

Turn Presentation **Disasters** into Presentation Success

How to Handle Things That Go
Wrong in your Presentation

By George Torok

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Version 1.02

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Reference:

The source for the laws appearing in this report is “Unwritten Laws: The Unofficial Rules of Life as Handed Down by Murphy and Other Sages” by Hugh Rawson.

The **Murphy Report** for Presentations

“Whatever can go wrong
will go wrong”.

Murphy’s Law

In this special report you will discover how to:

- **Avoid the common presentation disruptors**
- **Confidently manage when things go wrong.**
- **Mitigate the damage from the turbulence**
- **Leverage bad things to your benefit**
- **Defend your presentation against Murphy**

By George Torok

Hello Presenter,

The list in this report is not exhaustive. People and technology keep coming up with new ways to do things, (especially wrong). This report includes the 17 presentation disasters that I have most often witnessed or experienced.

Tell me about your experiences with presentation disasters either as a victim or a witness. Send your examples and questions to me at Coach@Torok.com

I might address your examples and questions in a revision of this report and/or on my Speech Coach Blog at www.SpeechCoach.ca

About the Author



George Torok was a shy student who learned how to be an effective public speaker and business presenter. During his 20 years in corporate management he delivered thousands of presentations and suffered through many more. He has delivered over 1,500 presentations as a professional speaker. He delivers keynote speeches, seminars and workshops. www.Torok.com

He is the creator of the **Superior Presentations** training program. He has trained thousands of managers, entrepreneurs, professionals and MBA students to deliver Superior Presentations. www.SuperiorPresentations.net

As the **Speech for Executives**, he helps business leaders deliver million dollar presentations. He has coached hundreds of business owners and executives. www.SpeechCoachforExecutives.com

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Introduction



Warning – Danger Ahead

When you speak before an audience you will encounter the ravages of Murphy's Law. It is not a matter of "if" things go wrong, it is only a matter of "when" they will go wrong. You can't predict when that will happen. Murphy is always lurking in the room just waiting to attack.

Don't count on luck to help you avoid these presentation gremlins. Remember that there's both good luck and bad luck. Some presenters claim that if it wasn't for bad luck, they'd have no luck at all.

If you speak, you will encounter some of these presentation potholes, detours and accidents. Murphy seems to enjoy messing with presentations. This report is as close as you can get to holding a "Get Out of Jail Free" card.

You can't always prevent these potholes, detours and accidents from assaulting your presentation. But you can prepare for them so you can minimize the damage and shine through the turbulence.

Luck is the residue of design.

Rickey's Law

The Entire Audience Walked Out on Me

What could be worse than losing your entire audience? Imagine no one showing up for your presentation. I experienced the one and almost the other.

While promoting my book I arranged short presentations along with a book signing at book stores. They were never a good place to present in because they were not set up for presentations. Usually the audiences numbered between six and 10.

On one memorable book store visit there was only one person waiting for my presentation. That was ego deflating. I checked the signs and my calendar. We both had the date and time correct so at the scheduled time I started my 20 minute presentation. I was hoping that more spectators would arrive or that my standing and speaking might attract some curious book browsers. Five minutes into the presentation the woman's cell phone rang. She dug it out and asked me to hold. Naturally I stopped speaking because my entire audience stopped listening.

After a short call she put the phone away, looked at me and announced, "That was my son. I need to pick him up. Bye."

My entire audience walked out on me. Ha! I can laugh now but I didn't at the time.

I forced another smile. Bade goodbye, packed up my things and signed the books from the shelf, then left.

Since then I don't mind if people leave part way through my presentation – as long as some remain.

When you present there are few things you can control and some things you can influence. And there is everything else that is beyond your power. Focus on what you can do and accept the randomness of reality.

Guidelines for Presentation Success

When preparing your presentation, consider the things that might go wrong and plan how you might handle them.

Take the precautions to minimize the possibility or impact of things going wrong.

Accept the reality that perfection is not the goal. Being effective with your presentation is the goal.

