The ENGINEERING CAREER COACH PODCAST
SESSION #57
Five Tips for Drastically Improving Your Engineering Presentations with Melissa Marshall

Show notes at: engineeringcareercoach.com/melissa

Episode Intro: This is ***The Engineering Career Coach Podcast***, the only podcast dedicated to helping engineers succeed in work and life. This show is hosted by engineering enthusiasts, Anthony Fasano and Chris Knutson. Both are professional engineers who found success early in their careers and now work together to help other engineers do the same. Now, it's show time!

Anthony: Welcome! This is the show for engineers who want to succeed in both work and life. I am your host, Anthony Fasano, and I am excited about today's show. And I am really excited because, we officially launched the revamped engineeringcareercoach.com website and I have officially partnered up with Christian Knutson which we have been talking on the podcast here for a while. Chris is not here with me today on this podcast episode but he will be a periodic co-host and he will be on the show from time to time. And who knows, maybe even take the show on himself every now and then to change it up a bit.

And what I really like about joining up with Chris is that he has had a lot of leadership experiences in engineering. He's been in the military for twenty plus years as an engineering leader and his website previously was engineerleader.com, where he blogged quite a bit about engineering and leadership and all those articles are now are at engineeringcareercoach.com site. And he's going to bring that perspective to everything we do together and I think that's going to add a whole other dimension and it's going to be much more robust and helpful for our listeners and our readers. So I am really excited about that.

And I am super excited about today's show. It is the first guest ever that has done a TED talk coming on the **Engineering Career Coach Podcast**. Her name is Melissa Marshall and the title of her TED Talk is "Talk Nerdy to Me". So with that being said, let's jump right into the content for today's show. Let's get right into the interview with Melissa. And before we do so, I want to give you one quote that kind of lines up with our topic for today. "No one can remember more than three points." (~ Philip Crosby) And again, "No one can remember more than three points." You will see how this quote is applicable in the interview coming up. And then at the end of the show, in the Take Action Today segment of the show, Melissa actually gives you two awesome actionable pieces of advice. So hang out for the whole show. It's going to be a very powerful episode.

Coaching Segment:

Anthony: Now it's time for the main segment of our show. For today's main segment, I am going to be interviewing my guest, Melissa Marshall, who I am very excited to interview. Melissa is on a mission to transform how engineers and scientists present their work, which is one of the reasons that I was really drawn to her because I have similar aspirations. Melissa believes that even the best engineering designs and scientific research is destined to remain undiscovered unless it's presented in a clear and compelling way that sparks innovation and drives adoption. And we are going to get into that with her, how you can really ramp up your presentations to make them be more compelling. Melissa spent the last decade travelling around the world to work with Fortune 100 corporations, institutions and universities, teaching these strategies that we are going to dive into today on speaking effectively. Melissa is a dynamic speaker. In fact, she has got a TED talk entitled "Talk Nerdy to Me", which is all about helping engineers and scientists communicate better. She has talked for Harvard Medical School in the New York Academy of Sciences, centres for disease control and many other great organisations. And I am really honoured to have her on. Melissa, I want to welcome you and let you know that you are the first person in the **Engineering Career Coach Podcast** that has a TED talk. So, we are very excited about that and I am just excited to have a conversation with you.

Melissa: Great! Thanks so much Anthony. I have been looking forward to our conversation and I'm excited to, hopefully, empower you audience today with some really great actionable ideas that they can start using right away.

Anthony: Melissa, you are listening. The summary of our talk today will be located at engineeringcareercoach.com/melissa. You can go there. You can look at the summary. Anything that we talked about, any references, books, resources; we will link to them on the show notes as well. So Melissa, let's jump right into this interview. Why don't you tell us how you got into the world of helping engineers and scientists communicate more effectively?

Melissa: Sure. Absolutely! So, I have spent 10 years as a faculty member at Penn State University and I have actually just recently wrapped up my time there because I am going full-time into coaching and training professional scientists and engineers. But during my 10 years at Penn State, I started off my career as a specialist and expert in communication and specifically, in presentations. And I spend a little bit on my academic training, and my early part of my career was spent helping people become better presenters.

