

Prepare to be Spontaneous

IMPROMPTU

Leading in
the Moment

Judith Humphrey

WILEY

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Published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.

Published simultaneously in Canada.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:

Names: Humphrey, Judith, 1943– author.

Title: Impromptu : leading in the moment / by Judith Humphrey.

Description: Hoboken, New Jersey : John Wiley & Sons, Inc., [2018] | Includes bibliographical references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017029464 (print) | LCCN 2017040994 (ebook) | ISBN 9781119286769 (pdf) | ISBN 9781119286776 (epub) | ISBN 9781119286752 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Communication in management. | Business communication. | Extemporaneous speaking. | Leadership.

Classification: LCC HD30.3 (ebook) | LCC HD30.3 .H8569 2018 (print) | DDC 658.4/092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017029464>

Custom cover typography by Fang Yu and Ben Egnal

Cover Design: Wiley

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Marc

*For all the impromptu moments that have
made our life together so joyous*

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PROLOGUE

The Soul of This Book

Every book—whether autobiographical, fiction, business, or general interest—comes out of the author’s inner being. Some go deeper into that place than others do. Even more than my two previous books, *Speaking as a Leader* and *Taking the Stage*, this work comes out of a very personal journey.

It all began when I was asked to give an impromptu speech in seventh grade. Our teacher thought it would be a good idea for the 12-year-olds in her class to be able to speak extemporaneously, and I was the first to be called upon. I headed to the front of the class with no small amount of trepidation, and things got worse when the topic she gave me was “boys.” I vividly remember panicking because as a shy young preteen girl I certainly had thoughts about boys, but none I wanted to share publicly. Besides, talking about the opposite sex was taboo for me since I was raised in a household where we weren’t even allowed to watch Elvis Presley on TV. In front of the class I somehow was able to blurt out my first line: “I don’t know why you’ve asked me to talk about boys since I come from a family of five girls.” But everything after that is a blur—I don’t remember a word of it. I only remember the fear I felt in the spotlight.

I believe that episode shaped the trajectory of my career and life. Shortly after that awkward experience, I took up the violin and played on stage as often as I could to overcome my nerves. I went to a top music school, Indiana University, and continued to perform with chamber groups and orchestras. When I went on to graduate school in Rochester,

New York, I switched to literature, and then became a university lecturer in Toronto, regularly speaking before groups of several hundred students. Eventually (after several years as a speech writer) I launched The Humphrey Group to help other leaders overcome these fears and be successful communicators.

It was not always easy for me to stand on these stages and play my violin, or in later years to speak with authority and conviction. As an undergraduate I forced myself to speak up at least once in every class. As a university lecturer, I'd often arrive just in the nick of time—prepping up to the last minute. As an entrepreneur, I faced down my fears when I made cold calls to CEOs, spoke to companies about our services, or pitched training at senior levels.

My salvation was that I practiced hard for these roles. And I've found that the same discipline is required for all the impromptu moments in our life. This book and its central argument—that you need to prepare to be spontaneous—comes from all the years I've spent working to be successful on stage and dedicating myself to preparation, whether for a violin performance, a university lecture, a pitch to prospective clients as an entrepreneur, a tribute speech to family and friends, even a marriage proposal. As a result, I've come to feel more relaxed and confident on stage—whatever that stage may be.

Most of the speaking all of us do fits into the category of impromptu communication. It includes all the remarks that have helped us succeed, get our ideas across, negotiate pay raises, and build relationships with friends and colleagues. I know how important these exchanges have been for me. I'm certain this book will support readers in the same way. It will give you the confidence and skills to be a superb impromptu speaker and in so doing move toward your professional and life goals. These key moments are not governed by a “quick fix” or “winging it.”

The larger vision of this book is that discipline and preparation are the secret to successful spontaneity—and a successful life.

Judith Humphrey
Toronto, Canada

Making speeches on the spot is necessary both for those who address the people and for those who go to court and for those who take part in private gatherings... [and] we see those who can speak [extemporaneously] honoured by others as if they had a god-like intellect.