When things go wrong, appear calm and stay in control of the show. Remind yourself to pause, breathe deeply and smile. This is likely the most important point you can learn from this report.

Never lose self-control. There are many things you can't control but your behavior is the one thing for which you are totally accountable. Don't appear to be angry, arrogant or frustrated. And don't pretend to be blameless. You can't control what happens to you but you can control how you deal with it.

When things go wrong, don't blame somebody else. The audience is looking at you. They are judging your reaction – not the circumstances.

As the speaker you always have the option to end early or take a break.

Sometimes a disaster in your presentation can be a gift because your audience will suddenly perk up and remember how you managed the disaster. Handle it well and you might win their respect and more.

If your audience likes you, they are more forgiving than you think. Establish rapport with your audience early so they are onside when disaster strikes.

Focus your efforts on the portion of your audience that you have a realistic chance of reaching.

**Murphy doesn't hate you. He simply
encourages chaos
to watch you squirm.**

Torok's First Presentation Corollary to Murphy's Law

You

You are only human. Your mistakes as a presenter can easily be magnified if you allow that. Instead, accept your human imperfections and move on.

I heard of a speaker who stumbled and fell face down on the floor of the stage. After the collective gasp of the audience had died down, he said, while still lying on the floor, "I'll now take questions from the floor." The audience erupted into laughter because they knew that he was okay and ready to move on.

Your audience doesn't expect you to be perfect, just self-aware and honest.

**No one can make you feel inferior
without your consent.**

Eleanor Roosevelt's First Law



Speech Anxiety

If you get nervous before or during your presentation, you are normal. The fear of public speaking is the most reported human fear. You might never totally overcome the anxiety, but you can learn to manage the symptoms. I experienced this discomfort many times and still feel some tingles occasionally.

The four best techniques to combat presentation jitters are:

Breathe slowly and deeply from the bottom of your diaphragm. That's down behind your tummy. You might need to practice this technique because most of us tense up and hold our breath when we get nervous.

Smile to make yourself feel better and convey to the audience that you are confident. Smile when you start speaking, after you said something important and when you end.

Pause at key points throughout your presentation to allow yourself time to breathe and think. This also transmits confidence to your audience.

Speak slower than your normal pace. This will allow you to think about what you are saying. Your voice will also be clearer and sound more confident.

The goal is to manage your nerves and keep the audience from knowing about your inner anxieties.



Brownouts

This is the most common problem you will likely experience when speaking in public.

While you are speaking – you suddenly forget. Perhaps you forget what you intended to say next; what the person asked you; the name of the company president or some other important information.

And the immediate reaction is to panic, drop your jaw and allow unintelligible sounds of pain to escape your mouth.

Instead make the one choice that you will not feel like doing at this moment – pause and smile.

Yes, pause and smile.

You won't feel like doing that but it will make you feel better and more importantly your audience will believe that you have everything under control. Often that pause and smile can be enough to get your brain back on track.

If you have notes or slides check them for inspiration. If these remedies don't work then repeat the last phrase or keyword that you said. It's like rewinding the tape to re-engage your line of thought.

And give yourself permission to change the sequence of your presentation or leave something out. Your audience doesn't know your script.



You make a mistake

This happens often. The most common examples are mispronouncing a word, misstating a number and getting tongue tied. Don't waste time apologizing. Simply correct and move on. If you stop and apologize for every small error you are only bringing more attention to the errors. Remember that most people aren't listening all the time. But say "sorry" and suddenly they register that you made a mistake.

The pilot of a plane is constantly making small course corrections. Can you imagine how anxious passengers would be if the pilot apologized for every correction.

Nobody notices when things go right.

Zimmerman's Law of Complaints

Your facts are wrong

Imagine that you displayed a chart on your slide or in the written materials. An audience member points out that your chart is clearly wrong. You realize that the person is correct and you or the person who prepared your data has erred. In this case apologize for your factual error. Don't make excuses. Don't try to pin blame on someone else. Don't try to make a joke about it. Apologize, accept responsibility and thank the person for their help.