And then, early on I got an interesting invitation by the College of Engineering at Penn State and they said, "Hey, we would love to try having a presentation skills class that is geared towards our engineering students because the feedback that we are getting is that, our engineering students are terrific technically. They really got the goods when it comes to the technical know-how. But some of the feedback that we are getting from industry employers is that, you know, our engineering students

could present a little bit more effectively." And so, I was the person that they asked from the communications side of campus to come on ever to engineering and see if I could help them with this challenge and really help build the skills that of those engineering students.

And it turned out, that everything is serened up in some way as in, it turned out that this was exactly what I was meant to do. And I realized that literally day one. And my first class, I walked into that room with a roomful about 30 engineering students and I was completely intimidated, first of all, but also completely fascinated. Because as I just started it here about some of the amazing things that they were working on, I couldn't believe it. To me it seems that this treasure trove of information and just exciting projects that were happening in an area of campus that, to be perfectly honest, prior to that time, I didn't really know a whole lot about. And so I'd say that it was a love at first sight for me with engineering.

So, I was so fortunate that I was able to stumble into that so early in my teaching career. And as a result, I dove head-first into really figuring out how I could take the information that I knew and understood from my years of study in communication, and how I could translate that over, to make sure that engineers and scientists are able to use those practical pieces of information to make sure that others can understand and appreciate their work. So, I essentially really took on with a whole lot of passion in this idea of trying to help engineers and scientists translate their work to people who are in the position to move that work forward.

Anthony: I know from being kind of in similar shoes when you get that feeling, like you said you had that feeling on day one and that this is that you are kind of meant to do. It's a pretty awesome feeling. Must have been excited to get it so quickly

Melissa: Absolutely! It was absolutely terrific. I can't imagine doing anything else.

Anthony: And it's really great to hear that Penn State approached you about the class like that because for me, I have been trying to convince colleges and universities across the United States for about five plus years now, that engineers need these kind of skills. We need classes like that and it's great to hear that a major, very well-respected university actually took the initiative and reached out to you and got this class in place. I am sure the engineers are doing much better forward after they graduate. So, that's great.

Melissa: I am so proud of my time at Penn State and I have nothing but just, the greatest admiration for really having leadership in the College of Engineering has tackled this issue head-on. I mean, that was a little over eight years ago now that that class has been up and running and going. And now, we have a whole team of instructors. Starting with just me, you know, kind of getting in there and trying a pilot. We have a whole teams of instructors and we now serve a huge number of students that are taking these presentation skills for engineers' class.

You are exactly right. I think that Penn State is really leading the way in terms of actually trying to provide meaningful credit, in terms of their curriculum, that they are taking these courses and then establishing a program, enabling our engineering students to be successful engineering professionals.

Anthony: So you're at Penn State. You started these courses. Tell me how you ended up doing this TED talk, "Talk Nerdy to Me".

Melissa: You know, as part of my role at Penn State, I spent some time as the faculty advisor for TED XPSU and for those of you who aren't familiar, TED X events are independent TED events and so those are the ones that any community such as a university for example, can apply for a free license to host their own TED themed event. And so, because of some of the paperwork involved and having an event at the size we wanted to have it, what TED asks is that the person who is, you know, advising if you will, that they attend to one of their regular TED events to get a sense of how an event should be run and that sort of thing.

And so, I was already scheduled to attend TEDGlobal in June of 2012 and that conference was one of TED's main conferences that took place in Edinburgh, Scotland that year. And so, I was all signed up to do that and again, in the course of my role as the advisor for TED XPSU and about 6 or 8 weeks before the conference, this email went out and said essentially that they have wild card spots, where they have some opening slots like in the conference, where conference attendees can pitch talk idea to give to one of those spots.

Anthony: Wow.

