

## Look 'Em in the Eyes: The Real Power of Eye Contact

“At that moment when our eyes are locked in silent communication, we are, in essence, touching.” -Debbie Bailey

Besides touch (not really an option in a presentation setting), eye contact is the most powerful and personal of all of presentation delivery cues. When you look an audience member in the eyes, for those few seconds, you are talking directly to him/her. Why is eye contact so powerful? Good eye contact cuts physical distance in half, helps you connect with your audience on a personal level, invites audience members to participate in your presentation (if I look at you long enough you WILL talk), enables you to gauge your audience's reaction to your presentation, stops hecklers from pestering you, and so much more. The fact is, when you look someone directly in the eyes, it is as if you are standing much closer to him/her. In a presentation setting, close is good. The closer you are, the more immediate you are, thus the harder you are to ignore. Think about it from the audience's perspective—it is much easier to tune out a presenter who is farther away from you (I can't see you, you can't see me). Because the audience members seated closest to you will have the best experience anyway, use your good eye contact to move yourself physically closer to audience members seated in the back of the room. Your eye contact also provides you with valuable feedback about how the audience is receiving your message. Approval, confusion, excitement, hostility, frustration, and many other emotions are all expressed through your audience's body language. Eye contact will help you read and react to the silent messages your audience is sending you about their understanding, their likes, and their dislikes so you can determine what to reinforce, review, hurry through, etc. There is definitely an art to making good, strong eye contact. The best eye contact is direct and sustained—lasting 4 to 5 seconds per audience member. That is MUCH longer than most people think. In fact, inexperienced presenters often make the mistake of glancing quickly around the room without holding eye contact for any length of time. Their eye contact appears to bounce from person to person. Instead, look at each audience member until you see him/her silently acknowledge you before moving on to someone else. This will help you forge a much greater connection with each individual in your audience. Be aware that most presenters show eye contact favoritism. This means that they look at certain people in the audience more than others. Research indicates that we tend to look at the audience members who give us the most positive feedback and also the people with the most authority (i.e. the CEO in the room). While it is confirming to look at the people who are enjoying our presentation (“they like me they really do”), make it a point to look at everyone as equally as possible. Audience members who don't feel that you are talking to them (as demonstrated by your lack of eye contact) will have the tendency to tune out. And as for looking at the people in power, remember, they are watching you to see how you treat the others in their organization. The best way to demonstrate your fairness and respect is through eye contact equality. Want more proof about the power of eye contact? Try using your eye contact to make someone speak. Look someone directly in the eyes and sit silently, saying nothing. Then just wait (it is hard to do, but be patient). The individual you are looking at will be compelled to speak. Behold, the POWER of eye contact! Conversely, if you have a heckler in the audience, you need to use a different visual tactic. Hecklers—defined as those who want only to embarrass or annoy—almost always sit in the back of the room, where you have difficulty seeing them. Hecklers want to remain anonymous, that's why you need to use your eye contact to single them out. With your eyes, say, “I know who you are and I see what you're doing.” Sometimes, I even walk closer to them while looking at them—it absolutely unnerves them. Then, once you've established that you see them--NEVER look at them again. All except the most persistent hecklers will get the message. If eye contact is the most powerful nonverbal communicator, why do many presenters waste precious eye contact looking at their slides? Presenters watch their slides (instead of their audience) as if at any moment, their slides might change into something new and exciting--“I've got to keep my eyes on them because you never know what they will do.” Avoid the tendency to look at your slides. Instead, focus the power of your eye contact on that which may really surprise you—your audience.

## About the Author

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