Be sure to remove the false data or correct it before your next presentation.

If your whole argument was based on this error then you might as well stop speaking and sit down. For this reason check your facts before you speak. Don't repeat someone else's lies. Don't quote urban legend as fact. Just because every body "knows" something doesn't make it true. At times everybody "knew" that the earth was flat and that Enron was a good investment.

Claim victory and retreat.

Aiken's Solution

Technology

If you've watched any of the Terminator or Matrix movies, you know that the machines will eventually try to take control. You might even remember the movie 2001 A Space Odyssey and the famous line, "Open the Pod bay doors HAL."

Most of us have struggled with our computer, mobile device

That means that your audience is empathetic and perhaps sympathetic when you are experiencing technical problems when presenting.

They will probably be very interested in how well you deal with the problem because they might want to use that technique the next time they face this challenge.

The key is to maintain the outer image of calm. Machines can sense your desperation.

It will always break just when you need it the most.

Corollary to Murphy's fourth law



Computer Crashes

This seems to be the most common yet the least expected presentation problem. That's ironic. Presenters don't expect or prepare for the technology to fail. That's the same thinking that didn't put enough life boats on the Titanic. The owners thought that life boats just cluttered the deck. Who needs life boot for a ship that's unsinkable?

Murphy loves technology. If you present with a computer slide presentation, you will encounter technical problems and delays. Even Bill Gates has experienced computer glitches more than once during important presentations. Consider that as poetic justice and a warning to you.

When technology fails you, don't react as if this has never happened to you. Don't appear angry. Instead, look and sound calm, even amused. Have some saver lines ready to employ.

Some examples that might work for you:

"Houston, we have a problem."

"Scotty, beam me up."

"Do I take the red pill or the blue pill?"

"Et tu Brute."

"I guess that means that I'm voted off the island"

"Computer, you are fired."

"Should have got a Mac."

These lines don't need to be funny but often the audience will laugh because the line is unexpected. They will also believe that you were clever to think up that line on the spot. But you were prepared.

There are two times when you will run into technical hiccups:

1. When you are making the switch just before you start your presentation
2. Random point during your presentation when Murphy strikes

But don't do what one company VP did. When her computer hookup didn't immediately work, she said to her audience, "Talk amongst yourselves." She then focused on

supervising the assistants as they tested the equipment. Her comment and behavior was arrogant and insulting. It was also a bad start to her presentation.

Instead she would have made a better impression if she told a short story while the stage assistants were fixing things.

Always have an assortment of relevant short stories that you can inject into your presentation to cover these glitches.

Get into the room before the presentation to meet with the audio video people and test your computer with the projector. Or bring your multimedia files on a USB stick. Make it easy for one of the assistants to find your file by giving it a name that might appear intuitive to them. That might include a combination of your name, the event name and the date.

**Never let an inanimate object know that you
are losing your temper, or its cussedness
will just get worse.**

Rawson's Second Corollary

Microphone Noise

Speaking with a microphone is not a natural talent. Depending on the size of the room you might need to use one. It's best to get into the room to test and familiarize yourself with the microphone before your audience arrives.

Meet the AV technician or person responsible for the sound system.

Don't start your presentation with, "Is this thing on?" You should know.
Don't blow on the microphone. Instead, tap it lightly.

Most microphone problems fall into these five categories:

- No sound
- Volume
- Crackle
- Popping
- Feedback

No Sound

Learn how to turn the microphone on before you use it. Most wireless microphones have two switches than need to be set to on. Once the switches are both in the on position there is a few second delay before it works.

If the microphone dies during your presentation it could be as simple as the battery in the microphone. Or it could be something more serious. In either case, this is why you made friends with the AV person before your presentation. Look for or call that person, then wait patiently for that person to perform their magic.

Volume

If the volume is too loud or too quiet, those are matters that the AV person can and should adjust on their sound board. If you tested before your presentation it should be just right.

If you are using a handheld or fixed microphone don't speak so closely that your voice is killing the audience. You are not a rock star. Keep about six to eight inches between your lips and the microphone.

