Presenting Performance Results:
How to present your results so that they are understood and are believable

By: Bob Wescott

Summary

We have all seen a poorly explained truth go down in flames and a beautifully told lie carry the day. If the inmates are running the asylum where you work, then they are most likely very good at presenting their very bad ideas. How clearly and convincingly you present your results determines how successful you are. If doing performance work is a book on learning to fly, this section would be called "Landing."

This is an excerpt (with modifications) from: **The Every Computer Performance Book** a short, practical, and occasionally funny book I wrote on doing computer performance work.

Proof

As Carl Sagan once said, "Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." Look at your results and conclusions and ask yourself how your audience will react.

The more disruptive, shocking, or expensive your conclusions and recommendations are, the more backup data you need and the more effort you want to expend in making an airtight case. If you are claiming bacon is good for you, then you will have an easier time with the National Pork Producers Board than with a group of vegan cardiologists.

However, just because you have 30 backup slides for your shocking revelation, doesn't mean you need to show them all. Pay attention to your audience. Once you've convinced them, forget the remaining 24 backup slides, and move on to your next point.

Build Your Faith In Your Results First

Your results and conclusions may, or may not, be correct. Mistakes happen. Things are missed. Calculations are botched. Data can be corrupted. You are usually keenly aware of all of these things just before you have to present your results. Worry creeps into your mind like a cold fog, and you can find yourself unsure you know anything at all.

There is only one way to prevent this. Start by accepting the fact that you are a regular, carbon-based life form fully capable of screwing up, and then do the hard work necessary to build a rock-solid faith in your results and conclusions. If you don't deeply trust in the results, then that lack of trust will show on your face, and whatever you say won't matter. If they don't believe you, your results are worthless. This is especially true high up the org chart as they don't have time to comb through all your data.

Check everything. Check it twice. Look for inconsistencies. If you use a tool to boil down your performance data, recheck a few values to be sure the tool is working. Present your results to a trusted co-worker to debug your analysis. Have someone else look for typos, misspelled words, and grammar glitches. Ninety-nine percent of this work will find nothing amiss, but the work is not wasted. You now have a rock-solid faith in your results, and your presentation has a few less booboos for your adversaries to use against you.

Practice

It is a natural human reaction to avoid difficult things, and that is why most people never practice their presentations before they give them. This is unfortunate and leads to many overlong, boring, confusing, and generally bad presentations.

You need to practice. Really.

When you practice, say the words out loud, don't just think them. You use a different part of your brain when you speak, and that gives you another chance to notice problems in your logic and in your material. Do you doubt me? Have you ever had some thought that sounded reasonable inside your head but sounded monstrously stupid once you said it out loud? I rest my case. You need to practice. It may feel silly to stand up in an empty room and present to no one, but you need to do this. I've been presenting for over 30 years, and I still do this with new material. It helps me every time.

One key thing to practice is getting any presentation equipment you need set up. I can tell you from painful experience that this is important. I remember the flop-sweat trickling down my forehead as a room full of people watched me struggle with a projector. That very, very bad day taught me to always get to the meeting room early and figure out those little things that can make you look like a big idiot.

No Bad Surprises

Never plan to surprise the person responsible for a problem in a public meeting. The goals of performance work are measured in response time and throughput, not in how much drama you create in the conference room when you point your accusing finger at the unsuspecting culprit.

When you locate a problem, the first person you should find is the person who is responsible for that part of the computing world, and discuss that problem with him or her. Why? That person may know a lot more about that part of your computing world than you do, and may have further insights as to the root cause and the reason(s) why things are done this way. Often, I find that when I privately share my concerns and ask for help in crafting a list of possible solutions, that person is quite willing to be helpful.

I have made the mistake of not involving the person I believed was responsible for the problem and have suffered these consequences, usually in this exact order:

1. The person responsible for that part of the computing world gets angry and defensive and works relentlessly to tear down my work and credibility.

2. That person points out my ignorance and further points out the real problem is caused by some other part of the computing world owned by a different person. Now there are two angry people in the room.

