Great technical speaking with Bob Ferguson

SPEAKERS

Susan Heaton-Wright, Bob Ferguson

Intro 00:00

Welcome to the superstar communicator podcast. Our aim is to ensure you speak and communicate with confidence, clarity, credibility, and impact, so that you present the best version of yourself in all business conversations. Welcome to our host, Susan Heaton-Wright.

Susan Heaton-Wright 00:18

Oh, time. Hello, everybody. Thank you very much for joining us today, I am really, really privileged to be talking to a very old friend, Bob Ferguson, who is a fellow speaker, and trainer and coach, and he has is someone who has supported my journey for a number of years and I'm incredibly grateful to him. But the reason why we're here other than me gushing, is the fact that he has recently written a book called technical speaking, it's not rocket science. And for those people who are either very technical, technically minded, or who are training, technical topics, this is the event for you, or this is the conversation for you. So, Bob, welcome.

Bob Ferguson 01:16

Thank you very much, Susan. And I would say that was an accurate description, although I'm not sure about the emphasis on a very old friend, although that's probably true as well.

Susan Heaton-Wright 01:25

We've known each other for, not from childhood, but certainly in business in a business setting, known each other for a number of years. So I don't know if anybody's watching today. But if you are and you want to leave any questions for Bob, please put them into the comments. Otherwise, I have loads of questions. And a few people have asked me to ask questions, too. So first of all, Bob, why did you write this book?

Bob Ferguson 02:03

It was, it is part of my job, going round and helping train people in technical environments, I was aware of two major problems really, one was a problem of techniques. And you see the back half of the book is really devoted to techniques to help people speak more effectively, clearer and get their message over. But I also found there was a challenge that I was being asked to train individuals, because the organisation thinks the problem is in the individuals. But in fact, often the problem is in the corporate culture. And I've had examples, for instance, one client asked me to train his technical managers, and asked for a sample presentation, and of course, when it arrived, I knew what it was going to be it was wall to wall PowerPoint. And I said to him, "What are you going to do when I tell your staff to stop using PowerPoint?" And he said, "Oh, no, you can't do that. That's the way we do things here." Yeah, well, the problem is not them, then it's you know, it wasn't one of my best sales techniques, I have to admit.

But it's accurate, and often that's the case, I'd go into organisations and all their questions are about using PowerPoint, because that's the way they do things. And it's such a poor primary communication tool. It's very powerful in presentations, you can use it well, and it can aid your message, a visual aid is exactly what it is. But the cultures of the organisation are poor, and this just works out as a lower level of effort to provide information but it doesn't do the job. So I felt I wanted to get all this down. So you'll find the front half of the book focuses on the problems and challenges of technical speakers and the back half gives them ideas on how they can perform better.

Susan Heaton-Wright 03:55
But why are you a person that's able to help technical people? Because I know you've got a backstory and your backdrop?

Bob Ferguson 04:06
Yeah, absolutely. It would be good to say my backgrounds in space, because it's actually exactly true today. The background behind me is a magnetic Magnetic Resonance picture of mercury. And I was very proud to work on the European mission to Mercury, which is at Mercury now. It arrived about six months ago, and it's orbiting around, they're trying to slow down so we can get it into orbit. And that all happens in December 2025. But I also worked. I used to say I worked on the next European mission to Mars, which is going later this year, but I'm not sure if that's true now because sadly it was going up on a Russian Proton rocket and all that's gone by the wayside now. So whether that gets launched in time for the technology to be still current, I don't know. But my whole career has been in engineering, before I got interested in speaking in fact, I got interested in speaking in 95 because I realised that amongst the other engineers, mine was abysmal, too. Not only was mine abysmal, actually, I didn't like it. I used to detest public speaking, I would avoid it at any possibility. And then I've got my backside kicked, and someone said, your career won't go anywhere, unless you improve your public speaking. And the more I got involved in it, the more successful I was personally, but the more I realised there was a demand in technical trades, for people to be able to speak clearly, concisely, and with impact.

Susan Heaton-Wright 05:39
What is the particular challenge for technical speakers?