Crackle

Crackle or static might happen when you are holding a handheld microphone on a wire. They are not common but still around. To stop the crackle you might need to bend the wire immediately attached to the microphone in an S shape and hold it firmly in place while you speak. If you know of this problem before you speak, you could tape the wire in place.

If you are getting crackle from any other type of microphone the problem is a bad connection in the sound system. The AV tech needs to check the connections.

Popping

A popping sound indicates that your lips are too close to the microphone. This noise is particularly noticeable on your letter “P”. To alleviate the popping sound, simply move away from the microphone or adjust your position so you are not speaking directly at it. Test your distance and positioning by saying, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

Feedback Screech

When you walk in front of, or under a speaker that is broadcasting from your microphone you will hear that annoying feedback screech.

When it happens, first move away from that spot, then add a saver line:

“It must be microphone mating season.”

“That’s why I stopped singing.”

“Reminds me of my - first spouse / history teacher / neighbors’ kids.”

These saver lines don’t need to be funny but your audience will be surprised by your spontaneity. They might laugh and believe that you are in control.

You could avoid this problem by arriving early and testing the microphone while walking around the stage to detect those hot spots.

Audience

Your audience doesn't hate you. At least most of them don't. But some might be in various stages of angry, tired, obnoxious, bored, distracted, depressed, confused or bored. And they expect you as speaker to make it right for them.

Your presentation will never be the opiate for everyone, so don't try to cure them. Don't be hurt by their lack of love. Remember your purpose. Focus on getting your message through to the 80% that might be interested.

**It is impossible to make anything
foolproof
because fools are so ingenious.**

Fourth corollary to Murphy's first law



Tough Questions

Be prepared to face your worst questions.

That will likely be about what people perceive to be your weakest point. That could be high price, poor quality, lack of experience, missing credentials, over qualified, too aggressive, too timid, too complex, too simple, too young, too old...

Think about your perceived weaknesses and prepare to answer that question with confidence when it comes up – because it will. Plan and rehearse your answer so it is convincing when you deliver it to your audience.

Just imagine how your audience will feel when they see you accept the worst question then watch you answer it with confidence.

You might be asked a question to which you don't know the answer. There are two ways to handle this:

Admit that you don't know and offer to get back to them.
Reach out to the audience to see how they might answer the question.

There is one other tough question – the ridiculous question. This is the question that is completely off topic, might be full of innuendo or a personal attack on you.

In most cases, it's best to ignore it, say "Next question" and move on.



Hecklers

Why do people heckle the speaker?

Perhaps they:

- are bored and trying to amuse themselves,
- are the class clown and seeking group acknowledgement
- believe that they are the better expert on your topic
- feel threatened by you or your message
- disagree with your position

Hecklers are not necessarily bad people. They just seem like bad people to you when they interrupt your presentation.

The more controversial your message the more likely you are to encounter hecklers.

Hecklers are more likely to attack you when you bore, insult or threaten them.

If you want to offer less fuel to hecklers – don't bore your audience and don't insult them.

One way to reduce the chance of insulting people is to avoid the use of absolutes. Don't use words like everybody, always, everyone, nobody...

It's difficult to avoid saying things that might threaten some people. If you are an expert on your topic and you take a bold position you will offend some people.

How can you deal with Hecklers?

Don't react to the heckle. Instead respond to the intent.

For example:

"That's very amusing."

"You question the logic. I'll explain..."

"That's an interesting opinion."

"Thank you for that perspective."

"The real question is..."

Never argue with or insult hecklers. If you do you have lost and they have won.

The audience will decide how to label those people.

Never argue with a fool, people might not be able to decide which one of you is the fool.



Your Joke Dies

Ha,ha. This is no joke when it happens to you. Imagine that you told what you thought was a funny joke and nobody laughed. It can feel horribly embarrassing. If it happens to you, you simply smile and move on.

