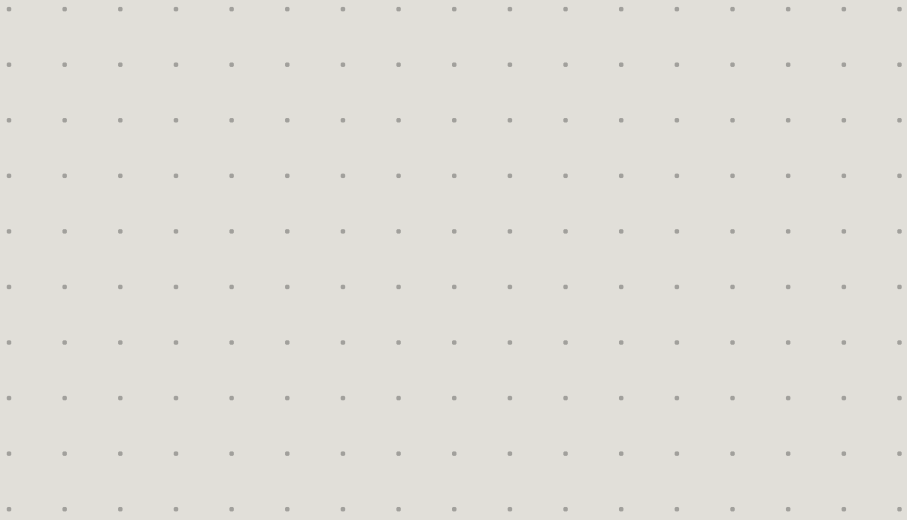


HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS IN PRESENTATIONS





Communication is key in many job descriptions today. Whether you are a leader, an expert, a facilitator, teacher or trainer, the success of your job in many cases comes down to your ability to communicate effectively.

In this article, we will share a few tips and tricks to support you in delivering presentations with effect. Acknowledging that the field of communication is wide, and it is far from possible to cover all in one single article, I have made a prioritisation as to what might be most relevant to those who want to get started on improving their communication practice. If you are an experienced communicator, it might be that you can also get a couple of new ideas for how to advance. The article starts with an introduction to how the brain works. This section serves as a foundation for the following sections, as many principles of communication are reflected in the way we know how the brain works. That said, studies of the brain is also a wide field, so in this article, we will only shed light on the most relevant insights from this field that relate to communication. Section 2 uncovers the presenter's preparation phase where we unfold two concrete tools for you to improve your presentations that you can already start using today. The last section takes a deep dive into how to deliver your presentation, focusing on the strategic use of body language.

Introduction: Understanding how the brain works

The American body language expert Mark Bowden claims that you have no more than 90 seconds to convince your audience to be your allied and not your enemy. This means that we have very few chances of succeeding with our presentations if we get off on the wrong foot. If you are facilitating a workshop or a meeting, be aware that your participants will start evaluating whether they like you or not based on how you welcome them to the room and how present you are before the formal meeting starts. Are you occupied with your emails, or do you show an interest in them, making small talk with positive gestures and openness?

In his description of how the brain works, Israeli-American psychologist Daniel Kahneman has divided it into two agents called system 1 and system 2, which each represent either fast or slow thinking. Going back to the 90-second rule, this is where system 1 – the fast-thinking part of the brain – is dominant. Then what can we do if we really want the system 1 brain to like us, you might ask? What we know about system 1 is that it is evoked by emotions and that it tends to jump to conclusions without having a concrete reason for arriving at a specific conclusion. When we want people to like us, we will most likely try to find common ground that connects us, having them build empathy for us or the story we tell. We also want them to feel in good hands and that they can rely on what we are saying in our presentation.

Knowledge about how the brain works is important for you when designing and executing your presentations. If you sometimes feel that it is hard to engage your audience, think about what you did to motivate and build

trust with them from your very first touchpoints.

The redundancy effect

The redundancy effect, which has been described in various learning theories in the past decades, is related to how the brain deals with multiple sources of information such as visuals and text. A way to exemplify this is when you are picking up your phone while being focused on a task on your computer. You cannot stop looking at the task on your computer even though you are on the phone. Listening while at the same time looking at the words written on the screen is hard to combine. How does this impact the way we develop our presentations? Overall, we need to ensure that our slides do not contain too much text that will distract the audience from listening to what we are saying, because if they are reading and listening at the same time, the chance that they will remember what you have said is zero¹.