Bob Ferguson 05:44
I think fundamentally, they're too bright. Anyone who's got a technical bent, knows far too much information to transmitted effectively. And part of the challenge is that they think in order for other people to understand what they understand, they've got to deliver all the back information that the audience needs in order to come to the same conclusion, but they don't managers higher up an organisation do not need the whole history, and the background behind decisions in order for them to make their own decisions. So people just have too much information, and they're reluctant to chop stuff out. And generally, what they look for, is to cram it in, and you weren't sure have been two presentations, where someone said, "oh, you know, this, I've got 50 slides, and this is normally a two hour presentation. But I've only got 40 minutes, but I'm gonna get them all in" and the preparation comes rattling. And technical people very quickly become a drift of a lay audience, and they don't realise it. But you don't only have to work on a project for two or three months, before your brain is in the gear of what's happening in the project, you understand what's happening, you understand how all

the bits go together. And as soon as you talk to someone who's not involved in that project, they have none of that background knowledge, and certainly comes very hard to communicate, if you try to do it through detail.

Susan Heaton-Wright 07:20
That's really, really interesting, isn't it? And it actually takes courage, to headline and to summarise all of this information. Yeah, yes. That's, that's fundamentally what you're saying?

Bob Ferguson 07:36
Yeah, yeah. And it is an important part of the technique. In general, all communication should work from big picture to small detail. And if people have got a big picture, they found that if we learn with a structure in mind, then we understand the detail far better. And as an example, you only have to think of a map of the world, which most of us have grown up with. If I started talking about the temperature differences between the Sahara, North Africa, and Manchester, immediately, you would see the differences because you know, where they are on the map. And if you do that, for people, if you define this big picture map that they can follow, then the small detail becomes far easier to understand.

Susan Heaton-Wright 08:27
That's really, really interesting. So, um, why you mentioned early on that you were told that unless you did public speaking, it would impact your career. So why do you think it is important for technical people to speak?

08:43
Oh, yeah, I think it's absolutely critical. Technical people have so much value in what they have to offer, and it's not an information. We think that technical people provide information. And I've seen examples, even at government levels where that's true, where people think their job is to provide information. But it isn't really it's for technical experts to be influences. They should be guiding the decisions of managers, they should be helping people come to the right decision. And you can see if you're going back to my example of Parliament, I used to go to the institution of mechanical engineers conference every year to speak, and in the question and answer session, there was always the same question coming up. "Why are engineers not better represented in Parliament? Because engineering is a huge portion of the population." And yet, we've probably only got one or two engineers in Parliament. And the reason is often, they like to remain neutral and not influence, whereas if you look at the people who are successful in Parliament, they're all influences. They all influence the direction we're taking, the decisions we're making. And I think tech Experts have a really important role to influence the decisions that other people make. And we can see that now with climate change, we're getting a lot of climate change experts, and they're talking, and they're passing on information. But they're not really influencing, which is why we get on the fringe activities with insulate Britain and all the rest. Because those technical people are not getting their message through. And that's the key thing they need to become people of influence.

Susan Heaton-Wright 10:32

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Do you think that there's an element of within the culture of engineering and and tech, that if somebody steps up and starts influencing that they're seen as being a show off? Or they're, they're, you know, they're speaking above their grade?

Bob Ferguson 10:53
Yeah, I, you certainly can get that. By in large, I think you see a lot of introversion in engineering and technical aspects, because they're people who like to look inwards at their own skills, and what they have to offer, and making sure that the work that they put out is as perfect as it can be, rather than this outward looking. And so people who stand up and speak, and I've probably been there, myself, they look at them, and they think, oh, you know, they're getting there by the gift of the gab. But you're not really, you're using your voice as an important instrument to be heard and understood and valued. And that's what it's about. When people see you rise through an organisation, because of that, they think it's just because you're talking, but it isn't, it's because you're influencing, it's because you're helping people above you make better decisions, better quality decisions. And this is hugely important, not just for avoiding disasters, but it gives organisations technical advantage, it brings bright ideas from the bottom of the organisation to the top. So it is of huge value.