Melissa: And so, I am somebody who is usually willing to give something a try. And so I thought, well you know, I am already going to be there. I might as well write in my idea because everybody knows, that comes into contact with me, knows how much I care about this idea, this message; how much I really believe in the importance of communicating effectively about technical ideas. And so, I wrote in a little proposal and then, I got a follow-up where I had the chance to essentially pitch the teleconference to a group and long story short, essentially I was one of the people that was, whose idea was selected to happen at the conference.

I got to craft and give what became a talk that was something I still believe really strongly about. It was an absolutely tremendous experience and it was really terrific to work with the people at TED, who I thought were just outstanding in terms of their ability to really help me as a speaker, to make sure that I crafted my message in the way that would help it to resonate and then the way that I wanted it to.

Anthony: We are going to dive into some tips for engineers that you can use on your presentations. But the reason I am bringing this up and kind of take a little time on this whole idea of the TED talk is

because I often talked to engineers about the opportunities that exist in speaking. The ability to get in front of a room, get in front of an audience certainly develops or elevates your expertise and your credibility, especially in such a technical world. And Melissa, I believe that your TED talk is probably as close to a million and a half viewers, right?

Melissa: Yeah, I haven't looked at it for a little while. Last time I looked, it was around 1.2 and that was a few months ago.

Anthony: Yeah. I looked at it recently and it was that close to 1.5 million.

Melissa: Wow!

Anthony: So my point is for the listeners is that, first of all, you never know when the opportunities is going to come to you because, Melissa certainly didn't know that was coming, you know, six to eight weeks before.

Melissa: That's exactly right!

Anthony: Secondly, when you get up in front of people, the bottom line, at least from my experience, I am sure, Melissa the same, is that opportunities come to you. Period. So, don't be shy. We are going to jump into, now, and Melissa is going to talk a little bit about some strategies that you could do to make your presentations more compelling, more engaging to people. Because often as engineers, we do present to people that aren't necessarily technically savvy, that is important to get our information across. So Melissa, why don't we jump into that a bit and you can, kind of, give some pointers out here to the listeners.

Melissa: I want to also just echo what you said about taking advantage of those opportunities and looking for ways to put yourself out there. Because actually, one of my first pieces of advice, in terms of how to improve your presentation skills, is to actually present. I think that this is something that you have to do a little bit of trial by fire. You have to learn what works and what doesn't. I think that one of the best ways you could do that is be the person on your team who volunteers to present any other projects at the next status meeting. I mean, be the person who is continually putting themselves out there because you will learn so much about what works, what doesn't and it gives you a chance to try some new things and see what causes your audiences to change. How can you start to see some of those differences?

I think engineers, as technical professionals are great at experiments. And I always say, don't be afraid to try some new experiments. Try some things that are different. Don't be afraid to step out there a little bit. And so, looking for these speaking opportunities I think is huge. Once you do get your next speaking opportunity, couple of things that I might, there is a lot that I could say but a few things that I might emphasize. I think that the first and one of the biggest challenge is, for any sort of

technical talk, when you are thinking about the project that you are trying to present, I think that filtering the details of the project is a really big challenge. Because, you are the specialist, in terms of the area you are presenting on.

And so, how do you look at all of this information that you have to present and maybe somebody wants you to talk for ten minutes on a project that you have been working months on, for example. How do you decide in that short period of time that you have, which are the details to emphasize and which are the things to keep out. And fighting back is one of the first pieces that engineers would benefit from mastering; is how do you decide which details to keep in and which to keep out. And so, one strategy that I often suggest for that, is that I say to start at the end. Meaning, think about where it is that you want to end up. And I would actually challenge you to write that out as one sentence. This is the place. I want my audience here to walk out of the room with this idea or this knowledge, or this understanding. And I understand that that's really hard. It's hard on purpose.

I understand that you have to really boil everything down to one sentence and at the end, that's really difficult. But, if you can do that, you can decide that: "Hey, if they walk out with nothing else, they are going to walk out with this." Now, what you can do is you can ask yourself the question: what do I need to cover in order for that to be true, or in order for them to believe that, or in order for them to take that action? What would I need to cover in order for that to be the case? And what happens when you go through that exercise is that you will find that typically, you will rise to the top, two or three most important ideas, the biggest and most important details. There certainly could be other things that you might talk about.