Another sure way to lose your audience's attention is to forget all about the fact that they are in the room. This could happen for many reasons. For instance, if you are nervous about your presentation, you may be very strict about sticking to your speaking notes, or if you are talking about a topic you are very passionate about, you might forget everything about the time and the people and energy in the room. Based on what we know about how long our brain can stay focused, we recommend that you keep your presentations to a maximum of 20 minutes in a physical meeting

and 10 minutes in a virtual meeting before activating the audience. A way to involve them could be as simple as asking a question and making them reflect and relate to the content presented, or you could have them discuss a question in pairs for just a couple of minutes. Using micro-involvements every 10 or 20 minutes is an easy way to keep your audience engaged throughout the presentation. Your presentations should be no longer than 45 minutes in total before getting the participants to work on actual group activities to digest the content of your presentation. If your knowledge session lasts longer than one hour, it might be a good idea to give your participants a break every hour.

FACT BOX

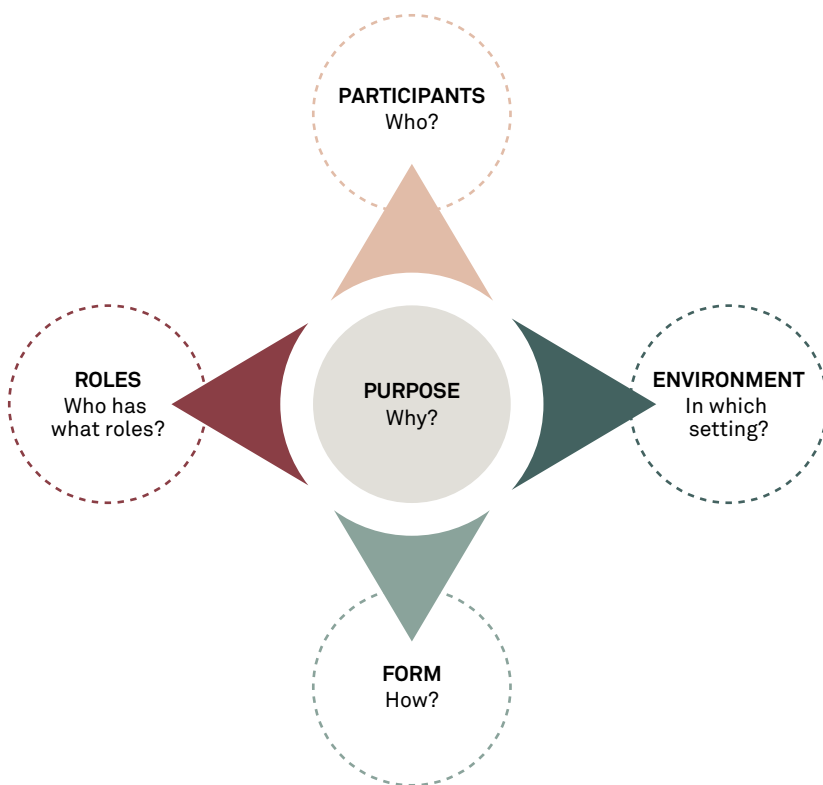
1. Presentations should be no longer than 20 minutes before you involve the audience
2. Give your participants a break every 60 minutes
3. Your presentation should be no longer than 45 minutes

In the next section, we will share two concrete tools that can support you in developing and organising your presentation.

¹ David JP Phillips, "How to avoid death by PowerPoint?"

Section 2: Preparing your presentation

At Implement, we have developed a tool called the design star which we use when designing all kinds of human interactions, including developing a presentation to be shared with your audience. The design star has five dimensions and is shown in the model below:



Purpose – why?

When clients come to us and ask us for help to become better at getting across with their communication, we often find the root of the challenge in the first step of the design star, which is **purpose**. We are busy people, and preparing a presentation for a meeting is something we have done many times before. To many of us, communication is not our primary job, but it is an important part of our primary job, e.g. we cannot be scientists or researchers without sharing our work with others, and we cannot be leaders without communicating, even though we do not consider communication our primary job. We have probably all participated in meetings, listening to presentations with PowerPoint slides with so much content that it is hard to follow the point, and when we do not have any mental resources left to keep ourselves engaged, we start drifting, looking out the window, checking emails or social media. And then finally, back at our desk, we realise that we also have a presentation we need to prepare for tomorrow. What do you do? If you are anything like most other people, you will probably start collecting slides from previous presentations while hoping that a clear storyline will appear out of nowhere as soon as you have put together all the slides you find relevant. And if you think it is not clear enough, it might be that you add one or two more slides to see whether that helps. But how can you define whether the selected slides are relevant if you do not have a purpose to compare it with?