Susan Heaton-Wright 12:06
And now we've had a couple of questions from Anzala Asha, now, Anzalah works in the UAE, as a trainer within an engineering company. And one of the questions is "How can we deliver technical training effectively to people who aren't engineers? Without diverting from the main subject?"

Bob Ferguson 12:32
Oh, right. Okay. So the her audience is not engineers?

Susan Heaton-Wright 12:37
That's right, yes. But she's wanting to make sure that they understand what the company is providing. So it might be to the marketing department, for example.

Bob Ferguson 12:49
Yeah, sure. I'm not sure what level of technical training the marketing department get, but what they should do. So going back to what I said earlier, it all should all start with a big picture. There's the old people in the organisation, and the culture grows from the big picture that is created. So whatever the technical aspects they have to put over, they have to start with a big picture of what that means to the organisation, what they're representing. If they're in marketing, what are the values that technical expertise brings with it, and normally, you'll find that high things like integrity, technical grades, value, integrity almost above everything else. And it's why incidentally, in buying going past, in organisations, they're very, very valuable ambassadors for the company when they go out. Because customers and clients relate far more differently to someone who's got a technical grade than someone who says they're in sales. You know, if you say you're in sales, the cross comes up and they back off. It's true. Yeah, but technical. So you've got to start with the big picture. And you've got to involve them in a discussion. So that you can migrate their understanding of what they're putting out in the marketing, to how the values of the technical people relate to that piece of marketing.

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Susan Heaton-Wright 14:21

Now, as you were talking, it made me think of another question that I wanted to ask, I had to have other questions and that is a technical person representing an organisation at say, a conference or a to an event. So often with exhibitions for example, we will have the non technical people on the stands. Yet, as you say it's a value to have a you know, an IT technical expert. Around what tips could you give to a technical person Who is at a conference to network or at an exhibition?

Bob Ferguson 15:04

Okay, so my core message before was you got to work from big picture to small detail. And that's even true if you're the technical person on there, and the person coming on to the stand is interested in technical information. Think of yourself as a writer of a newspaper article. So in writing newspaper articles, they have a structure called the journalist triangle. And it starts off with a headline at the top, which is the bit that catches everyone's attention. And that's the people look at and it makes them decide whether they're going to buy the newspaper or not. So the headlines are critically important. And then you'll find in the first paragraph, there are the critical details, which are like an executive summary. And then, for the rest of the article, you've got the detail in depth. Now you'll find people who are taught to speed read, do not read whole articles fast, what they learn to do is read the headline, understand the essence, read the first paragraph to pick up the key information, and then read the last paragraph to get the conclusion and move on. And they only go to the middle if they're interested. So anytime you're interested in talking to an interested party or potential client who comes onto a stand or, or any other time we put a technical person in front of the client, they need to work from the top down, they need to start with the headline, they need to understand the headline of the message they're trying to get over. And politicians are adept at this, they know that message they're going to give and every question they're asked, they reply with the message they want to get out. So you've got to have that one message clear in your mind, and then perhaps four or five points that are critical that people should know. And then beneath that, you need to use Question and Answer technique. And you need to bring the client into the conversation and let them drive the conversation. So you should start asking them questions by how do you think how do you think that would affect you in your line of work, and they will then start to tell you the problems and you can feed back the technical information that is only relevant to what they're telling you. If you become really good at it, you learned how to tease people as well. It's not a skill engineers use an awful lot teasing people, but you can tease people by saying, "I see that this is a challenge in your organisation, and we have a really good way of getting around that" and then just shut up and see what they say. Because if they're interested, they'll say, well go on, what is it, tell me tell me what it is. And then you know that they're interested in what you're going to say next. If they say nothing, move on, forget it, you don't have to tell them it just because you know it. So use that triangular structure to tease them into the detail and then only give them the detail they're interested in.

Susan Heaton-Wright 18:16

It's really interesting hearing you speaking about this, because what I'm getting as an essence, is that sometimes technical people will think that they need to talk a lot rather than listen. Would you agree with that?