But what I am trying to get at here is that, you have to identify the most important details and you have to put the time into those. What that does is it helps to clarify those details and tells you which are the other ones, that while interesting, or maybe also important, there is still secondary in terms of their importance. So my first tip, in terms of clarifying details and filtering details, is to think about where you want to end up at the end. Force yourself to articulate that in a single sentence and then go through the exercise of, "What would my audience need to know, understand, or believe is true in order to arrive there?"

Anthony: It's funny because that is the similar approach that I took to my engineering career. It was basically, where I want to end up. I want to be a project manager, a partner in an engineering firm. And then I would look at, what's kind of not to say the minimal steps I need to take but I didn't want to do a lot of extra stuff. I tried to find a mentor, tried to do things to make it an efficient process. So, it's very similar. It is a very brilliant suggestion to start with the end in mind. Most times, people start at the beginning and start laying out their PowerPoint presentation.

Melissa: PowerPoint, that's next! Also, you are exactly right Anthony. I love what you said. That's exactly how most people start! That was the other big thing that I wanted to get to your listeners.

Anthony: Okay.

Melissa: Is talk it about PowerPoint. Because you are exactly right! Most people, here is the process they go through, is that somebody says, “Hey, I need you to give a talk,” or they know they have to give a talk and say, “Alright”. And so they sit down and they open up PowerPoint. And so then they start to plan. And the way that people plan on PowerPoint is that they type topics on their slides.

And so what happens very quickly when you go with that strategy is that, you end up with so much information. Because essentially, you are doing it almost stream of consciousness where, maybe I want to talk about this particular slide, maybe the topic is going to be in order of analysis, for example. And so what you do is, you start to think about all the things around order of analysis that you want to cover. “You know, I want to talk about this. I want to talk about this. I want to talk about this.” And you keep going and you keep filling up that slide with all of those different details. And the problem is that you didn’t filter the slide. And it goes back to exactly what I said; is asking yourself, “What is the one thing that I want my audience to take away?” And so when I circle this back around, so I think this is a strategy that works on the meta-level for the whole presentation. But this is also a strategy that I really want to add the cake for within the talk itself.

If your audience was to leave this podcast with just one thing that they might think, even a little bit differently about; my big challenge, and this is to your audience, and this is to scientists and engineers everywhere, is that I think that we have to completely rethink our status quo of PowerPoint. And what I mean by status quo is that, I mean the common practice of what people typically do. And what people typically do is they have a phrase title and they support that phrase title with a bulleted list. And what this leads to, our slides that are tremendously wordy and slides that actually do not have a whole lot of visual information on them. And the reason that this is such a problem is that if you look at a lot of the research regarding how people learn, how people process information; I mean there is a whole era of vast field of cognitive science and if there is one thing that comes up again and again, and is supported over and over, it is that people have a limited capacity to take in information when it’s presented, both being spoken and being read.

So when you overload the words-based part of the brain which is exactly what happens when you have somebody giving a talk while having a slide that also is full of words, you are now at an extremely high risk and really entirely likely, more likely than not, possibility that your audience will experience cognitive overload. Essentially what that means is that instead of information getting through efficiently, now very little information gets through. And so, that becomes really problematic when you think about the typical presentation situation.

And so, the other big piece that, I think, people need to know from the cognitive psychology research in terms of how people learn, is that images are processed separately in the brain and they are processed in a much more deep manner, much more memorable to an audience. And so, when you take those two pieces of information together and you look at what people are typically doing with

PowerPoint, there is a pretty big disconnect in terms of those. And so, what I think that people need to be doing is they need to be thinking about: how do you design your slides with your audience in mind. Meaning, how is it that my audience's brain is working and how are they going to interact with the slide and what choices can I make as a presenter that will make sure that this slide is working with me instead of against me.