Adding more slides and adding more text, data and facts to the slides is not the way to make effective presentations – on the contrary. It is not that we cannot reuse slides, but before starting the exercise of putting together

slides from other presentations, we must ask ourselves: Why are we delivering this presentation? What is the purpose? What do we want to leave the participants with? This is where you define the 1-3 key messages that are important to include as part of the presentation.

Participants – who?

When you have formulated your purpose, it is time to consider who your target group is. This is the dimension we call **participants** in the design star model. The same type of communication is often necessary to use for different target groups, e.g. project team, steering committee, leadership team, external partner or others. But even though the main messages might be the same, the presentation should not be. The target group is crucial when it comes to design choices in the actual development of your presentation. Knowing your target group enables you to identify which messages will resonate the most with the different groups and then use this to select what to highlight and bring forward in the specific presentation. The number of participants is a final but important fact to take into account, as the tricks for using body language vary a bit depending on whether you are presenting to a small or a large group of people. As a rule of thumb, it takes 40 seconds from you ask a question to your audience hears and understands the question and is ready to reply. The 40-second rule applies to large groups of people, but the principle of making sure to have a break and stop talking, allowing the participants to think before answering, also applies to small groups.

Environment – in which setting?

Environment is when you consider where the presentation should take place, e.g. is it a virtual or a face-to-face presentation? If it is a face-to-face presentation, do you have any influence on where it takes place, or has this already been decided? Sometimes we do not have any influence on this decision but will have to make the best of what we get – but remember that we can do a lot with the room we have available. You probably still remember the 90-minute rule, and to support you in getting off on the right foot, the environment can be an easy fix. If you show the participants that the presentation is important to you and that you are well prepared, you also signal that the participants are important to you, which is often something that gives you a plus on the friend-enemy scale. A way to stage the room to send this signal could be with a welcome flip chart on the door or in the room when people arrive, music playing in the room and handouts with more details about your presentation placed on the seats. Another thing to consider is the mental environment. How much do you think about supporting your participants in arriving with the right mindset to engage in what you intend to present to them? A way to ensure that the participants' mental environment is where we want it to be is to think about whether they need to receive anything from you in advance. Do they need to prepare anything, read or take action on things before the meeting to make the presentation more meaningful for them to engage in?

Form – how?

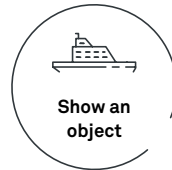
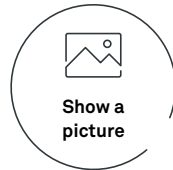
If you grew up in a western culture, and maybe even in an academic environment, my guess is that every time you read the word “presentation” in this article, you thought about PowerPoint presentations and slides – at least, that is probably what 90% of you did. Maybe a PowerPoint presentation is the best method to achieve the purpose of your presentation, and maybe other methods would better support your message and the purpose you are trying to achieve – or maybe even a combination of PowerPoint and other process methods is exactly the recipe you did not know you were looking for.

Form is therefore where we want to challenge you a bit on your traditional thinking when it comes to presentations. We briefly mentioned flip charts as a way of staging the room, but have you ever tried to make a presentation using only flip charts and index cards? Or have you thought about printing the key slides in your presentation as posters and putting them on the wall, which would provide greater flexibility for you when giving your presentation, as you can use the entire room and invite the participants to engage in a standing presentation as part of the session to also ensure the energy and engagement of your participants.

Roles – who has what roles?

Finally, if you are more than one presenter, it is a good idea to align roles in advance and maybe even practise the transition between your different responsibilities in the presentation. Confusion and small misunderstandings between presenters can be enough for your participants to drift away and lose focus of what you are presenting to them.