Bob Ferguson 18:35

Absolutely. I think that's spot on. When in any form of contact with a client, the gold dust comes out of the client's mouth, generally yours. And so anytime that you can use questions, and in presentations, I encourage people to use that same structure in presentations, particularly to senior management teams. Because all your problems go away with a senior management team, if you use that structure, you get a brief time to give them the essence, the headline, and the key facts and executive summary. And then if you stop and ask them what bits interests them, you'll find three things. Firstly, you don't have to worry about your content, because they'll only ask about the things they're interested in. And it's wise to keep a check in case they miss anything major, but generally you can answer what they're interested in. You no longer have to worry about the time of your presentation because when they've had enough they stop asking questions. And lastly, the key word for drivers who are predominantly in executive groups, is control. And now because you're in q&a, you've put them in control and they love it. They're as happy as Larry then it just makes your life easier if you use that structure to present and give them the freedom to drive the presentation.

Susan Heaton-Wright 20:03
Brilliant. And in fact, my next question was about q&a is because people are, whether they're doing any sort of presentation, or speech, that is one anxiety for many people, what what are your top tips?

Bob Ferguson 20:18
Right? Well, firstly, I think that q&a gets a bad press. Because after time, I see q&a pushed to the end of presentation. So I've got an hour's presentation, and I'm going to talk "blah, blah, blah, blah, blah", for 50 minutes, "right who's got any questions". And by then a lot of the audience have switched off, because they don't want to listen to you for 50 minutes without interacting. And as we got meetings on Zoom, now, lots of meetings on Zoom, this is even more critical, because if people don't interact, they start looking at their emails and all the things that are around the screen that they can pick up on. The earlier you can get q&a into your presentation, I think the more successful it is because the audience are thinking about your material so they can ask questions. They're engaging with you. And you'll probably get some level of discussion going backwards and forwards. So it becomes more like a conversation, than a "here I am on the stage presenting all the knowledge that I know". So firstly, I think it gets a bad press, the quicker you can get q&a in, the better it is. In terms of tips, a couple of things to remember, firstly, you're not under obligation to answer every conceivable question. You don't necessarily have all the answers, if someone comes up with something that you think is really relevant, but you haven't got a pat answer, you can just say, "it's not something I've got the answer to now. But if you give me your email address, I'll happily send you all the information afterwards". Now, you clearly can't go through every question doing that, but if you just do it once or twice, then people will take that and it will stop you getting egg on your face by trying to answer a question that you don't really have the answer to. Take a little bit of time to think. And certainly if you're on a stage repeat the question. Not only does that give you a bit more time to think but you'll find that not everyone in the room has necessarily heard the question, and if you're miked up and you repeat it, it gets it out to everyone. Try and keep on track with your answers. So it doesn't expand into some new presentation about another subject. I think if you get someone who's not asking a question, who's there to show how clever they are? Oh, yes, the show boaters. Yes, to encourage them and say so what is your question? Keep pulling it back to what is your question? So that you force them to focus? And probably the biggest tip never ever counterpunch. You know, you will get people who say things that you don't like, never tried

to push back because there's a strange thing in audiences, if someone asks you an aggressive or heckling type question, the audience will think, how daft are they? If you push back against them, the audience will think if "I ask a question, you could do that to me". And then they'll start to side with the heckler. So never ever counter punch, I always have soft phrases like if someone comes up with something that I think is wrong, I say, "Well, to me, that sounds a bit harsh, but you know, I can understand where your opinion comes from". So it just diffuses it and pushes it away. Don't try to push back.

Susan Heaton-Wright 23:47
That's a really, really good point. And presumably, with the same thing of that triangle, the journalist triangle, when answering questions, you should approach it in the same way.

Bob Ferguson 23:59
Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. Just start with the top and the essence and give them that and see what happens. I think there's always a trap as well, that some people do want to have a personal conversation with you. So you ask, answer the question at a higher level. And they want to drag it down and make a conversation of the whole thing. And you can ask the audience. I know it's not Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, but you can ask the audience. So you can say, well, there's a lot of detailed information in there. "I don't know, does everyone think that that's worthwhile or shouldn't be taken up outside the room?" And then you'll see from the reaction if everyone's going, No, no, this is interesting. We want this then let the conversation flow. If people are going, "Oh, no, we don't really need this". You say "again, I'm happy to go in into this with you outside afterwards".

