



Word has it: Westpac chief Gail Kelly is a strong public speaker

COMMUNICATION

A MANNER OF SPEAKING

Corporate audiences can be a tough crowd, so business leaders need to convey **credibility, passion and vision** to win them over. **Report: Samantha Hutchinson**

● As the 2011-2012 reporting season wrapped up, a straw poll around the *BRW* office revealed a familiar roll call of the best corporate communicators: Gail Kelly from Westpac, John Borghetti from Virgin and Bernie Brookes from Myer.

All three chief executives were lauded for their ability to inspire an audience, and to reaffirm the image of the successful company in which shareholders felt compelled to invest in the first place.

Conversely, stories also emerged of myriad general meetings presided over by not-so-standout communicators: the droners, the monotonous, the ramblers and the PowerPointers who left shareholders, employees and other stakeholders dazed, confused and downright disenchanted.

"Often politicians and chief executives overlook the **huge investment an audience has in them**," says Andrew Buchanan, a communications and media consultant with 25 years experience as an announcer with the ABC. "Sometimes we don't recognise it's a huge privilege to have an audience listening to us."

For many chief executives, business

owners and managers, the prospect of delivering a speech to a crowded room is the stuff nightmares are made of. You're a manager, not a motivational speaker right? Wrong. There is a growing recognition that communications skills are just as important for effective operation at the c-suite level as other technical and operational skills.

However, being a good communicator isn't necessarily easy. Communication styles and audience tastes have changed dramatically over the past 15 years.

"Being an authentic communicator has become a big focus these days," says Lucy Cornell, a vocal coach who has made a career of helping chief executives internationally improve their oratory skills.

"Once upon a time [corporate communication] was about claiming your power and demonstrating your authority," she says.

"It was a Thatcherist, declamatory style of communication. Now it's all about disarming people and demonstrating real authenticity."

Cornell says the head of the International Monetary Fund, Christine Lagarde is an example of the new ideal communication style. "She's what inspirational leadership sounds like – **warm, grounded, slow and purposeful**. You can hear her breathing, which from

a voice code means that you're not holding back on anything, and you're giving your whole self to the moment."

Closer to home, Cornell believes Premier Anna Bligh's performance during Queensland's floods of 2011 to be a standout. Aside from speaking clearly, slowly and purposefully, Cornell says Bligh demonstrated the **authenticity and vulnerability** that audiences of today respond to best.

"Vulnerability is so important because it gives [the audience] a glimpse of who you really are," she says.

"You need to bring your audience into the communication with you. It's not about you presenting and the audience sitting there and taking it in, it's a sharing thing."

Buchanan believes that authenticity and showmanship are in no way mutually exclusive.

"Presenting effectively is really about seducing an audience, and to do that, you have to be open about your passion and your vision for an organisation. You need to let [the audience] know 'this is what worked, and this is what I'm excited about, and this is [the area] we need to focus on,'" he says.

"[Former Queensland premier] Peter Beattie made an art out of saying **'we made a mistake'**, and that worked well because Australians love a degree of honesty."

But there's more to it to than the performance alone. Word choice also plays a key role in what message is delivered and how you are perceived delivering it.

Cornell notes Bligh's use of "elevated" language during the flood crisis – **emotional, evocative** and, above all, visionary language as being particularly effective because it gave her audiences a clear insight into how Bligh herself was feeling at the time.

"She started saying things like 'we are Queensland' and 'we won't let this beat us' and using other conceptual, visionary language which made the message register on a deeper level."

This use of 'elevated' language was a strategy employed by Alan Joyce this year as he negotiated the fallout following his decision to ground the Qantas Airways fleet.

"He said 'I've had to make a bold decision' – it was simple language, but it shows courage, responsibility and a considerable amount of emotion," says Cornell. *BRW*

TOP TIPS: IT'S ALL IN YOUR DELIVERY

- 1. Check your breath:** **Breath is one of the biggest giveaways that a presenter is under stress. "Ask yourself, 'am I breathing?' because as soon as you hold your breath, your audience will too," voice coach Lucy Cornell says.**
- 2. Skip the wine:** **Buchanan has a strict no-alcohol and no-coffee rule before a big presentation. "Coffee dries out the vocal chords, and alcohol will dull your senses and your spontaneity," he says.**
- 3. Embrace the butterflies:** **Nerves can be a good thing. "You should have the stomach wobbles [before going on stage] otherwise it shows you're complacent and not ready to perform," communications and media consultant Andrew Buchanan says.**
- 4. Tell it like you're telling a fourth grader:** **"Audiences are dying to be entertained, and are dying to be told a story," Cornell says. "Take on that role as an entertainer, rather than an information provider."**
- 5. Be conversational:** **Not all information is interesting to an audience, but Cornell insists that even the driest content can be brought to life with a conversational tone that "focuses on the humans, not the data".**