

SHARPEN YOUR MESSAGE WITH A LASER TALK

In the late 1990s, the NSDC Board of Trustees and staff established influencing policy and policy makers at the local, state, and national levels as an organizational priority. As part of this process, we examined the policy-influencing practices of other organizations, both within and beyond the field of education. During our research, we were introduced to an organization called Results, an advocacy organization that seeks to eliminate the devastating impact of poverty. Results members are committed to a world where all people have a fair chance at success.

The organization's mission is "to create the public and political will to end poverty by empowering individuals to exercise their personal and political power for change." Its theory of change combines the voices of passionate grassroots activists with strategic efforts to influence federal decision makers to leverage millions of dollars for programs and improved policies that give low-income people the health, education, and opportunity they need to thrive (see www.results.org).

Results is successful because of its committed and well-prepared core of volunteers. They convene regularly to study, strategize, and plan their next actions. While I am not an active member of Results, I have benefited from its research and many of the strategies it uses to advance its agenda. I view one particular tool, the laser talk, as having significant value for educators. In this issue of *JSD*, we highlight foundational concepts rather than content and processes of our field. I view the laser talk as an essential process for advancing effective professional learning so that all educators and students learn and perform at high levels.

A laser talk, sometimes called an elevator speech, is a short and compelling message designed to influence another person's actions. This strategy offers an approach for organizing a message when time is limited and the speaker intends to make a request of the listener.

I have used laser talks at school board meetings, in meetings with elected officials, as the opening and closing of speeches to large groups, sitting next to a congressperson on a plane, and in meetings with committees. Results helps its volunteers remember the four components of a

laser talk by using the mnemonic EPIC: engage, problem, inform, call to action.

STEP-BY-STEP

1. In the first step, consider how you will **engage** a group or an individual listener. The goal is to get your listener's attention with a dramatic fact or short statement. Another option is to thank the individual for a specific action or contribution in the past.
2. Next, present the **problem**. Support the statement of the problem with facts, anecdotes, and details. If possible, appeal to the listener's emotions and interests. If the problem is satisfactorily established, your listener will be interested in your ideas on how to help.
3. The next step is to **inform** the listener(s) of the proposed solution. If possible, provide examples of where the solution has already implemented effectively.

Results volunteers know that conversations typically end at this point because speakers have failed to think specifically about what they want from their listeners or are uncomfortable in making a request.

4. Results volunteers practice seeing their talks through the final step, the **call to action**, when the speaker makes a specific request of the listener. An appropriate request includes a specific action within the sphere of influence of the listener and a date by which the speaker can hear about the outcome.

The laser talk offers me an effective way to think about what I want to accomplish by identifying the problem to address, considering what I want others to know about it, determining a solution to share, and selecting the help and specific actions I want from others.

THE LASER TALK IN ACTION

Here I offer a laser talk with annotations. And you — my listeners, or, in this case, readers — will let me know if I have been effective.

Engage: One of our most respected educational leaders, Phil Schlechty, states: "If you don't have time to read, you don't have time to lead." The foundation of our organization is based on the assumption that educators must continue to learn and grow in order to improve performance.

A short and powerful quote from a respected leader is one



In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh will share a professional learning challenge and possible solutions that create results for educators and their students. All columns are available at www.nsd.org.

STEPHANIE HIRSH (stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org) is executive director of the National Staff Development Council.

way to grab your listener's attention and draw him or her into your topic.

Problem: In my view, reading is an essential component of any continuous improvement strategy. And yet I hear too many educators say they don't have time to read. Organization and school leaders tell me they feel woefully behind in their knowledge of new research and findings in their fields. Some tell stories of how they stack their journals — or add bookmarks to their web browser — in the “to-read” file and never get to the bottom. Others express guilt at the idea of reading a journal, newspaper, book, or article during the workday.

This concerns me because these same educators are in positions of leadership and authority. They make professional development decisions without knowing about all possible options. I believe their decisions would be stronger

if these leaders were informed by research and best practices. When these decisions result in less effective professional development, our practice can flounder, our results suffer, and our critics celebrate.

A personal perspective on the problem is more engaging than a mere statement of facts and figures, but you also need real-life evidence that people believe. Your problem statement will be more effective if at least some of your evidence matches the day-to-day experiences of your listeners — in this example, what professionals wouldn't understand the challenge of an overflowing to-read file?

Inform: We know today that students will not successfully learn math if their math teacher does not have a deep understanding of the subject matter. The same holds true for district and school leaders. They cannot implement more powerful professional learning for

adults if they do not understand the fundamentals of the continuous learning cycle. Any educator in a position to influence professional development decisions must have knowledge and understanding necessary to make critical decisions.

An increasing number of individuals in school systems hold some level of responsibility for professional learning. They may go by different titles: trustee, superintendent,

associate superintendent, director, consultant, coordinator, principal, coach, team leader, or teacher. They are all positioned to become professional development experts if they take time to invest in the knowledge base and experiences of the field. We need as many of these individuals as possible to offer the expertise and leadership that is essential to ensure effective professional learning for every educator so that every student achieves.

When you inform listeners about the solution to the problem, your credibility as the speaker is essential. They must know from earlier experience, your positional authority, or the facts you cite that your solution has the possibility of solving the problem. When you provide foundational knowledge, be prepared to back it up with research, readings, or additional resources.

Call to action: NSDC's purpose calls for every educator to engage in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves. We need your help in cultivating leaders and advocates who understand what it takes to fulfill this purpose. The first step in this process is convening colleagues who have demonstrated an interest in professional learning to become part of a study team that will serve as the organization's brain trust for professional development. Seek permission, if necessary, to organize such a team and determine whom to invite. Indicate to potential members the intention to form a group that is committed to staying current on the field's research and best practices so that others will seek their expertise when critical decisions about professional development are made.

Schedule your first session, and begin by reviewing this issue of *JSD*. Next, establish a list of books and seminal research studies you will examine together over the next year. Or decide whom you want to learn from and how you will do so. Capture your learning and record the decisions you believe you influence positively as a result of this effort. Let me know in six months if my assumption was accurate: Higher-quality decisions, and consequently practices, are in place because of this learning investment.

If you undertake this challenge, I am confident that, in addition to the many ways you will influence practice in your organization, you will see many opportunities for delivering laser talks. You will have the essential knowledge you need each time to engage, explain the problem, offer a solution, and describe how someone will help you solve it.

Give your listeners options in the call to action. Help them realize that they should take steps that build on what they already know and care about as part of their commitment to learning. While advocacy requires us to push ourselves beyond what may be comfortable, we are most effective when we use what we know and grow from there. ■

Visit

www.nsd.org/learningBlog/

So how did I do with my laser talk? Are you compelled to take action?

See this column on the blog, and please respond with the action you took.

In addition, look on the blog for other examples of laser talks that I will share in response to some of the common criticisms we face about professional development.

I look forward to reading how you are engaging others in building knowledge and skills to make better decisions. I will celebrate NSDC members as the most informed and committed advocates for high-quality professional development. And together we will take steps each day to advance NSDC's purpose.

— Stephanie Hirsh