Susan Heaton-Wright 24:53
Brilliant. And now we've got another question. What is the most effective approach for keeping people engaged during technical presentations. Now you mentioned about Q and A's. Are there any other tips that you have?

Bob Ferguson 25:09
Yes, switch the PowerPoint off. Every time you've got PowerPoint on, you are by and large, delivering an impersonal, factual message. Every time PowerPoint is off, you are delivering a personal emotional message. And you can't avoid it as a speaker, you cannot avoid speaking emotionally because how you feel comes across. People disengaged from the facts as, I can't remember I said at the beginning with the poorest deliverer of information on the planet, you know, we speak at around 130 words a minute, you can listen clearly at 260 words a minute, if you've got one of those tape decks, that dubs it will go at double speed, and you can listen to that quite comfortably or on masterclass or something like that, you can ramp up the speed to double speed, hear it quite clearly. So that's 260 words a minute, you can read 300 words a minute, sometimes 400 words a minute, if you're good at it. So we are very poor at delivering information. One thing I would say that technical people are poor at is using stories to drive emotion in their presentations. And ultimately, whatever we've progressed in technology, people still buy from people, and it's your delivery of the emotions involved in your subject that will swing your audience's opinion. Now they need the facts, they've got to have the facts to back them up, that's for sure. And you need the facts somewhere in a report or something you can hand out to them. But you want to sway them emotionally, and it's hard to do while PowerPoint is on. So I always have a remote

presenter, and they have a blank button on them. So you don't have to keep running back to the keyboard to press the B button. If you've got a picture, or a chart or something that needs discussing, you can show that you can talk around it. Hit the blank button, walk away, talk to your audience. And anytime it sounds like a conversation, people will feel engaged. If it sounds like you're presenting facts at them, they will switch off. Have I got quick time for one extra tip. Yes, absolutely. Break up your presentation into short chunks, go and watch the James Bond movies. They do nothing more than 10 minute segments, 10 minute of action. 10 minutes of story. 10 minutes of love interests for Bond 10 minutes about the villain. And the fact that you're the subject is changing every 10 minutes is the reason people come out of a Bond movie and look at their watch and say "that's been two and a half hours how have I watched something for two and a half hours and not known it's gone back". So don't have one long presentation, break it up into short chunks. And then every time you break it up, the audience will think oh, we're onto something different. Now I need to pay attention again. And you'll drag the audience's engagement back.

Susan Heaton-Wright 28:15
That's brilliant tip. Is there anything else you'd like to add before we finish this session?

Bob Ferguson 28:22
Anything that I haven't said? No, I don't think so. I just believe that technical experts in organisations and when I say experts, the people I speak to, I think are in the slate industry. So that scientific, legal, accounting, technical and engineering, predominantly. But when people have great expertise, technical expertise, you have a key role in helping the people who make decisions, to understand the framing and the context of the information you're passing over. That's what it's about. And that helps them make better quality decisions. So if you're just passing over information, you're only fulfilling a small part of your potential within the organisation. And I'd encourage all technical people to become effective at presenting.

Susan Heaton-Wright 29:13
That is a brilliant way to finish. And I feel that I should plug your book, which is for so many, so many professionals within technical, not specifically science. As you've said, accountants, lawyers could benefit from this. So it's great technical speaking is not rocket science by Bob Ferguson. And I will put a link underneath on how you can act how you can access it. But thank you. Thank you so much, Bob. This has been a fascinating interview. And I'm sure that people when they listen to this when it becomes a podcast, or if they watch the the live event later on on LinkedIn, or as a video, they will love this. How can they contact you if they want to ask more questions?

Bob Ferguson 30:10
My website is www.BobFerguson.co.uk , Easiest way to contact me is via email to Bob@BobFerguson.co.uk Brilliant happy to answer their questions.

Susan Heaton-Wright 30:26
Excellent. Thank you so much, Bob. Until next time, this is Susan Heaton-Wright. And I'll be doing another LinkedIn live very soon. Thank you for watching. Bye bye. Thanks, Susan.

Outro 30:40

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