—Alcidamas, 4th century BC

IMPROMPTU

INTRODUCTION

At the 2017 Oscars®, movie producer Jordan Horowitz provided viewers with a remarkable impromptu moment. He had just accepted the Best Picture award for *La La Land*. Suddenly there was commotion on stage, and the PricewaterhouseCoopers folks informed him that *Moonlight* had actually won. Others might have been speechless—or angry. But instead, Horowitz boldly announced: “There’s a mistake. ‘Moonlight,’ you guys won Best Picture. This is not a joke.” Then, holding up his Oscar statuette, he said: “I’m going to be really proud to hand this to my friends from ‘Moonlight.’”¹

These brief remarks were brilliant, and were justly praised by the media. Horowitz showed grace in announcing the real winner and offering up the prize so generously. Later he explained, “It was not about me. It was about making sure that ‘Moonlight’ got the recognition it really deserves.”²

I’d like to think that everyone who reads this book will respond to off-the-cuff situations as eloquently as Jordan Horowitz did.

“But,” you may ask, “isn’t impromptu speaking something people do without thinking much about it?” The word “impromptu” conjures up the instantaneous remark, the wedding toast done in a flash of friendship, the job interview where you decided to “wing it,” the insightful comment that just came into your head at a meeting. Yes, these are all acts of spontaneity. But as we know, they don’t always go well. Who could be more aware of this than Tony Hayward, the BP executive who told a reporter after the explosion on the Deepwater

Horizon oil rig that “I’d like my life back.” The world knew, as he did, that eleven individuals had lost their lives in the fire. His words left a bad taste—so bad that he was vilified in the media and removed from his high-profile role.³

And it’s not just high-profile leaders who wing it and regret it. How many managers become tongue-tied when they speak up at a meeting, or go on too long, losing the thread of what they had wanted to say? How many leaders, when asked a question, ramble and conclude with a desperate, “What I’m really saying is . . .?” How many of us on conference calls wish we had been more astute and wonder if the others on the call tuned out? Who has not passed a colleague in the corridor and only afterward thought of something more meaningful to say than “How’s it going?” What manager has not been stuck in the elevator with a senior executive and looked down at the floor, afraid to speak, not knowing what to say, regretting afterward the missed opportunity? And who has not spoken up at a meeting only to feel that she “lost it” in the middle of her thought?

Here’s the rub: so many of us think of impromptu speaking as “winging it.” That’s why our corridor and watercooler conversations can sound so banal, our comments in meetings can be poorly thought out, and we can be awkward in our attempt to distill a thirty-minute PowerPoint deck into a few pithy messages when our boss says, “Just give me the big picture.” It’s not surprising that we have phone conversations that don’t seem to go anywhere. It is not surprising that when we answer a question, we can flounder. It is, in short, not surprising that our daily conversations are often not geared to leadership and our encounters can be less than inspiring.

Impromptu speaking is an art that few have mastered. Yet it’s a critical skill for leaders—not just those with fancy titles—but those at all levels who wish to come across as polished and persuasive. Impromptu speaking enables us to influence and inspire in day-to-day situations that are becoming more and more common.

What You Will Learn from This Book

The purpose of this book is to enable every reader to become much better at extemporaneous speaking. The secret is preparation! As paradoxical as it may sound, you must prepare to be spontaneous. The two statements on the cover of this book are key. “Leading in the moment” is the goal for anyone who wishes to have day-to-day impact on others. And “prepare to be spontaneous” is the means to achieving that goal.

We all have so much to say—all of us are experts in one or more fields, and we can talk endlessly if we are excited about our topic. But to say something meaningful, something motivational, something that conveys leadership on the spot, takes discipline. In some cases, you’ll have only moments to collect your thoughts. In other cases, your preparation can begin well in advance of the event.

Here’s a range of impromptu situations that demand some degree of preparation and forethought.

- Deciding you want to contribute to a meeting and collecting your thoughts in a few seconds.
- Sitting at a dinner event and suddenly hearing you are receiving an award (which you knew), but also hearing that you will be giving an acceptance speech (which you didn’t know). You jot down a few notes on the back of a napkin.
- Attending a networking event, where you know you’ll see prospective employers. You wisely polish your “elevator pitch” in advance.
- Being told you have only five minutes to give what you had thought was a thirty-minute presentation. You quickly redraft the talk to give only “the big picture.”
- Seizing a moment to coach an employee and collecting your thoughts so you can leave her with a few key messages.

