
Creating presence in a presentation.

What Bill Clinton's 1992 town hall debate teaches about eye contact, personal space and presence.

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Some people have an overwhelming personal presence, and a rare ability to persuade people in face-to-face meetings and presentations. This ability is sometimes called the "reality distortion field".

It matters to anyone who is continually making presentations, and trying to engage clients, suppliers and colleagues and convince them of a point of view.

Having a strong presence, and being able to make eye contact without being evasive, creepy or overbearing, is central to it. So is an awareness of personal space and the use of body language. Doing this well, with people you may not know well, is a very useful skill in business. Two people recognised for having it are Steve Jobs and Bill Clinton.

Steve Jobs.

Jobs had an aura of charisma, confidence and persuasion. People reported that it was almost impossible to avoid surrendering to him and following his will when they dealt with him face to face.

Great communicators such as Jobs make noticeably more eye contact with their audience than average presenters do. They rarely read from slides or notes. Research shows that eye contact is associated with honesty, trustworthiness, sincerity and confidence. A lack of eye contact is most often associated with a lack of confidence and leadership ability.

Bill Clinton.

A New York Times Magazine profile near the beginning of his presidency described Clinton's ability for "making eye contact so deep that recipients sometimes seem mesmerized".

The article this guide is based on tells the story of a friend of the author's who had always despised Bill Clinton:

"Somehow my friend found himself at a function that Bill Clinton was attending. And, within the swirl of the crowd, he was introduced to Clinton. In that moment, face to face, all of my friend's personal animosity towards Clinton disappeared, in one instant. As they were shaking hands, Clinton made eye contact with my friend in a way so powerful and intimate, my friend felt as though the two of them were the only people in the room."

Bush v Clinton: **the 1992 debate.**

On 15 October 1992, Bill Clinton took on George Bush (senior) and the Texas billionaire Ross Perot in a nationally televised presidential debate.

Rather than a formal studio debate, Clinton proposed a town hall format, with the audience at close quarters and taking part. Bush agreed. It was the first town hall debate in US presidential history, and it gave Clinton a massive advantage.

The video of the debate is worth watching (search for "Bush Clinton 1992 town hall debate"). Here is what to look for.

Bush

In the first seconds, Bush checks his watch as the voter begins asking him a question. Presence? It says, "How long do I have to listen to you before I can talk?" It was widely considered among the worst gaffes in presidential debate history, and it all hinged on one moment of absent presence.

Notice Bush's eye contact as he answers the woman's question. It is sporadic, weak, drifting and random. He hasn't decided whether he's talking to her, to the moderator, to the whole audience or to the air in the room.

He is also unsure how close he should stand. He walks closer to her, then backs off, visibly uncomfortable with the personal space. On all three factors (eye contact, personal space and presence) he is clearly not making a personal connection with the voter.

Clinton

When Clinton begins to answer, notice how he manages to own the space and put the woman at ease at the same time. He walks several metres closer than Bush did, making a personal connection in her space without making her uncomfortable.

His eye contact is clear, unwavering and calm. There's no mistaking who he's talking with. Clinton is in a room with two rival candidates, the news media, other audience members and a national TV audience of millions. Yet that feeling of "the only two people in the room" is palpable when he talks with the voter.

Look at the woman's response. Clinton completely has her. Bush's expression says it all: he knows he's been beaten.

The result? 58% of viewers declared Clinton the winner of the town hall debate, 16% Bush and 15% Perot.

In the previous debate, with a traditional podium format, 47% of viewers declared Perot the winner, with 30% for Clinton and 16% for Bush.

Lessons for us.

1 Set your own agenda

If possible, set the agenda yourself. Make your own rules, or you will be following the rules of others.

2 Practise beforehand

Know your subject. Bush showed a combination of not listening and not knowing, and his answer was poor as a result.

3 Choose the environment

Selecting the environment in which you present is important. Play to your own strengths and make use of all the tools available.

4 Control the environment

Once you are presenting, take charge. Be confident in letting others know you are in control, without being overbearing.

5 Mind your body language

Body language matters, even when you are not the one doing the talking. Imagine you are being filmed for the client to watch later.

6 Observe yourself from above

Gestures, eye contact, body language and the way you use your voice have at least as much influence in a presentation as the words you use. Learn to "observe yourself from above" while you present.

I didn't write the original, but I thought you would like it.

This guide is based on an article I highly recommend reading in full. I don't create all of the great knowledge in the world, and this is one of those articles I think is valuable and useful to anyone who presents.

Source: Michael Ellsberg, "How it works: Clinton's 'reality distortion field' charisma", a guest post on Tim Ferriss's blog, 21 November 2010, tim.blog/2010/11/21/bill-clinton-reality-distortion-field.

NED COTEN

**Don't seek to be a person of
Importance.**
Seek to be a person of Value.

Email

ned@nedcoten.com

Website

nedcoten.com

LinkedIn

linkedin.com/in/nedcoten

Ned Coten AM is an investor, board chair, and passionate volunteer in basketball & other sports. He has over 30 years of experience at every level of business, sport & technology within Australia and globally, based in Melbourne, Australia.

nedcoten.com