And so, couple of ways to do that; first of all, I advocate for something that is called Assertion Evidence slide design and that's something we can provide a link to on the page of this podcast.

Anthony: Great!

Melissa: This is a slide design that is pioneered and primarily researched by Associate Professor of Engineering Communication at Penn State, Michael Alley. And it's one that I have become familiar with during my time working at Penn State and still is the one now that I am training and coaching full-time. Right now, as far as I am concerned, I think that this is the best strategy that is the most practical way that, you as an engineer, can right away revamp your slides.

And to give you this kind of real quick summary what the strategy is, is that essentially each slide, the strategy advocates that you have a concise full sentence, and that's the Assertion, and you could just think of the concise full sentence at being at the top of the slide and you could think of it as, "This is what I want my audience to know as a result of this slide." And then, the body of the slide, instead of having a bulleted list, which is what most people do, get rid of that bulleted list. Those are the things that you could say because you are going to be actually giving the presentation. And use the body of the slide for primarily visual information.

For engineers this is so terrific because you work in that type of environment. I mean, you have charts, graphs, tables, diagrams, schematics, equations, computer code; all of those things are visual in nature and are supremely better than having a bulleted list on the body of your slide. Because essentially, what happens now is that, when you choose to have a primarily visual slide and again, when I say visual, I want to be really because this is so important for technical audience, I am not just saying a picture. A picture is one type of visual. But you can absolutely have media and very complex visuals that can still work really well. But essentially what you are trying to do is that you are balancing out the flow of information during a talk.

And so now, you are giving the talk and you, as the presenter, talking through that information and your slide is doing something for you that your words cannot. And I think that, that's really the biggest trick. Right now, we have slides that are doing exactly the same thing as what our talk is doing. They are just repeating what's there and it's not doing a lot for our audience. But I think, thinking differently about your slides is a really great place to start and to stand out right away.

Anthony: What did you say the name of that scheme was?

Melissa: Yeah, so it's called the Assertion Evidence slide design. That's how you might come across it.

Anthony: Okay.

Melissa: That's what it's called on that website. That's the name for it and a lot of the studies that have been done are calling it that. But essentially, all that it is, it's called the Assertion Evidence but really you can just think of it as sentence visual.

Anthony: We will get a link into the show notes so you can get some information on that. And I know I have a lot of work to do now. My presentation that I prepared for two weeks from now have to be revamped the whole thing.

Melissa: I hear that a lot because I travel around the world, helping scientists and engineers to present more effectively. And one of the biggest things is that, the great news is that, I think there are practical things you can do right away. The challenge is that it definitely goes against the status quo and so, you might need to so some things differently from what you typically are doing.

Anthony: I think it makes a lot of sense to me. I think there is so much information you could take in one kind of medium. Like you said, the writing and hearing the words and it just makes a lot of sense to change it up for people.

Melissa: Something that I want to mention to, because this is usually something that comes up really often and I bet a lot of your listeners may even right now have this question. Well yeah, that makes a lot of sense just like you said. I mean, it makes sense to balance out the medium because you are talking and so, you have got that words part of the brain for your audience essentially covered and so, you have this visual instead to the slides so that you are doing something a little bit, you know, accessing a different part of their brain.

But then, one of the biggest practical challenge is that, people might be identifying already, is they say, you know, "Well I have to put all of that information in the form of that bulleted lists on to the slide because the slide has to serve as the document for the work." So maybe somebody that couldn't attend the talk, often times in most companies, they do things like send around the slide deck as a way to really document their work. And so, I just want to address that piece because I think if you use one simple strategy, that helps us a lot. So here is what I would say.

I think that asking PowerPoint to be the handout or the document for the work is really asking the medium to do too much. Because essentially what happens is that now becomes the primary function because people are putting information on there with the idea being that this has to serve as the document after the talk. And the problem with that is, then I think what's happening is that, we are

sacrificing the opportunity of the live presentation situation. Because we have something that we are putting on the screen that really, we are also trying to make service of the document after the talk and now we sacrifice the tremendous opportunity that is a live audience.