- Preparing for a Q&A by thinking of possible questions and developing answers.
- Finding yourself in the elevator with your boss's boss. Knowing exactly what to say because you've been thinking about how much you liked his last speech.
- Paying tribute to a departing employee with a few notes you've created.
- Being interviewed for a job and making a strong case for yourself because you've prepared notes that sell you into the role.

You won't read a script in any of these situations. You'll invent the words on the spot. But you must prepare. In fact, there needs to be just as much discipline in creating your impromptu remarks as there is in preparing for more formal speaking situations.

To lead in impromptu situations requires the right mind-set, knowledge of your material, key messages, a sound structure, clear language, and an engaging presence. All this takes preparation. In fact the word, "impromptu" derives from the Latin *in promptu* meaning "in readiness."⁴ This book will show you how to be ready for all the extemporaneous situations you face every day.

Mastering the art of impromptu speaking is more important than ever in today's fast-paced, time-challenged world. Whereas decades ago you might have had weeks or months to prepare your remarks for an off-site strategy session, today such planned events are often replaced by conference calls, sometimes scheduled in a matter of minutes. And while in the past scripted speaking was the order of the day for executives and political leaders, today these staged communications are often replaced by Q&A sessions or press conferences. With the advent of social media, impromptu remarks are instantly broadcast to far-flung audiences.

Times have dramatically changed, and the stakes for these off-the-cuff comments have become very high. Those spontaneous

remarks can inspire and unite audiences, or they can wreak havoc. They can upset employees or anger voters. More than ever, there is a need to bring leadership to the impromptu stage.

This book will equip you to speak “in the moment” in ways that will convey leadership. And it will enable you to speak off the cuff in ways that will look and sound spontaneous—but will be thoughtful, well-argued, and deeply motivational.

History’s Great Impromptu Speakers Were Made, Not Born

History provides many examples of individuals who faced the challenge of impromptu speaking—and discovered how to measure up to that challenge.

The first story recorded in Old English, back in the seventh century, told of a humble cowherd named Caedmon who was called upon to speak spontaneously at a mead hall feast. It was customary to pass around a harp and ask each guest to tell a story. The cowherd saw the harp coming toward him and panicked. He fled the hall in embarrassment. But he had a mystical dream that night, and when he returned to the hall he was able to miraculously compose a song of creation. All agreed it was divinely inspired.⁵

Abraham Lincoln knew the importance of spur-of-the-moment comments. He told young lawyers that: “Extemporaneous speaking should be practiced and cultivated. It is the lawyer’s avenue to the public.”⁶ Lincoln practiced what he preached, and as a result became an extraordinary impromptu speaker as was evident in the Lincoln-Douglas debates.⁷

Winston Churchill, who would become one of the greatest orators of all time, honed his impromptu speaking skills. Early in his career he stood up to speak before the British Parliament and his mind went blank. According to a contemporary, Churchill stood there in silence “until at last he could bear it no longer; back in his seat, he could only bury his head in his hands. After his breakdown in the House

of Commons he dreaded getting up to speak more than ever.”⁸ But Churchill worked hard on his speaking and became an eloquent orator.

Martin Luther King, Jr., was another leader who became a remarkable extemporaneous speaker through lifelong practice. As a preacher he would think through each sermon in advance, but he didn’t read from a prepared text or notes. This gave him the opportunity to “rearrange ideas on the fly even being able to pull in sections of a totally different sermon.”⁹ This ability to create his material in the moment was a powerful force behind his “I Have a Dream” speech. Even though he had prepared a speech the night before, the “I Have a Dream” refrain, which is the heart and soul of that address, was improvised while he was speaking. He moved the crowd in a performance that reflected his extraordinary impromptu powers.¹⁰