3. Now the manager becomes angry with me for creating tension among the staff.

It always works better when I talk to the responsible person privately well before I write up my recommendations. We look at the problem and explore solutions. Then I can walk into the meeting and say something like: "The problem is here, and after working with Drew, we have a few ideas on how to improve the situation."
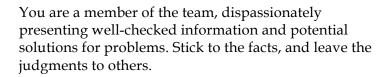
To Tell The Truth
If you are presenting your findings and you don't know something, admit it directly and, if it's important, add it to your to-do list and move on. Don't try to hide your ignorance. The decision makers need to have confidence in you. A big part of that confidence is setting a clear line between what you know and what you don't know.

When pressured by others to hide an inconvenient truth, you can emphasize other things, and you can even leave the inconvenient truth out of your presentation, but **do not lie.**

Leave The Judgments To Others
When you present, you are not a superhero striking down evil. You are not an arbiter of good design. You are not there to make yourself look big by making others feel small.

You are a member of the team, dispassionately presenting well-checked information and potential solutions for problems. Stick to the facts, and leave the judgments to others.

I have seen presentations where the speaker delivered the bad news in a mocking and sometimes directly insulting way that hurt group cohesion and deeply offended people in front of their peers. That approach did not aid in answering the question, but it did unleash a wave of back-stabbing and other bad behavior. Every time I have seen someone be intentionally cruel or hurtful to a co-worker, it has not worked out well for them, especially in the long run.

When The Tension Is High
Sometimes the success or failure of your company hangs on your results. When the stakes are high, and everyone is hoping for good news, while preparing that presentation you might want to think about going to the movies. Specifically an old-

school, action movie, like Indiana Jones.

A big reason audiences enjoy an action movie is that they are reasonably sure from the onset that they will like the ending. They are sure that the hero will triumph, and the wrongs will be righted.

There is a temptation to use a dramatic style when presenting the results of your work because you naturally want to tell a story that builds in excitement and drama and finishes with thunderous applause. That is a fine thing to do, but it works much better if you tell them very early in the presentation that all will be well. Then the audience can relax and enjoy the ride. So start your talk with something like this:

> *With the current configuration, we will not be able to handle the upcoming peak. However, I've identified the bottlenecks and I have workarounds to propose for all of them. Let me show you what I've found.*

I have seen presentations, without this early calming statement, go badly. When the presenter was about half way through the list of all the serious problems ahead some participant will start angrily demanding something like: "**Are we screwed?!?**", "**Is there a fix?!?**" This is not what you want.

The Five-Minute Trick

More times than I can count, I've been told I have an hour to present my findings and then, at the last minute, have found out that "Mr. Big Cheese is running late" and I'm either being bumped from the schedule altogether or cut back to a small fraction of the time I was originally allotted.

For a critical talk I always prepare a second, totally separate presentation that lasts no more than five minutes, and I offer that to whoever is doing the scheduling for the meeting. 99% of the time that offer gets gratefully accepted. Often, Mr. Big Cheese is intrigued with what I have to say in those five minutes, and I'm asked to go into more detail, while the scheduler goes off to tell someone else that they've been cut.

This short presentation is not just going though your slides faster. It is a completely different presentation developed, edited, and optimized to deliver in that brief time. Please don't start whining that you can't possibly do justice to your months of detailed work and analysis in five-minutes. I've successfully given presentations this brief:

> *"You will easily make it through your seasonal peak. The details are in my report."*

> *"The fix for your current problem is moving one very busy file to three new disks. Your staff knows what to do."*

As the performance person you can make a big impression when you are prepared to move swiftly, and can help keep the executives running on time. That positive impression lasts a long time and is good for your career.
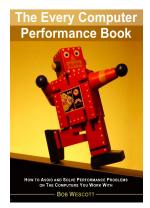
Finally

The single biggest "trick" I use in every talk I've every given is to care about the people in the audience. This is not a trivial closing thought to fill the page.

This is a core truth. You can tell when someone cares about you, and you can tell when they don't. You naturally give more attention and show more compassion to people who care about you.

In the time just before you start, take a moment and let yourself focus on deeply caring about the audience. Care about their needs and concerns. Care about the fact that they have been sitting in meetings for two hours before you started. Care about them as people. Caring connects you to them in a powerful and positive way.

This short, occasionally funny, book covers Performance Monitoring, Capacity Planning, Load Testing, and Modeling.

It works for any application running on any collection of computers you have. It teaches you how to discover more about your meters than the documentation reveals. It only requires the simplest math on your part, yet it allows you to easily use fairly advanced techniques. It is practical, buzzword free, and written in a conversational style.

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