

PROFESSIONAL REPUTATION

Develop a commanding presence and impress your audience

By Luigi Benetton
Toronto

In 1993, Jean Charest sought the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party and, by extension, the leadership of Canada. To get there, Charest had to stand in front of a huge auditorium filled with delegates and give the speech of his political career.

Charest enlisted Toronto-based communication coach John Plank, who took Charest to the convention venue the day before to prepare. "We went all around the auditorium," Plank recalled. "In particular, I had him run up and down the stairs to the stage. The

platform must have been 12 feet high. I had him run up and down the stairs until he frankly got angry."

"We stomped on the boards. We walked back and forth to every corner of the platform. And then I went up into the various tiers of the auditorium and carried on a normal conversation with Jean, who stayed at the podium, asking him what tie he was going to wear tomorrow and what the schedule was like and so on. By the time we had finished our session, he had spoken to me in every corner of that auditorium."

"And then," Plank continued,

"the next day at the convention, in the incredible mayhem just before he went on to speak, we had only a few moments alone, backstage. I asked him to close his eyes and simply visualize where he was standing, had him point his finger towards Hull, and then over to the Maritimes, Montreal, and then he pointed over to Western Canada and down to Toronto, and then went back to Montreal."

"He went down a little bit. I asked 'Where's that, Jean?' He said 'Sherbrooke.'

"When he bounded up the stairs amidst the brouhaha and the music and the cheering, and strode confidently around to the platform, ready to speak to the delegates and to Canadians from coast to coast, he looked like he owned the auditorium. It was his home."

Plank does not take credit for Charest's performance, though. "Charest is one of this country's finest speakers," he said. "He did not need much help from me."

Plank shared Charest's adventures around the time he started his company, Commanding Presence. And he continues to help lawyers speak more effectively to this day.

"The world has changed for lawyers," Plank said. "It used to be that if I didn't understand what my lawyer said, it was my problem. Now if I don't understand what my lawyer says, it's my lawyer's problem, because I'll just find a lawyer who will speak in a way that I do understand."

Lawyers, throughout their education, work experience and training, hone their writing skills, often to the detriment of their verbal abilities.

"People earnestly try to speak the way they write, not understanding that listening is more of an emotional experience than an intellectual experience," Plank said. "They communicate in a series of eloquent monologues."

Although Plank rates "eloquent monologues" as the number one verbal communication problem for lawyers, the one that brings the most clients to his office door is glossophobia — stage fright, or the fear of public speaking.

"It's the single most important thing that I deal with," said Plank. "Some people wrestle with it throughout their entire careers. I've worked with a number of senior partners who have experienced panic attacks, and none of them had been able to tell their partners. Some of them haven't even been able to tell their spouses."

Plank's advice is remarkably simple — look at the event from a

different perspective. "A lot of people feel that when they get up in front of a lot of people, that they are entering the listeners' world," said Plank. "They're hoping to be accepted. They steel themselves to endure the pressure, which only makes them more self-conscious."

"I encourage speakers to think of themselves as the host wherever they speak, and to understand that the listeners are welcome into their world."

To turn a speaker from a "guest" into a "host," Plank recommends tactics such as those he practiced with Charest in '93: go into the meeting room early; decide where to sit; speak out loud in the room, in advance; have a conversation with a friend in the room; rearrange the chairs; and befriend the technicians and get lighting and the microphone right.

Speaking skills, especially as practised within a law firm, are crucial. "The future leaders of the firm are showing up as associates every day," Plank said. "Current partners have the future of the firm in their hands. Yet very few firms are enlightened enough to have personal communication skills as a strategic imperative, and the ones that do, do very well indeed."

"It's very sad," Plank continued.

"Leave a legacy. It leads to immense rewards and a sense of satisfaction."

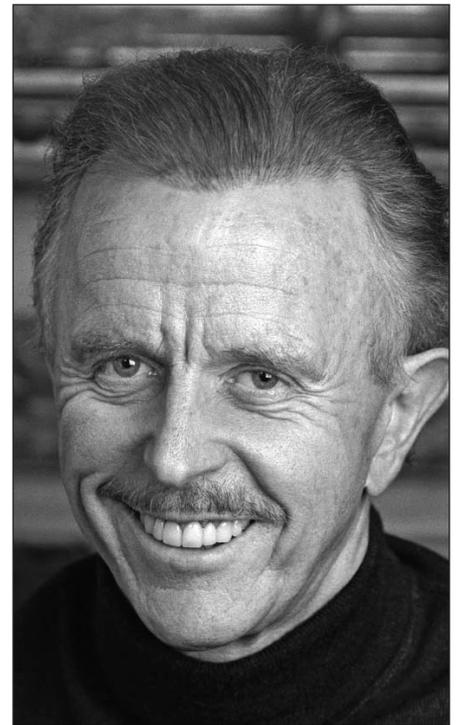
"After five years of associateship, many people have everything they need, except the people skills. If they cannot communicate their skills and their ability, they very often have to walk out the door."

"You can't be partner if you're not able to bring in the business."

For those who seek a leg up in the pursuit of partnership, Plank's advice is, again, simple: make storytelling a daily practice.

"Everyone hates presentations," Plank explained. "Even the word 'presentation' sucks the energy out of people, just thinking about it, planning it, scheduling it — horrible! Ghastly! But everyone loves stories."

So Plank recommends lawyers turn all their recommendations into stories. "Stories are much easier to memorize than other kinds of information," he said. "As soon as people go into a storytelling mode, a switch goes on in their head, and they become really good



John Plank

speakers."

"We've only been reading for a few hundred years. We've been talking for five million years. We're hard-wired to tell stories. We're not hard-wired to write. We're an oral species."

"Lawyers get that," Plank continued. "Lawyers are excited about that. You can't just improve your speaking skills because you're supposed to. You have to find what's going to excite you."

Plank also has advice for seasoned lawyers. "One of the great tragedies is that people can go through their entire career and not be truly known," he said. "When you've become successful, made partner, paid off your mortgage, educated your kids, and you have a decade or two to go, what now?"

"I asked that question to a ballroom full of lawyers on the last day of an American Bar Association conference. There was utter silence, the kind of silence that you don't hear very often, especially not in a roomful of lawyers, especially not during lunch."

"There were 600 people in the room. They noticed one another's silence," Plank recalled. "They were all thinking about it."

"The answer, to me, is legacy. What do you want people to say about you at the end of your career? And, to a large extent, that has to do with expressing yourself."

"So during the last decade of one's career, take the opportunity to become a storyteller," Plank said. "Leave a legacy. It leads to immense rewards and a sense of satisfaction."

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