One way to avoid this situation is by not telling jokes. Don't try to be a comedian unless you were trained as one. Even professional comedians who learn the techniques of how to deliver a joke have jokes that fail. So what chance do you have?

Don't tell jokes. Most jokes make fun of somebody else and have nothing to do with your message. So imagine how a joke can hurt your presentation.

1. People didn't laugh.
2. You insulted some members of your audience
3. They are confused about your message.

Now humor, that's different. It's often good to make people laugh. Tell funny stories that illustrate your point. If they don't laugh, at least they'll see the point.

The most common reason that an audience doesn't laugh is because of the delivery. You must rehearse the delivery to get the word order and timing just right.

Coughing

While you are speaking there is one person near the front of the room who is coughing. You can't fault a person for coughing or sneezing but if it is persistent it can be distracting and annoying for your audience.

If the person is unable to stop coughing you (and much of your audience) wants him to leave the room. Some considerate people will leave on their own. But sometimes you need to nudge them. You can do that by looking at him and saying, "Bless you" each time that he sneezes or coughs. Smile when you say that. If the person doesn't get the message then you might escalate the message with "That sounds bad" "I hope that I don't catch that" "Feel free to get some fresh air. I won't feel insulted by you stepping out of the room."

You didn't tell him to leave. You simply suggested that he could if he wanted. He still might not get the message but another audience member might suggest it more strongly.

Laughter & Chatter

This disturbance usually occurs near the back of the room where disrupters feel safe. A table of people are chatting and/or laughing amongst themselves during your presentation. They not participating in your presentation. They are enjoying their own company and conversations.

If you noticed it then so does most of the others in the room. If you don't address this, you will lose the attention and respect of much of your audience.

How do you manage this?

Look at the offending group. Say, "I'll wait until I have everyone's attention" and wait for them to quite down. When they stop chatting, add, "Thank for joining us" and carry on. You might have offended that table – but they were never your friends.

If that doesn't work then do this. While speaking, walk out into the audience toward the offending party. Don't look at them but walk towards them. If they continue chattering, stand right next to their table and pause until they quiet down. Then look at them, thank them and move back to the front of the room to continue with your presentation. If they start up again, repeat this procedure.

Use a similar approach with a person chatting on their cell phone.

Don't be mean or cynical. Your goal is to speak to the rest of the audience that is interested in your message while removing the distractions to your presentation. Accept that some people might not be interested in your message but do convey the message that you expect that disinterested faction to display respect for the group – if not you.