And so, what I think people can do today, I mean right away, I, is that if you utilise the Notes pages of PowerPoint a bit more effectively. And essentially what I mean by that, is that take what you might typically put as the bullet points or the things that you plan to say when the slide is showing. Put those on the Notes pages and the Notes pages, as people are probably aware, are just right below where you design the slide. So put those in the Notes pages and then, when you need to provide, if somebody needs the slide deck and you need to provide the document if you will, provide to people a PDF printed copy of the Notes pages. So, that's a really easy thing to do in PowerPoint. Just go to 'print', go to 'pdf', and then it's an option where it's called Notes pages.

And so, when you do that, I mean such a simple thing that anybody could do right away, but now what happens is what people would get, what the PDF of the notes pages looks like is that it has the slide that was presented during the live talk, and then it has whatever details you chose to include and that you typed in that Notes pages while you were working on the slide at self. And so, now you have the best of all worlds because you have a slide that was designed and optimized for the live talk, and you have those details; what it was that you said when the slide was showing.

And it's even better because you actually can include references, links to other things and so now, you have this really nice follow-on document that you could provide to your audience, and you haven't sacrificed with either of the mediums, in terms of the documents versus the slides. And really, you haven't had to do a whole lot of extra work because now instead of writing all of that information on the slide, just write it in the Notes pages and provide that to people after your talk.

Anthony: That's great because I can definitely see that being a concern for any technical professionals that you know, they want to have that to hand out. And I think one of the things too that I was thinking, another reason that people would shy away from this is because a lot of people, which you shouldn't do, use the bullets as basically a crutch to get them through the entire presentations and listen, I think it's better than reading something word for word, but still I think if you want to be an expert in that topic, you need to know the talk and be able to look at one sentence for the visual and be able to talk about it.

You could always have a note card in your hand with some bullet points if you want to but, I think the more you rely on the slides for actually, what you are going to say can be a little bit tricky and a little bit risky. I mean, I gave a talk once at a major university and the projector wasn't working. Luckily I had done the talk like three other times that week, so I pretty much was in pretty good shape. And I gave the handouts out and I, kind of, was able to go through. But you never know what's going to happen basically, that's what I'm trying to say.

Melissa: I completely agree first of all, in terms of, I think that we need to spend a little more time practicing our talks, being comfortable with the information that we can really own that material and we don't need to read from the slides in order to do that. If your hurdle is, the reason you can't switch to a more visual slide design is because you really are worried about losing those speaker notes, if you will.

Something that I also think another practical tip that I think more people should look into is using Presenter View on your laptop. If you are not familiar with it, people just google Presenter View. This is an option that is on pretty much on every laptop. It actually defaults very nicely on Macs. But again, if you don't run a Mac, I run a PC, laptop and I get a Presenter View pretty easily. And all the Presenter View is essentially what you have on your laptop.

It is a little bit of a different view than your audience has on the projector screen. Your audience just gets a riffle of slides, but if you have done the settings correctly for Presenter View on your computer, and again, just google how to do settings for Presenter View. This is something you will be able to figure out. But if you have Presenter View set up, essentially what that means is that on your laptop screen, you will see your current slide that's being shown in full screen to the audience, but you will also see the Notes pages for that slide which can give you those reminders and you will see the slide that is coming up next.

And so, at least if you need to take a glance at your laptop screen, you can see the other reminders. There is Notes pages if you will or whatever it is that you are supposed to cover next. And that keeps you on track if you're, again if you are worried about needing those speaking notes.

And the big thing that I am advocating for is I just don't want to subject our audience to that. I really want people to approach a talk with a more audience-centred view point. Meaning that you are making choices for your talk because they make sense for the audience. And so, that's the kind of choice that you can make that, it's okay if you are the speaker and you need a couple of reminders, but let's not subject our audience on to those reminders and run that risk of that cognitive overload that I talked about earlier in too many words.

