

Ep #16: How to Stop the CEO from Interrupting Your Presentation



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Michelle Barry Franco

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Welcome to *Beyond Applause*, a podcast for mission-driven leaders, coaches, and creatives who are ready to share their expertise and stories through public speaking. Here's your host, Michelle Barry Franco.

Hello, hello, my speaker friends. So today, we get to answer a question that I get asked so often, especially when I'm facilitating a training for inside of an organization. But this actually comes up, and you'll probably recognize it yourself, whether you're speaking inside of an organization or you're facilitating sessions on behalf of your own business or even doing just conference speaking and breakout sessions.

So I know this comes up everywhere, so let me set the scene for you. You're standing in front of this room full of people and you have worked hard to craft a presentation to share your idea, take your stand for something, and you've built a really good case for it. Maybe you've got some awesome slides that support the argument that you're making.

But as you stand up there and you're just kind of getting your momentum, you're a quarter or a third of the way in, someone in the room – probably a high-level leader, maybe your CEO, but it could be the client, you know, the executive client that you're trying to woo and engage with your product or your service going forward.

Whoever it is, they stop you and they say, "Excuse me, I have a question." And they ask you a question that you were going to address like 20 minutes from now, or maybe seven minutes from now. You might think of it as 15 slides from now. But whatever it is, they're interrupting the flow of your presentation.

And sometimes, even, if you can kind of handle it that first time and give them a quick answer and say, "I'll promise more on that later." They might

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come back with another similar question that's out just a few steps further than that one just as you're building momentum again, right.

So you just keep getting interrupted with questions that are not relevant to what you're talking about in that moment but that you were planning on covering within this presentation, ideally. Sometimes, they're even things you weren't planning on covering.

So I want to talk with you about that today; why is this happening? Why is it that the CEO or other high-level leader keeps interrupting your presentation?

So I remember, during one training session that I was facilitating for a large organization, it was the last session of those two-day training and one of the managers in the room says to me, "So are the executives here at this company going to get the same training that you're sharing?"

And, in fact in this particular company, yes, they were training everyone inside the organization. Now, this is pretty uncommon in my experience, but it was pretty delightful to be able to say yes to that. but the conversation that ensued from there, because I asked them – yes, in fact they are, what's coming up for you?

And they're saying, you sharing all of these awesome best practices and I can see why these will make us better speakers. They will make our presentations more engaging and all the things we want as speakers, as presenters. But if the executives inside the organization aren't on board with this and if they're sort of like – if we stand up in front of the room and we've got a bunch of image-based slides and there's not a lot of words on the slides, they're going to be like, wait a minute. Where's the document that I'm supposed to be reading along with while I'm sitting here in your audience?

So here's the point. We have to use these best practices that I share with the audience in mind always, which means, if you've got a room full of executives or high-level leaders, or as is often the case, you've got a mixed

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audience and you've got some high-level leaders in there, you definitely need to make sure you know what's on their mind, what they're needing and wanting, so that you can address it early on.

So yes, these best practices are truly awesome and they can work whatever your organization or whatever kind of speaking you're doing, but you're going to need to set things up appropriately depending on the audience so that you don't have the executive or high-level leaders in the room interrupting you and saying, "Hey, where's this thing that I need?" Whatever it is.

At some point during almost every training I facilitate, someone in the room asks that question; how do I stop the executives from interrupting my presentation? Here's the thing; whether the high-level leader in your audience is a potential client that you want to engage or it's a leader inside your own organization, they probably have a few things in common.

Number one – they have way more to do than time to do it. By the way, this is probably the case for you too, right. It's the case for many of us. They spend most of their day making decisions. That is a huge part of their job all day long. This is exhausting and sometimes really frustrating. So they really look for as much ease as they can find in decision-making.

And three – they want you to get to the point. And when I say the point, I mean the one that they care about. So it's really essential that you hold this in your mind when you have an audience of high-level executives or you've got an important decision-maker that you're really wanting to engage in the audience.

So, of course, the big question here is, why are they doing this and, maybe more importantly, what do you do about it? So that's what I want to share with you today is why they're doing this and how you can actually prepare your talk so that they are far less likely to interrupt you, take you off course and possibly even just shatter your confidence going forward in delivering a presentation you've worked really hard on.