Classics to consider for the beginning



Step 2: Content – create understanding

This is where most people start. You might think you know what you are trying to communicate, but you still have a hard time building your storyline, finding the right slides and reducing the amount of text on your slides. Regardless of whether the format of your presentation is PowerPoint slides, posters or flip charts, there is one simple and common rule:

1 slide – 1 message

If you want to get your message across clearly, it is crucial that you help your participants know what exactly was the most important takeaway from this slide. You can have more than one key message in the presentation but make sure to have only one message on each slide.

Our brain naturally draws our attention towards moving objects, big objects, signalling colours (such as red, orange and yellow) and contrast-rich objects. Use this knowledge consciously when laying out your slides and deciding where to guide your audience's attention.

If we have more than one object on a slide, it is recommended to make use of contrasts to hide the objects that you have already presented or have not yet presented, thereby only showing what is relevant for the audience to pay attention to. This is a feature in PowerPoint, and for handheld

presentations, using index cards with key words or sentences and presenting these one at a time is another way of not overwhelming your participants with too much information at the same time.

PowerPoint comes with a white background by default, which has a couple of downsides you want to avoid. The white background draws the attention of the eye and will make your participants want to look at the presentation instead of you. If your presentation has a dark background, it helps to relax the eye, and the participants will start focusing their attention on you – and remember, you are the presentation. The way you convey the important messages of your presentation is essential for the participants to gain takeaways from what you have presented – regardless of how great you are at making slides.

A final point to take away about how to develop your presentation is to have no more than six objects on each slide. If you have more than six objects on your slide, it will require your participants to count the objects, however, by sticking to no more than six, they will see the objects instead. When we know that the brain does not have unlimited resources to take in information, it is crucial that we do not waste people's mental resources on the wrong things, e.g. counting objects instead of listening and understanding what we are communicating.

If you read this article at a point where you have an existing presentation that you want to improve, it might be a good idea for you to take a few steps back. Complete the design star with emphasis on the purpose of your presentation and start cutting out the slides that do not support the purpose. Now look at what you have left to see if it follows the six guiding principles for building a better presentation.

Six guiding principles for better presentations

1. One slide = one message
2. Redundancy effect – we cannot read and listen at the same time
3. Highlight your most important message on your slide
4. Utilise contrast effect to increase focus
5. Use a dark background
6. Keep the number of objects at no more than six per slide

How to get your message across in presentations

Step 3: Closure – create action or reflection

Your presentation ends at the tail of the fish because we want you to end by flicking the tail as you close your presentation. Consider what actions or reflections you want to leave the participants with at the end. How can you structure your presentation so it leads to this outcome, and what could be the final, challenging and maybe even provoking question you ask your participants to evoke reflection or action?

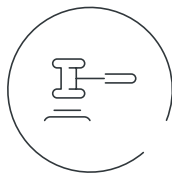


Ideas for closing your presentation

What would you like to leave the participants with?



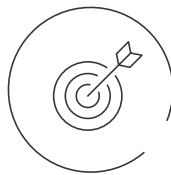
A summary



A conclusion



Encouragement



The most important key takeaway



Suggestions for the next step?



Final questions?

Section 3: Executing your presentation

Congratulations – you are now done with your preparations, and now it is time to execute your presentation. The field of body language has been explored and developed in decades. At Implement, we have helped many clients improve their communication skills through training and coaching. We are inspired by many different thinkers within this field, such as Mark Bowden, Joe Navarro, Paul Ekman, Amy Cuddy and many more, and we know from having trained many leaders and employees in becoming stronger communicators that it is hard to learn this by reading. It requires training and many hours of practice. However,

we have tried to share a few tips in this final part of the article, being fully aware that what is shared here is only scratching the surface of what body language is and what you can do to become a master in this field. In this article, we have chosen to highlight three things you can start practising, which will improve your presentations straight away.

Position in the room

Where do you place yourself in the room when presenting? If you are speaking in a conference room or an auditorium for a large group of people, there will typically be a large screen, and maybe

it is even dominating the room. To show your presentation, you most likely plug in your computer in a corner next to the big screen. Some presenters fall into the trap of delivering the presentation from this position, probably because they do not think about it. Remember that the brain is lazy, and this is where the technological equipment requires me to stand. Or maybe I forgot to bring my clicker, which means that I cannot move away from my computer. Or maybe I keep standing in the corner behind the lectern because I am nervous about presenting in front of that many people. How do you think this presenter comes across

from an audience perspective? Most people in the room will probably see the presenter as insecure, which will potentially start the snowball effect of further questions of doubt such as: “Does he know what he is talking about?”, “Is she hiding anything?”, “What is he afraid of?”, “What is it that she is not telling us?” or “Does he even care about being here?”. You get the point. Even a small decision like this can lead to several unwelcome reaction patterns from your audience that will make it more difficult for you to get your message across.