Anthony: Alright, that's a great point. I think for most engineers, when you do these technical presentations, you're typically out on podiums that typically works out pretty well. I mean for me, I do a lot of walking around but I think, having that Presenter View is awesome. I mean, a lot of times, when you plug your laptop into the projector, sometimes something like that comes up which is helpful but I didn't know that there was actually a Presenter View. So, that's helpful and that's something I'll definitely check out.

And again, don't forget, we are going to list all these tips that we got in the show notes at engineeringcareercoach.com/melissa so that you can find them easily and you can access this information. We can wrap up this segment and then get in to the Take Action Today segment where

we really want to give listeners one actionable piece of advice. Do you have anything else you want to say before we jump into that final version as far as any other general tips or strategies?

Melissa: The only other tip that I wanted to share was that sometimes people will say, “I’m thinking about this concept that I want to have and I understand that you out of the cake from more visual slide designs.” And then I’ll say, “Well for this one part of the talk there is just no visual for it. No visual for that part of the talk.” And the last piece of advice that I want to share is that, that is not a crisis.

I think that one of the most forgotten art forms, if you will, in today’s talks is that it’s perfectly okay to not have a slideshow at every second of every talk. And I recognize that, that may sound really kind of out there because we have gotten into this place where we feel there must be a slide showing at all points in time. But I just want to empower people.

If your slide is not adding anything to your talk at that moment, then one of the best things that you can do is blank the screen. Because it actually brings great amount of focus to you. The audience then is entirely focusing right on you. And it actually surprises people.

If you really want to get a lot of attention to a particular idea or concept, blank the screen. It totally changes the entire environment of the rooms. I think it’s a forgotten trick that actually works really effectively and it’s not one that a lot of people use. So, you can really stand out a good way and really bring focus or change the environment in the room just by blanking the slide once in a while.

Anthony: I believe that a lot of the clickers have a black button on their right and their screen goes black? Okay.

Melissa: A lot of clickers do and if you don’t even have a clicker, then I think you should have one because they are not expensive. Just keep it in your briefcase. I think every day you should travel with a clicker. But of course, I am a presentation nerd so I would say that. But you know, hey, I still think everybody should just have one.

But even if you don’t have one, if you are actually in slideshow view, just hit ‘B’ for blank on the keypad. It will automatically blank the screen. So you can do that just from a keypad on any computer, anywhere as long as that’s a slideshow, just hit ‘B’ for blank and it will go to a blank screen.

Anthony: Okay. So, let me just recap the five points that Melissa ran through here for improving your presentations. The first one is to start with the end in mind. If you think about the goal of your talk and what you want your audience to walk away with, and then craft your presentation around that.

The second point was to filter your PowerPoint slides. Have a strong set on to the top and some kind of a visual beneath it. Not necessarily a photo. Can be a photo, could be probably a design, drawing

or something else that is applicable to the topic you are presenting.

The third point was you can use the Notes section of PowerPoint and put your bullet points there instead of on the slides. You will still able to see it and you are also able to provide it to people afterwards as a handout in a PDF. So you don't have to worry about that being an excuse, I need to give out all the information from the talk.

The fourth point was to use the Presenter View on your laptop so that you can see the notes at all times and your audience does not see them and won't get distracted by them.

And then the fifth and final point was don't be afraid to blank the screen at times. You do have to have a visual or a slide every single second at every presentation. By blanking the screen, people are really going to focus on you.

So, that's a recap of the five main strategies that Melissa has given us. You have to check out her TED talk, "Talk Nerdy to Me". I am going to link to it in the show notes. It's got a lot of awesome points in it and she actually gives some examples because you can see her slides in the presentation. So Melissa is going to stay with us for this next segment and we will come back in a minute with the Take Action Today segment of the show.

Take Action Today Segment:

Anthony: Now it's time for the Take Action Today segment of the show. So, you have heard a lot from Melissa, which has been great so far with regards to improving your presentation. What we try to do in this segment of the show is to give you a piece of actionable advice that you can implement and see some immediate results. Melissa is actually going to give us two pieces of advice today. One, to help you with your content and the second, to help you with your slides. Go ahead Melissa.

