



MESSAGEHQ FIELD GUIDE

The 10 Pillars of a Powerful Presentation

Things I Say Out Loud

These aren't slides I found in a textbook. They're the ten things I actually say out loud — to founders before a pitch, to teams before a board meeting, to myself before I walk into a room that matters. I built these the hard way: a few hundred hours of network television, award nominations I won and lost, strategy rooms and more startup pitch meetings than I can count, all wrapped up in a constant barrage of success and failure. Take what's useful. Then go do the work.

THE TEN PILLARS

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PILLAR 1 Know Your Objective



You are selling, but no one likes desperation or a hard sell.

Numero uno: Be clear on your objective. Who exactly are you talking to, and what do you actually want out of the room? Referrals? Customers? An investor you're trying to bring along? Sometimes the honest answer is just amplifying your name — and that's fine, that's a real objective too.

The vibe you want to achieve is 'I'm not selling you anything right now. I'm not expecting you to buy.' You treat the audience and yourself with the same respect. The attitude should be 'You're here because you're curious and I'm here because I have something of value that could be useful.' That's the point.

In truth you are selling, but no one likes desperation or a hard sell.

Dig into that idea before you write a word, because a single presentation can carry three or four different objectives layered inside it, and if you don't know which one is doing the work, neither will your audience.

PILLAR 2 Find Your Zone of Genius Then Own It



Even if it only moves one person in the room, that's the whole point.

Here's the thing I believe all the way down: everybody has a zone of genius, a special sauce or whatever you want to call it. Every leader, every employee, every person trying to build something new and slightly insane. You have one too. The problem is most people never stop and take the time to figure out what it is.

That takes actual self-evaluation, not the LinkedIn-bio kind. What do you do with your time that isn't work but somehow explains how you think? A personal example. I love water. Scuba diving, specifically — and that started way before it was a hobby, back when I was eight or nine holding my breath at the bottom of Bear Pond in Waterford Maine for as long as I could stand it. That's where I found something like calm. It's also, it turns out, where I found tenacity — long before I knew that word applied to running a company.

Find the version of that for you. Look behind you, look sideways, consider all of it. Then bring that into how you tell your story. It doesn't need to be a whole scuba-diving digression like mine — even one true, specific thing about how you're built will land harder than a polished bio ever will. Even if it only moves one person in the room, that's the whole point. It's incremental.

Sometimes the only person in a room of hundreds is the person who moves the needle for you.

PILLAR 3 Rehearse It Out Loud



Say the words out loud until they're yours.

I'll say this one until I'm blue in the face because it matters that much: rehearse out loud. Not the night before. Not three minutes before you're called up. Stand up, throw your arms out wide, and say the whole thing like you mean it — in the shower, in the garden, wherever nobody's judging you... yet.

I watch pitch meetings for fun, if you can call it that. Weekly ones, one, three and five minute pitches, and I watch smart people stumble all over themselves — not because they don't know what they're saying, but because they've never said it out loud before that exact moment. Nerves you haven't rehearsed away will find you at the worst time.

And here's the upside nobody mentions: if you've practiced and you still trip, you'll know what to do with it. You'll laugh, make the joke, keep moving — instead of spiraling into 'oh no, what do they think of me now.' Who cares. Say the words out loud until they're yours.

PILLAR 4 Give Yourself a Time Limit



Time limits aren't a constraint on a good presentation — they're the pacing, the rhythm, the actual music of it.

Give yourself a time limit, even when nobody hands you one. If you've got a twenty-minute window, don't build twenty minutes of content — build fifteen. Do the work to earn that gap.

Nerves want to rush you. They always do. A time limit you've built in on purpose gives you room to breathe, to look up, to actually respond to whoever's in front of you instead of racing through a script because you're terrified of running long. Time limits aren't a constraint on a good presentation — they're the pacing, the rhythm, the actual music of it.

A note about time limits: The one minute pitch is a real constraint and seems very much in favor. Personally, I find it egregious but that's life. If that's all you have then hold on to the core items -- What the solution delivers? Who it benefits? Why it matters so much, people will spend money.

PILLAR 5 Silence Is Golden



A pause isn't dead air; it's the room catching up to what you just said.

When you have time and you've practiced well silence is golden, and I mean that literally, not as a nice sentiment for a mug buried in the company kitchen. If you drop something big in a room — a hard truth, a real problem, a number that should land — follow it with nothing. Let it sit.

Every instinct you have will scream to fill that silent gap. Almost everybody does. Nobody knows how to shut up and say less. That's exactly why not filling it makes you different. A pause isn't dead air; it's the room catching up to what you just said. Have the nerve to let it.

PILLAR 6 Observe Constantly Even While You Present



Watch the room instead of watching yourself.

This one only works once you've actually done pillars one through five — it's the advanced move, not the shortcut. Observation matters as much as presentation. Most people walk into a room already narrating a future that hasn't happened yet: 'I hope this doesn't go badly,' as if that's already decided. It hasn't. You can't do anything about the past and you can't do anything about a future that doesn't exist yet. You can only be where you actually are, which is why the prep is so important.

