

Hijacking Emotion Is the Key to Engaging Your Audience

The amygdala is the emotional center that governs fight, flight, and whether or not your audience will text through your next presentation. We need audiences to feel first, and then to think.

BY HELIO FRED GARCIA

The default to emotion is part of the human condition.

To better appreciate the role of emotion and what it allows an audience to do, we need to take a brief detour into evolutionary biology. The human brain can be understood as three separate brains working in tandem, if not completely integrated with each other.

The primitive brain and the limbic brain collectively make up the limbic system, which governs emotion. Within the limbic system, there is a structure called the amygdala, which leaders need to understand.

When faced with a stimulus, the amygdala turns our emotions on. It does so instantaneously, without our having to think about it. We find ourselves responding to a threat even before we're consciously aware of it. Think of jumping back when we see a sudden movement in front of us, or being startled by the sound of a loud bang. We also respond instantaneously to positive stimulus without thinking about it: Note how we tend to smile back when someone smiles at us; how we are immediately distracted when something we consider beautiful enters our line of sight.

The amygdala is the key to understanding an audience's emotional response, and to connecting with an audience. It plays an important role in *salience*, what grabs and keeps our attention. In other words, attention is an emotion-driven phenomenon. If we want to get and hold an audience's attention, we need to trigger the amygdala to our advantage. Only when we have an audience's attention can we then move them to rational argument.

I have become somewhat notorious in the programs I teach at NYU for the way I start each class. I teach all-day sessions on Saturdays, and as the 9 a.m. start time approaches, most students are still milling about, getting settled, and chatting with each other. At precisely 9 a.m. I touch a button on my remote mouse and play a sudden blast of very loud music. Most of the time it's the chorus of "Let's Get It Started" by the Black Eyed Peas, but to keep the element of surprise I sometimes vary the selection. After a 10-second burst of very loud music, I have every student's undivided attention. I then lock in the connection: I smile, welcome them, thank them for investing a full Saturday in developing their careers. Only then do I begin the class. I have hijacked their amygdalas. We need audiences to feel first, and then to think.

Five Strategies for Audience Engagement

When leaders are speaking to audiences that are under stress—even if the audience is merely tired or distracted—the leader can take the amygdala into account in determining how the content is structured and how the audience is engaged. Here are five ways to engage effectively:

1. **Establish connection before saying anything substantive.** And remember that the connection is physical. Techniques to connect include asking for the audience's attention, if only with a powerful and warm greeting, followed by silence and eye contact. The key is to make sure the audience isn't doing something else so that they pay attention.
2. **Say the most important thing first** once you have their attention. The most important thing should be a powerful framing statement that will control the meaning of all that follows. Remember that frames have to precede facts.
3. **Close with a recapitulation** of the powerful framing statement that opened the presentation.
4. **Make it easy to remember.** Keep in mind how hard it is for people to listen, hear, and remember. One way is to repeat key points. I often hear from clients, "But I've already said this. I don't need to say it again." Or, "I don't want to say it again." Or, "If I have to say this again, I'll throw up. I'm tired of repeating myself." But leaders need to constantly repeat the key themes, within any given presentation, and in general as a matter of organizational strategy. It doesn't matter if they're bored with saying it. The audience needs to hear it, again and again. And again. As a general principle, people need to hear things three times if they are to even pay attention to it. And because any given audience member at any time may be distracted or inattentive, he or she is unlikely to hear or attend to everything that is said. So leaders need to repeat key points far more than three times to be sure that everyone has heard it at least three times. One of the burdens of leadership is to have a very high tolerance for repetition.
5. **Follow the rule of threes.*** Have three main points. But no more than three main points; no more than three topics; no more than three examples per topic. Group thoughts in threes; words in threes; actions in threes. (See how I just used the Rule of Threes in that sentence?) Think of Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address: "We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground."

***Mrs. C says: note that grouping ideas in 3s doesn't mean revert to 5 ¶ form.**

The default to emotion is part of the human condition. The amygdala governs the fight-or-flight impulse, the triggering of powerful emotions, and the release of chemicals that put humans in a heightened state of arousal. Humans are not thinking machines. We're feeling machines who also think. We feel first, and then we think. As a result, leaders need to meet emotion with emotion before they can move audiences with reason.

The following is an adapted excerpt from [The Power of Communication: Skills to Build Trust, Inspire Loyalty, and Lead Effectively](#) by Helio Fred Garcia, printed with permission from FT Press, a publishing imprint of Pearson.