Melissa: So in terms of the content piece, what it is you are actually saying, my big piece of advice is to make your content more concrete for your audience. And what I mean by that is, I am specifically talking about the technical information that you are trying to share. And so ways that you can make technical or scientific content more concrete are using things like examples, or analogies, or stories. So those are ways to help information to stay with the audience and the analogies are tremendously helpful for helping people to understand abstract ideas in relation to something that they already understand.

And another way to really improve your content is to make sure that you make your numbers meaningful. One of the biggest problems in technical presentations is that people give a really big number or a really small number, for that matter. And they assume that that number mean something to the audience. But I think that at any time you are presenting numbers, especially those that are

very big or very small, provide a sense of context for that number. Give a comparison. Give something that's relative, because that makes that information much more concrete to the audience. So, make your numbers meaningful and use things like examples, stories and analogies to give your audience something else to hang on to regarding your technical content. So that's the advice on my content piece. I also wanted to, I couldn't pick between which two because I think they are equally important.

The other piece that I wanted to make sure I talked about, that you did nothing else regarding the slides. Start your next presentation with a totally blank slide. And what I mean by that is, get rid of that default master template that PowerPoint constantly wants you to have. Because I think that the default template makes some bad choices for you right off the back. And it doesn't mean you can't delete elements from the default template; you can. The problem is people typically don't.

And so, if you start with just a blank slide, what I think is so powerful about that is I want you to be the person that is making the choices about what goes on that slide. Not some template from a side program making that choice for you, but you decide what should go on that slide at each point of the slide. So you're determining what goes on there. And I sure would advocate if nothing else, removes those bulleted lists. Don't ever choose those as an option because they are so difficult for your audience to, in terms of helping them understand. And when you are choosing what goes on that slide, choose primarily visual information so that the slide does something for you that your talk cannot. Because you are giving a great talk. You got the words part covered.

Anthony: So, those were excellent two points from Melissa. Make your content more concrete. Very important. Often times as engineers, we have to present two people that are not technical, who are trying to get things approved, to get concepts accepted and that's an awesome way to do that; is to relate more to the person, that's your audience.

Secondly, to start with that blank slide, I really never thought about it and in PowerPoint, it does default you to a certain slide type. And if you just start it with the blank slide, it might change the entire way your presentation looks. Honestly, thinking about that, on got a bigger picture, you can actually apply that to your career.

Melissa: Yeap!

Anthony: And your life as well. Because I mean, I know a lot of engineers that tell me, "Well, how long do I need to work before I get my license to become a project manager, a partner." And I'm like, "Don't listen to someone who tells you to work for 5 years or 10 years to do anything. You can really craft your career and advance as fast as you want to if you continue to develop yourselves."

So Melissa, thank you so much for coming on and you have given a ton of great information. I have got so many questions from listeners on presentations and speaking and I think, probably 90% of the

questions I get can be directed to this podcast for them to listen and get some information. So I really appreciate it. And definitely keep in touch, and maybe we will have you back on again after you have been doing some consulting. I'm sure you will come up with a whole bunch of other things you can talk to us about.

Melissa: Yeah, thank you so much for the opportunity to be on here. I hope that these ideas are helpful to you all that are out there listening and you can certainly keep up with me and find some more tips and tricks at my website, presentyourscience.com. Thanks very much Anthony.

Anthony: And that's the best place to get in touch with you Melissa?

Melissa: Yeah, yeap. Anybody that has any questions that anybody wants to stay in touch with me, get in touch for updates, presentyourscience.com.

Anthony: presentyourscience.com. We will link to presentyourscience.com. The show notes we are going to link to Melissa's TED talk in the show notes. You will be able to definitely find plenty of information about her. I hope you enjoyed the episode today. A lot of great stuff for you to get into here and I hope you take advantage of it. We will be back next week with another episode. And until then, I hope that you continue to engineer your own success.

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