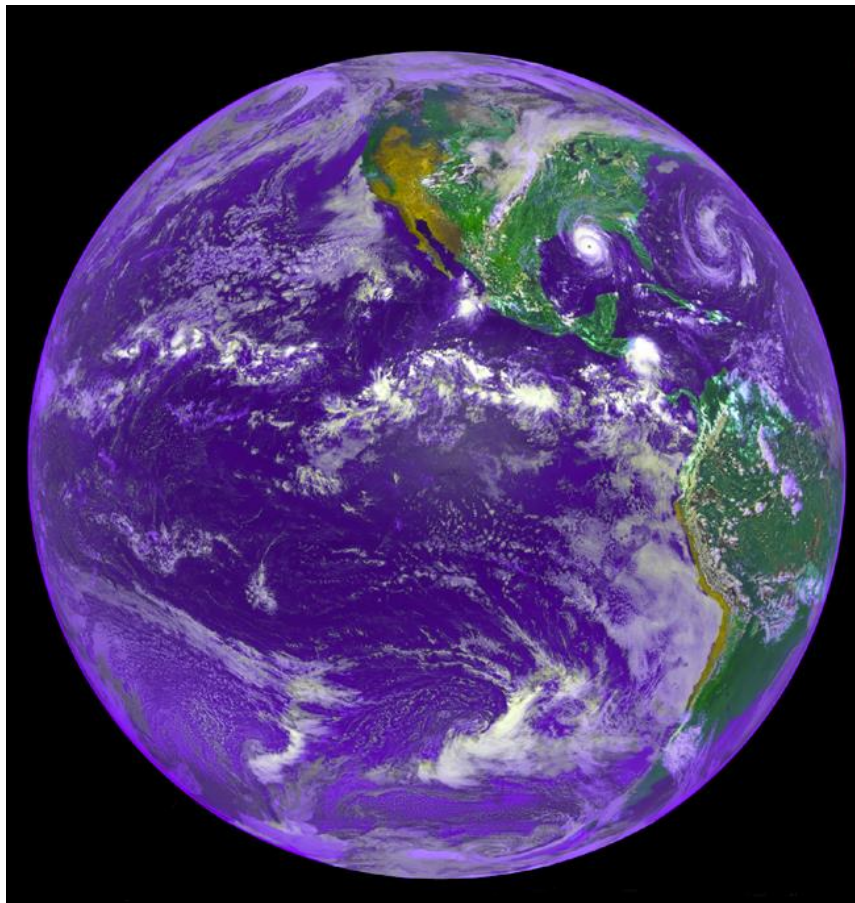
Circumstance

Things happen: evolution, revolution, solar flares, power failures, storms....

The world is not out to get you. The world doesn't even know that you exist. The world merely does what it does.

Que Sera Sera (Whatever will be will be)

Ray Evans, Songwriter



Your time is cut

You arrived prepared to deliver a 45 minute presentation. Then the MC tells you that you only have 32 minutes. What do you do? You finish in 32 minutes. Always be prepared to cut your presentation to fit the changing schedule. Don't be a baby and insist on "your 45 minutes". Recognize that it isn't your time. It's the audience's time.

Schedules change. Always be prepared to shorten your presentation. Mentally have at least three different versions. For example if you expect to speak for 45 minutes then mentally prepare 30 and 15 minute versions. To do this you need to know the length for each component. For every three minute story also have a 30 second version. Never leave your important message to the end. Get it out early.

Be able to sum up your presentation in 60 seconds or less. That'll force you to clarify your message in your mind.

And don't whine to the audience that your time was cut. That will annoy the program organizers and convey a negative image to your audience.

We all wish we had more time. The secret is to do what you want to do in less time than your competition.



Introducer mispronounces your name and or misrepresents you

Be kind to the introducer. Smile even if your name was mispronounced. The audience wasn't listening carefully and will forget the introduction. They will be looking at you and first impressions will determine how well they like and listen to you. If they see you wince or frown while being introduced they will wonder about your credibility.

One way to avoid this error is to meet with your introducer before the presentation and enunciate your name for the introducer. You could also write your name phonetically on your introduction.

If your credentials were embellished and that point is not significant to your message you might choose to ignore it. For example, because I worked closely with my co-author, Peter Urs Bender, for several years, I have often been credited with writing his other books. Peter warned me that this would happen. I follow his advice. I simply smile and move on. It's not worth disrupting your main message.

If the inaccuracy is critical to your message then you might say, "Because I worked so closely with the university, many people believe that I completed my doctorate. Thank you for flattering me." Then move on.



You smell smoke

Where there is smoke there is bound to be fire. DO NOT yell Fire! As the speaker you have the power to calm or panic your audience.

When you smell smoke or hear the fire alarm the first thing to do is to connect with the meeting organizer. Ask that person to check it out and get back to you quickly.

If the alarm is sounding you won't be able to continue speaking. Appear to be calm. Inform the group that you are checking it out. We are used to enduring false alarms in hotels and conferences centers so most people won't panic. Announce how people can leave the building if they wish. Naturally you checked the exit routes before your speech.

If there is smoke but no alarm, again connect immediately with the meeting organizer and ask that person to check it out and get back to you quickly.

If you don't have answers within a few minutes I suggest that you advise your audience to leave the building in an orderly manner.

This is the case of "better to be safe than sorry".

This happened to me when I spoke at a restaurant. The cook stepped outside for a smoke. Meanwhile the kitchen burst into flames. The smoke was wafting into our meeting room so I stopped speaking and we moved into the outer room while some people moved outside.