Remember that you are your presentation, and you need to own it. If you hide behind the furniture, you will seem as if you are not even convinced of your own arguments, so why should the participants care? When kicking off your presentation, you go to the centre of the stage and start your presentation. To come across as more confident, it often works better if you apply the “walk, stand, talk” principles, which means that you walk towards the centre of the stage, you stand and ground yourself, capture the attention of the audience and start talking. If you make this a routine, you will also quickly experience that using the same strategy and daring to own the stage will give you more confidence and security in return.

Use of hands

What does crossed arms mean? Think about this for 10 seconds before you read on. It can mean a lot. The question is in which context you observe the crossed arms. If a presenter says: “I have been looking very much forward to welcoming you today” while crossing his arms and taking a step back, we as audience will experience incongruency between the spoken word and the body language we observe. In this case, crossed arms do not support

us in coming across as trustworthy, as you can probably imagine. But if you have just asked the audience a question, or if you are listening to what a participant is saying and you have your arms crossed, people will most likely not notice anything different about your body language, and you are probably just carrying yourself in this way, as this is a comfortable position to be in when listening. When I train clients in the use of body language, I often get the question of where to place the hands? What is good and bad body language? To these questions, I will always argue that it depends on the context and what you want to achieve. You can use your hands strategically to support the message you are trying to convey. If you are presenting without any other visual elements, or if you follow the tips from this article for how to build presentations, the visuals supporting your presentation can be supported even more by the way you use your body language. You can make use of illustrating hands when explaining how to go from A to B by first pointing your hands to the left and then to the right. Or if you are talking about growth: “Back in 2010, we were this size, and now we have grown to 1,000 employees”, you can support the message by keeping your hands low and raising them as you talk. Your hands are also a great tool when facilitating human processes where you either want to drive the process forward – first letting one participant speak and then letting someone else speak – or if you want to make a pause in the process and encourage the participant who is currently speaking to keep talking.

We also train the use of heavy, constant hands, which is another way to appear more confident about the presentation you are delivering. Instead of not having control of your hands, e.g. one

hand moving in circles, which typically happens if you for a moment forget what to say or if you are not sure what words to use. While it is okay to have a break in your presentation, having a break combined with shaky, uncontrollable hands will make you appear nervous or insecure, which we want to avoid. Instead, make sure that your hands move synchronously when you deliver a message and have your palms facing upwards. This supports the action of “serving a message”.

Tone of voice

Your voice is important, and you can use it strategically to turn up and down the energy you want to create in the room. Sometimes you want to catch the audience’s attention by raising your voice and maybe even by speaking a bit faster. In other cases, you want to create a space for the participants where they are allowed time for reflection by speaking slower and with a lower voice. When talking about tone of voice, we also have to keep in mind that we were all born with a different point of departure. There is a clear difference between men and women as well as within the same gender. If you have a very light and soft voice, it might be worth trying to work with another tone of voice once in a while. Play with the different tones of your voice – and maybe even pay attention to what you are already doing, as we, in our everyday conversations with others, are also using different tones of voice, depending on the topic of conversation. Our tone of voice will often reveal our inner emotional state, so also pay attention to how you start your presentation, how you respond to critical questions from the audience and consider what strategies to use to get control of your voice in situations where it is needed.

How to get your message across
in presentations



Five tips

Tip #1: Place yourself at the centre of the room when you start your presentation

