Captivate Audiences One Person at a Time

How can a speaker captivate the attention of an audience?

Psychologist Jordan Peterson might suggest that this is the wrong question. He writes in *12 Rules for Life* (a recent read of mine) that:

> *"There is also no 'audience.' There are individuals, who need to be included in the conversation. A well-practised and competent public speaker addresses a single, identifiable person. . ."*

If Peterson is right, you have to focus in on the smallest unit of your audience – the individual – to hold the attention of a group of individuals (the audience). Good speakers do this.

Great speakers and performers go one step further in applying this individual focus, beyond the best practice of simply *speaking* to an individual. They bring disproportionate value to one audience member out of a crowd of many.

Today I saw that one-step-further principle played out when T.K. Coleman (Praxis) and Abbey Lovett (Lyceum Communications and fellow Praxis grad) gave a talk about powerful communication at the Foundation for Economic Education's FEECon conference. TK brought the word on the importance of patient, non-entitled communication (you shouldn't expect other people to understand you if you don't try to be understood), and Abbey (on fairly short notice) gave a rundown of the power of the thesis statement to clarify takeaways for audiences.

The moment when the talk went from good to great came in Q&A. A man asked about how to overcome fear of public speaking. Instead of just giving advice, TK called the guy up to the mic and gave him a minute to confront his fear and speak to the audience.

Things could have gone terribly wrong. But our brave audience member did a great job, speaking eloquently for a bit about the fear of public speaking. It turns out he had nothing to be afraid of. We all cheered as he went up to the stage, and we all cheered when he came back down. It was epic, and it was one of the most memorable moments for me from today's FEECon breakout sessions.

TK brought disproportionate value to this one member of the audience. Conventional thinking might say this is not a good idea for a public speaker – it takes attention away from the rest of the audience, and it denies us some time we might have used to ask more

questions. But in reality, we all enjoyed the talk so much more because of what TK did for that one audience member.

TK transformed the experience of a talk for all of us by focusing in on transforming the experience of a single individual. The guy he called on stage experienced a moment of transformation and profound personal development and courage. And the benefit wasn't just for him. Everyone in the audience shared in that moment and shared in his victory. There's no way we could all have gotten up to that podium in the time available, but somehow by just touching one person, the speaker touched all of us.

This experience clarifies for me why certain performances and speeches are especially loved. Consider music: there are lots of extremely popular YouTube videos of bands inviting a single fan up on stage to dance or even play music. We go nuts for those moments, and we remember those concerts. Whether or not we are the ones being called on stage, we share in the same transformative moment when a speaker or performer chooses to bring disproportionate value to just one of us.