

The Intersection Between Stage Actors and C-Suite Executives

By: Maddie Stengel

Audience members mingle casually, filing into their seats. An announcement is made; a hush falls across the cavernous room. Lights dim and the curtain rises - a performance begins. A story unfolds across the stage, perfectly manicured to color the script. Performers move choreographically around each other, communicating with body and voice. The narrative builds, rising to a peak before gently falling back to earth. Darkness lingers momentarily before house-lights rise and the audience filters out. Left behind on the stage, we find a map for effective corporate communication.

Before I studied the science of communication, I studied the art. My undergraduate studies took place in a conservatory-style program known for its pipeline to Broadway and cutthroat review process (a brutal ordeal in which some students were deemed unfit for the profession and asked to leave the program within the first two years). Classes were grueling and physically demanding. Fourteen-hour days were commonplace. We read pages of theatre history, comparing cultural norms across countries and eras. We spent hours studying the anatomy and physiology of the human voice. We sat in front of mirrors manipulating our facial muscles and breath patterns to elicit specific emotional responses from ourselves and others. We were broken down into small pieces and built back up into Olympian-level storytellers.

After graduating, I quickly had the excruciating realization that I did not want to be a professional actor. I no longer saw anything in my notebooks other than fictional gibberish, useless for another career path. It wasn't until I stepped back from theatre entirely and joined a corporate law firm that I saw how my artistic skills translated to other professional spaces. When I joined the firm, I discovered unexpected parallels between theatre and law. Attorneys spend their days crafting stories in defense of their clients. They often receive unexpected outcomes and must pivot their reactions accordingly without seeming alarmed. Their words carry power, but their voices must convey those words with strength. My artistic background suddenly made sense again in this new field.

The best actors (think Denzel Washington, Meryl Streep, Joaquin Phoenix, etc.) succeed because they embody the stories of others. They captivate viewers by stepping out of their own lives and into the reality of another. Not only are they effective communicators on screen, but the highest caliber actors are just as effective on live stages. For instance, Helen McCrory is known for her proud, ruthless portrayal of Aunt Polly in Netflix's *Peaky Blinders*. She masterfully manages the violent dynamics of men around her in a way that fits the intimacy of a television screen. In contrast, I watched her perform live in the National Theatre's 2016 production of *The Deep Blue Sea*. Sitting mid-depth in the balcony, I was taken aback by her ability to portray soft vulnerability from hundreds of feet away. This kind of fluid public communication is exactly what c-level executives should hope to convey.

Executives can benefit greatly from lessons taught in a professional acting class. Corporate spaces are just as cutthroat as a conservatory program (*insert any horror story from competitive law/business schools*). Before making it into the C-suite, these leaders also spent countless nights poring over research, data, and historical analyses. So, it is not an actor's competitive edge that should be emulated. In fact, it's the opposite. Corporate leaders can and should incorporate some of the vulnerability and complexity required of actors into their public communications.

Lauded acting teacher, Sanford Meisner, devised one of the most famed naturalistic

techniques called the ‘Word Repetition Game.’ Described by Backstage Magazine¹, the exercise’s basic rules:

...require an actor to sit across from their scene partner and make an observation about them. The scene partner then repeats the observation back. This exercise aims to create a connection between the actors by ensuring that they are actively listening to one another. Meisner described it as a ping-pong game that becomes the foundation for emotional connection...the actors begin by repeating the exact same sentence, such as “You’re looking at me.” Then they advance to repeating the observation from their own points of view, as in “You’re looking at me,” followed by the other actor saying, “I’m looking at you.” Or, if the actor is not looking at their scene partner, they could respond, “I’m not looking at you.”

The product is not an earth-shattering scene but rather a demonstration of real listening skills and engaged responses. Practiced in a corporate space, executives would have a chance to concentrate their attention on the person in front of them. Ideally, the exercise would be done across roles by pairing leaders with lower-level employees. Executives need the opportunity to listen to people directly in front of them without distraction. Employees would get a chance to recognize the most-senior executives as relatable individuals. An experience like the Repetition Game would encourage leaders to disengage from the environmental-noise of organizational demands and client needs in order to respond more directly to their colleagues. The exercise also prompts participants to pay close attention to body language, acknowledge their immediate surroundings, and speak in a way that is clear and concise. Much like an actor, an executive should not respond preemptively to circumstances that have not happened. In order to maintain a calm environment, it’s important that leaders stay engaged in the present moment. Their vision for the future can then be shaped by the real experiences of their employees.

When communicating publicly, it is the speaker’s job to captivate their audience. Any public-speaking opportunities can be treated like short plays for the stage. An executive delivering a speech is responsible for performing. It is their duty to prepare in advance so that the written words are captured correctly. It is their charge to practice the choreography of their hands, their posture, their volume, pauses, and inflection. As the speech moves forward, it should take the path of a story; one that rises to a climactic moment before falling back to a new stasis. Just like an actor grabs their audience, it is the corporate speaker’s responsibility to persuade stakeholders to both hear and absorb their message.

Now, picture this: Employees gather in a conference room, chatting as they settle. Their leader steps to the front, calling the meeting to order. Voices hush, a presentation flicks across the screen. Over the course of their speech, the executive guides employees through a story, one that paints a picture of the project or organization’s trajectory. A goal is set and steps are laid out for its pursuit. The speaker pivots, opening the space up for questions. Employees engage with their leader as they collaboratively address concerns and share ideas. The executive adjourns the group and the listeners return to their daily lives. Much like a theatrical stage, this corporate space has become a place to tell stories and imagine new futures.

¹Ates, A. (2022, March 14). *The Meisner Acting Technique: A Complete Guide*. Backstage. Retrieved July 2, 2022, from <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/the-definitive-guide-to-the-meisner-technique-67712/>