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So, of course, we're going to cover three things, as usual. And the first thing is – the first reason that they're probably doing this is that you haven't done a good enough audience analysis. I can't say this enough times or passionately enough. Your deep rich audience analysis is going to lead you to creating the kind of content that will captivate, engage, and keep the attention of over time and, ideally, often persuade the people in the room that you want to make a difference for or to persuade.

So you have to do that deep audience analysis. You have to ask those questions; such as who's going to be in this room? What role do they play in the organization, in the world, in their family? You want to list out their roles, their titles, that kind of thing, so that you're really connected with who's going to be in the room; paying special attention to those that you most need to engage and persuade, if persuasion is part of what you're trying to do.

And then given these relevant roles, what do you think brings them to this particular presentation? What motivated them to be there? Why are they taking their precious time to sit in your audience? And answer that question honestly because sometimes the first answer is, well because someone is making them be there.

Well, what might actually serve them about being in your audience? Because obviously, someone making them be there isn't a good answer, unless you can answer the question, why did that person want them to be there? So if they are in your audience on behalf of their boss, for example, what is their boss wanting, so you can deliver that to that person and they can deliver that to their boss, right.

What bothers them or confuses them or worries them so much that it keeps them up at night or it just nags at them throughout the day? And how is what you are about to talk about – how does it address that or can it maybe address the thing that is most pressing for them? What are they hoping to take away from this presentation? How do you want them to feel as they leave?

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So there are all of these questions – this is before you ever sit down to start crafting content. This is the most important part of your presentation prep. And in my experience, over many, many years of working with speaker sand presenters, it is the most often missed part. And it's for good reason, it's innocently.

It's because we just have so little time and we put off doing presentations because there's so many pieces to it and its anxiety-provoking for many of us that we're at this last-minute, like okay what do I want to say? And we just lay all that out.

And when we ask ourselves the question, what do I want to say? Instead of, what do they most want and also need to hear? We end up crafting the wrong talk. And when you've got a room full of executives especially, they have very little tolerance for listening to things that don't feel relevant to them.

So that's the first thing. You haven't done a really good audience analysis. And this can get you into tricky situations, by the way. It makes me think of a time I showed up to do a presentation at a nonprofit organization and because I had not spend the appropriate time on audience analysis, and in particular, yes, asking myself all those questions, but also asking my contact at this organization some of these questions so that they could help me make sure that I was answering them correctly, I literally crafted the wrong talk for this organization.

I mean, I had a room full of volunteers who were expecting to have a conversation about how to have difficult conversations, because these are people who have to have difficult conversations every day as part of their volunteer work, and I was there and began a presentation and facilitation on how to be a better speaker – how to be a better outreach speaker on behalf of the organization.

Now, fortunately, pretty early on, I realized, by their perplexed faces, that this is not at all what they were expecting and we were able to, you know, shift focus, which actually is another thing you want to be prepared to do. If

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you're being interrupted regularly, you want to notice, oh wow, I didn't ask the right questions ahead of time, I didn't focus this presentation appropriately. How can I meet the needs of this high-level leader?

So you also want to have that kind of agility. And doing an audience analysis ahead of time also helps you be ready for that as well. The second reason that that high-level leader is probably interrupting you is that you started in the wrong place in your content. And this happens because we often want to start from the beginning.

We think, well let me tell you the background on this. And here's the thing; especially with high-level leaders, they don't care about the background until they know how it's relevant to the most pressing thing on their mind. So you've done this rich audience analysis and you know what is most pressing on their mind. You want to start with that thing; that thing that is most pressing on their mind.

Enter into the conversation at that place. From this entry point – I know that this thing is on your mind, I know that the biggest problem we have going on right now is the budget. I know that in every department inside of our company, we are overspending and we don't have a good system for tracking our expenditure, so we don't even find out that we've overspent until the end of the month. And if this is the most pressing thing on the mind of the executive or set of executives in the room, then you want to state that early on.

Start right there. And when you can see or feel their heads nodding, then you can give a little bit more backstory. Then you can start with a story, but you can't start with a story unless they know why you're starting with that story.

I have seen this one tweak in approach to content dramatically change both the impact of the presentation on the audience, and especially the leaders in the room, but also in the confidence of speakers. I can think of one newly promoted manager at a really large company that I was working with and she had just been promoted into this position and she was going to need to

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do a lot more speaking. And she was nervous about it because her previous supervisorial position just didn't ask her to do more formal presentations in this way, and certainly not to high-level leadership the way her new position would.