Once the fire was under control I continued my presentation in the outer room. Naturally I had to omit parts of my presentation – yet it was a memorable presentation.

Disturbance in the room

Don't ignore the obvious.

The disturbance might be coming from outside the room. It might be the disco below, the construction above or the sirens in the street.

Acknowledge the obvious.

If you persist in ignoring what the rest of the room is experiencing – they will be wondering “Is the speaker deaf, or stupid?”

You have three choices:

- Send a person of authority to quiet the disturbance.
- Take a break.
- Leverage the disturbance.

You might wonder what I mean with the last one. How can you leverage the disturbance? If it is only a minor disturbance you might play with it in a humorous way. You could interpret noise from the session next door as a competition. Encourage your audience to make more noise than the neighboring group. Ask your audience to laugh or clap on cue. Make it fun for them.

While delivering a lively breakout session at a conference I received a note from a person from the next room. It asked me to tone it down because we were disturbing the group next door. I announced this request to my audience and asked them if we should comply. Their response was a boisterous “no way!” I'm sure that I made some friends and enemies that day.

Sometimes the disturbance is so distracting that it might be wise to simply move or postpone the meeting. You can't control everything around you. You can only control the decisions that you make.

Bad news just before you speak

Just before your presentation the audience received bad news so now they are depressed or focused on the bad news.

You will need to acknowledge the bad news and then bridge to your message.

The afternoon of September 11, 2001, I was attending a sales skills seminar. The speaker, Brian Tracy, took the stage and said, “We are all aware of the tragedy in New York city today. Should we cancel this program because of that? We can’t change those events and we’re not in a position to help right now. It seems that the best purpose would be served by doing what we came here today to do – to focus on being better sales professionals.”

It took less than 60 seconds for him to acknowledge and transition. Well done Mr. Tracy. I remember how I and others nodded our heads in agreement. We had needed reassurance that it was okay to focus on our original purpose in being there. The seminar went on and it was a productive day.

Medical emergency

What if there is an accident in the room that requires medical attention? A person trips and hurts themselves. A person has a seizure. It could be an allergic reaction, a stroke or heat attack.

What do you do?

Your focus should now be the health and safety of that person. Remind the audience of the shifted priority. Because you are the speaker you are the logical person to take charge. Stop speaking. Ask for a doctor, nurse or first aid practitioner. Ask for assistance. Ask for a volunteer to call an ambulance. Appoint a person to wait outside to direct the medical crew. Call a recess if necessary. No jokes. Present a calming and helpful force.

Conclusion

As a presenter you hold a lot more responsibility and power than you might first think. In some ways you are like the captain of a cruise ship. You want to achieve your purpose and convey your message effectively. You want your audience to enjoy the experience. You are seen to be responsible for the setting and the performance of the technology. And you have a responsibility for their health and safety when things go drastically wrong.

- 1. Prepare and rehearse your presentation.**
- 2. Arrive early and take care of the details.**
- 3. Maintain the appearance of confidence and calm especially when tested.**
- 4. Be clear on your purpose and message.**
- 5. In an emergency do what's right for your audience.**

1. A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First and Second Laws.

Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics

PS: If you found this information helpful then feel free to share this report with others.

PPS: If you want to offer your comments, feedback and testimonial please feel free to post on my blog at www.SpeechCoch.ca on www.Facebook.com/PresentationSkillsClub or email me at Coach@Torok.com

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www.YouTube.com/PresentationsSkills1

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<http://questionsaboutpublicspeaking.com/>

Presentation Coaching & Training

Study this report. Visualize the challenges. Internalize the lessons. Rehearse the techniques. Those activities will help you become a more effective presenter.

If you really want to transform your presentation skills you will need to work with a presentation coach.

If you want George Torok to help you, you can select from these options:

Executive Speech Coaching

One-on-one **in-person** speech coaching is still the most effective and efficient way to dramatically improve your presentation results. These private sessions are specific to your needs. Half day or full day sessions get the best results. We meet at your location to work on your specific presentation challenges.

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