Tip #2: Apply the “walk, stand, talk” principle

Tip #3: Use a clicker to give yourself more flexibility on stage

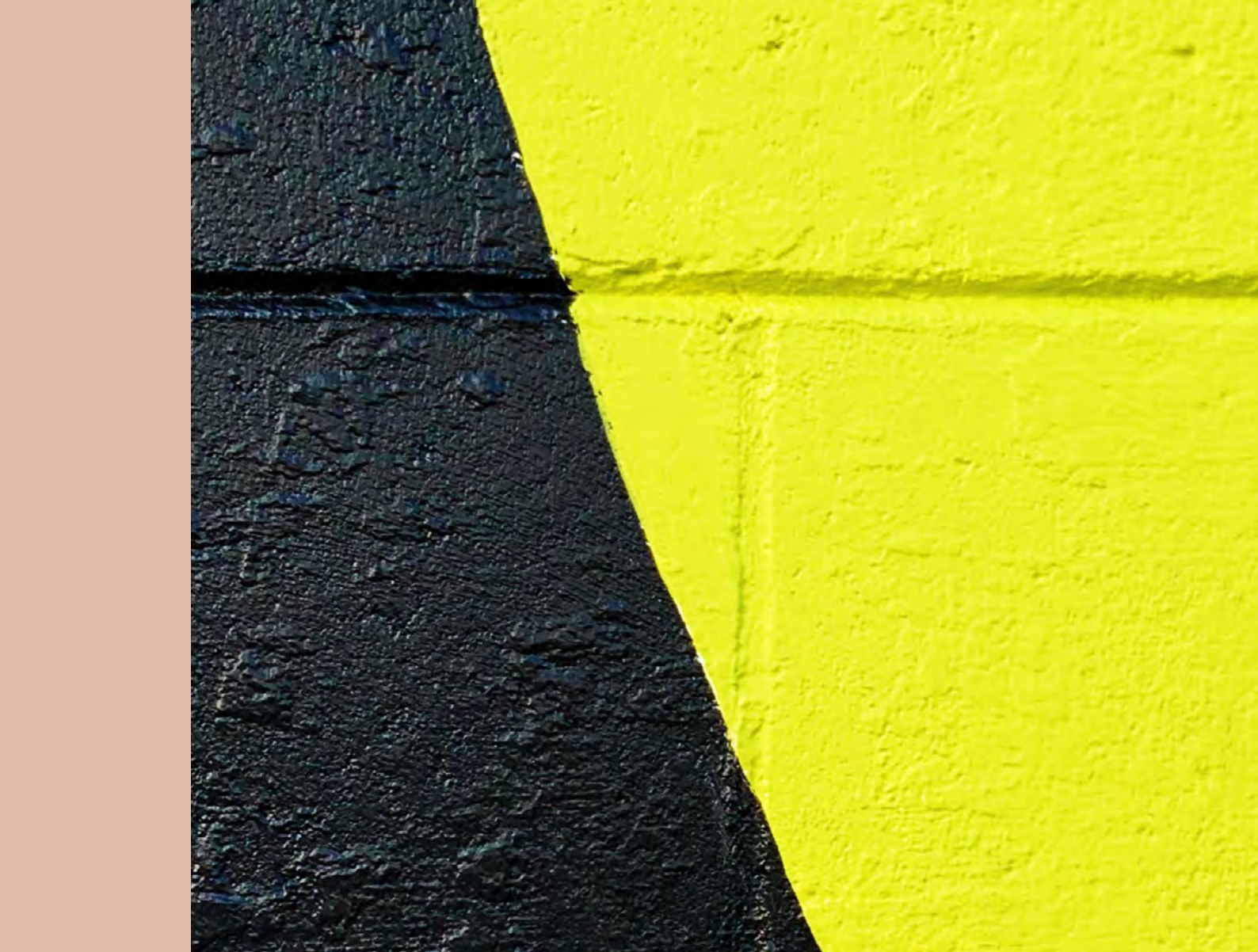
Tip #4: Keep your hands heavy and constant when delivering key messages and use illustrating hands for variation and support of the message

Tip #5: Experiment with your tone of voice and practise how to use your voice strategically to change the energy level

Closing

In this article, we have shared a practical guide to help you get started on preparing and executing more effective presentations. We started the article by getting to know some basics about how the brain works to better understand the dynamics of people who either lean in and engage or drift away and lose focus of our presentation. A few dogma rules on how to prioritise your time in each process were shared for you to keep in mind when developing your presentation. Section two introduced the design star model that helps you define the guiding principles of the design of your presentation, and we also introduced the fish model which is meant to support you in structuring your presentation around beginning, content and closure. Finally, we ended the article with five tips and tricks for strategic use of body language when you are ready to execute your presentation.

I believe that you have most of what you need in this practical guide to getting started on improving your communication practice. Now it is just a matter of rolling up your sleeves and getting started on your training.



Contact

For more information please contact:

Maria Hansen
Implement Consulting Group
+45 6126 9887
maha@implement.dk