So we took this very long – there were like 85 slides in this deck that had been built over time that a bunch of people had contributed to and there's a lot of things we did to the presentation to make it better, but one of the most important things and the thing that she felt the most excited about, both when we were crafting the talk, but also when she was prepping and delivering it, was that she could see how starting with exactly what was on their mind would get their attention.

And after she delivered that presentation, which was her first presentation in her new position, I got this super-excited email from her saying, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe how amazing that was. I felt so great from the beginning." And I know that it was because she had made that one tweak to her presentation.

So start from the right spot. And the right spot is the person or set of people you most want to engage in the room, which will often be that high-level executive. Make sure you're talking about what's on their mind; most pressing for them. That builds a kind of trust that allows you to go back a little bit and build some story or give them some background so that you can lead them to the outcome that you want to lead them to.

Finally, the third reason that you're probably being interrupted by that high-level executive or leader is that you haven't built enough of your own credibility. I have watched way too many well-intentioned really well-prepared speakers just get shattered way early on in their presentation because they didn't build enough credibility with the high-level executives in the room who are always asking the question, what does this have to do with me and what's most pressing on my mind? Why am I here? And really, do I even need to be here?

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They're always asking these questions in their mind throughout their day because they really do need to filter their day that specifically and clearly. When you haven't established your credibility, they don't know that they can trust you to help solve a problem that's most pressing on their mind.

So you want to deliver that credibility early. You just don't want to spend a lot of time doing it and you want to do it in a graceful way. So two graceful ways that I've seen and employed are, number one – tell a quick relevant story. Like, if you've got a client in the room that you're wanting to engage, tell a story about a similar client that you have worked with successfully.

So this isn't about blowing your own horn or making it look like you are amazing. It's really showing how awesome the outcomes were and how much your client enjoyed them and that you got to be a part of that. and there's a nuance to the way you tell that kind of story, but when you tell it well, they can see themselves in that experience and they can also see you as a credible partner.

You can also tell a success story about you bring a part of solving a problem that's similar to the one that's trying to be solved through this presentation. So if this is an internal presentation, for example, and you've got leaders and executives in the room that you want buy-in from toward a solution that you are proposing but they don't know who you are – you haven't really worked with them or around them before – a great thing to do is to tell a quick relevant story about a similar problem that you got to be a part of solving that will show them that you have credibility around thinking through this kind of a problem, but also helping solve it.

And when you take some time early on in the presentation and make sure it's relevant and graceful to build this kind of credibility, again, the leaders in the room who are always asking, is this going to be worth my time, just breathe a little easier and sink into more trust. Okay, so this person knows what they're talking about, they understand the issue that's on my mind. And you understand it, by the way, because you've done a great audience

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analysis. So now, I'm going to sit back a little bit and I'll follow along with them on the journey.

You still have to stay as concise as possible. You still need to make sure that the rest of the content in your presentation stays relevant to the issues most important to them, but once you've built that kind of credibility and trust and shown that you know what they care about, they give you more room to cover some things that may be relevant to other people in the room more but that just are necessary as part of building the full story.

I know that delivering high-stakes presentations to a room full of high-level executives or people that are going to pay you big money or have a great deal of influence over your career can feel really intense and overwhelming. It's also the opportunity of a lifetime, or at least a super-exciting opportunity within your lifetime and within your career or your business.

And I want to make sure that you have the tools that allow you to be the most successful. If you do these three things – if you do an awesome audience analysis, if you make sure you start in the right spot that addresses the thing most present on their mind and if you build your credibility early, you are going to have so much more trust built and really a much more engaged and captivated audience throughout your whole presentation.

So I'm excited for you and I can't wait to hear how it goes. Will you let me know? As always, it has been such a delight to be here with you. You know I love my time with you every week.

If you want more tips and resources, and especially very cool actionable things like the only presentation outline you'll ever need – you'll use that over and over again – you can go to michellebarryfranco.com/start and get your Get Started Speaking Guide, which is probably misnamed, because it's really like uplevel your speaking, no matter where you are on the speaking journey.

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Thank you so much for being here with me today, my friends. I can't wait to be here with you next week. Take good care.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Beyond Applause*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more, head on over to michellebarryfranco.com/start to get your free complete guide to stepping into leadership speaking right away.