Some of today’s most highly regarded business leaders have wrestled with—and overcome—stage fright, and are now superb impromptu speakers. Virgin Group’s Richard Branson has spoken openly about his early traumas with speaking¹¹ and how he used informal phone pitches to develop his impromptu skills.¹² Tesla CEO Elon Musk has admitted that he “used to be horrendous at public speaking,”¹³ and his comfort level is now with unscripted speaking. Warren Buffett said he was “terrified of public speaking,”¹⁴ but today he speaks confidently in impromptu situations, most notably at his shareholder meetings where he is live-streamed to the entire world and fields questions for hours.¹⁵

Today’s leaders have abundant opportunities to speak extemporaneously, and it’s important to develop these skills whether you’re building a business, leading an organization, expressing your political agenda, or inspiring colleagues around you.

The Power of This Book

This book focuses on the new world of communications and the opportunity to influence and inspire every day, every hour, every moment. It’s for leaders. And by “leaders” I don’t mean just those who

hold top positions in their organizations. I mean anyone who wishes to influence others at any level, in any capacity, inside or outside the workplace.

Impromptu: Leading in the Moment presents a single, consistent approach that works in all situations, whether you are making a point at a meeting, answering a question in the corridor, chatting at a networking event, or saying a few words at a luncheon. All these situations are platforms for your leadership. And your ability to direct the conversation toward a solution or the acceptance of an idea will serve you well as a leader. I'd also like to think that this book will inspire those who give formal speeches and PowerPoint presentations to consider impromptu speaking as a smart alternative.

The book is divided into five parts providing leaders with a roadmap for speaking impromptu.

Part I: *The New World of Impromptu* explores why extemporaneous speaking has come to dominate business life. It discusses the larger changes in organizations and how top-down structures have given way to flatter organizations in which everyone is potentially a leader and (at other times) a follower. This democratization of leadership and the movement from “big stages” to “small stages” creates enormous opportunity for those who excel at impromptu speaking.

Part II: *The Impromptu Mind-Set* explores the mental preparation required to be an effective spontaneous leader. The impromptu mind-set involves having the intention to lead, being a good listener, being authentic, being focused, and being respectful. These values and attitudes are absolutely necessary if you want to move a room—or reach one individual.

Part III: *The Leader's Script* shows you how to organize your thinking. You first need a storehouse of information and key messages to draw upon. Next comes the task of reading your audience. Once you've done that you're ready to create your script. This section sets forth the Leader's Script template for creating impromptu remarks. Its key elements are the grabber, message, structure, and call to action.

Part IV: *Impromptu Scripts for Every Occasion* offers readers templates they can use to script themselves as leaders in a full range of off-the-cuff situations. You will find scripts for meetings, job interviews, networking events, elevator conversations, micro-presentations, tributes, toasts, impromptu speeches, and Q&As.

Part V: *The Impromptu Stage* shows you how to rehearse and deliver your impromptu remarks. This involves choosing your words carefully, being “in the moment,” and building rapport with your audience through the skills that improvisational actors use. In this section you will also learn how to be vocally strong and physically present in a way that engages your audience.

This book will enable you to speak as a confident leader in all off-the-cuff situations, so that you’ll lead and inspire others every time you speak.

The impromptu words of tennis great, Roger Federer, offer one excellent example of how eloquent and inspirational your off-the-cuff speaking can be. After winning his eighth Wimbledon tournament in 2017, he said, “It’s magical. I can’t believe it yet. I guess it’s just belief that I can achieve such heights.” Then he explained, “I wasn’t sure I was ever going to be here again in another finals after last year and I had some tough ones with Novak [Djokovic] in 2014 and 2015. But I always believed that I could maybe come back and do it again. If you believe, you can go really far in your life. I think I did that, and I’m happy that I kept on believing and dreaming and here I am today.”¹⁶

Impromptu: Leading in the Moment will enable you to find the self-expression that takes you to these inspirational heights. You don’t have to be a tennis star or a CEO to be so inspiring. You may be a manager, a team leader, or an intern. Whatever your role, every day in every conversation you will be able to motivate, lead, and inspire by taking the journey mapped out in this book.

Part I

The New World of Impromptu