Watch the room instead of watching yourself. Is someone smiling? Frowning? Smirking? Use it. If someone's frowning at the exact moment you name a problem, say something like 'Yeah, you're frowning — because you get it, right?' Go off script when it's earned. That's not losing control, that's the thing that makes you read as an actual human instead of a script on legs. And you only get to improvise like that once the fundamentals are already in your body. Presenting is a performative function and just like actors listen and observe as well as speak so should you.

You'd be surprised how many execs and leaders have been in some form of drama exercise scenario. How do you think politicians prepare for debates?

PILLAR 7 Nerves Are a Warning System Not a Verdict



Preparation doesn't remove the nerves; it just means the nerves don't get the final word.

Nerves are natural, and they are not a character flaw. They're a warning system — your body telling you something feels unready or risky. Don't beat yourself up over having them. The fastest way through is to stop focusing on yourself and focus outward instead.

Plant your feet. Stand up straight. Take a breath and push the energy out instead of folding inward. Your legs might still shake a little — let them. Keep them rooted and keep going. You've done the rehearsal; you've built the earlier pillars into the ground you're standing on. That's the antidote. When in doubt take a breath and settle before continuing. Preparation doesn't remove the nerves; it just means the nerves don't get the final word. Sensei has spoken

PILLAR 8 Think in Big, Shiny Objects



Simple wins. It always wins.

Think about how dense your presentation actually needs to be, because the honest answer is almost never as dense as you think. I call this the big shiny object problem — we assume the room needs our level of expertise to care, and they don't. They need to feel something, not pass a test.

Build big, broad, easy-to-hold statements that address need function, customers and emotions and answer tricky questions in advance are helpful. If you grab people — not literally — and they are unclear about a detail but convinced of your authority, they will find you and say, 'I don't fully understand tell me more.' That's the win. Aim for the version a smart fifth grader could repeat back to you. Simple wins. It always wins.

PILLAR 9 Present Your Best Undistracted Self



Whatever gets you there — a run, yoga, reading, quiet — do it before you show up, not after.

Figure out what physically and emotionally puts you in your best state, and then actually do that before you present, not just think about doing it. Suit and tie or beat-up t-shirt — doesn't matter which, it matters that you know which one is actually you, and then you weigh that against who's in the room. Don't dress like the latest Silicon Valley starlet just because you think it's cool - do it if it feels real.

This one gets more literal on Zoom/Teams/Google than people expect.

If your background is chaos, you're looking at a second monitor if a fan's roaring, if I can't tell where your eyes are, that's pulling attention away from you whether you notice it or not.

Spend the very few dollars it costs in this day and age to build an environment that reflects you best. Buy a ring light. A side fill light. A good mic. And build a good background whether digital or real. Last note! Please don't use the Golden Gate Bridge backdrop in zoom. It's so old hat.

I have lights and mics and art on the walls that I love and a weird kitschy gold lamp of my daughter's in the background, not because I'm vain about it, but because it represents me as I wish to be seen.

For you it will do the same and removes one more thing standing between you and the message. Whatever gets you there — a run, yoga, reading, quiet — do it before you show up, not after.



Stop carrying 'I hate public speaking' around.

It's the one people forget first: have fun. If you're not enjoying it, nobody in that room is enjoying it either — energy is not something you can fake past an audience, they can feel the difference. Find the levity wherever it's hiding. This is meant to be a wild, occasionally ridiculous adventure, not a punishment you're serving.

This feels counter intuitive, but if we accept the adage 'always be closing' then we have to accept a certain satisfaction and fun in the process. Once upon a time we killed animals to survive, now we kill the competition and close deals.

Stop carrying 'I hate public speaking' around. Build a habit that treats pitching like eating ice Cream. So what if it doesn't go perfectly? You get to wake up tomorrow — on the right side of the grass, as my uncle Tass used to say — and try it again.

TAKE THIS WITH YOU
Pillars at a Glance

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BEFORE YOU GO

A Closing Note Not a Pep Talk

You can read this whole thing front to back, dog-ear every page, and still bomb your next presentation. That's not a flaw in the pillars — it's the point. None of this works from the page. It only works once you actually get up and do it, badly at first, and then less badly, and then eventually well.

I didn't come out of the womb with the confidence to speak in front of a room or hazard an opinion in one — and I have plenty of opinions. That confidence is built the unglamorous way: experience, time, failure, curiosity, getting it wrong in front of people, and paying attention to what happened next. Presentation is a learned skill, not a personality trait some people get and others don't.

So do the work. Say it out loud before the room makes you say it out loud. Then go again.

MESSAGEHQ

Put This to Work.

If your team's story isn't landing the way it should — in the room, in the deck, in the pitch — that's exactly the terrain MessageHQ works in.

Book a Clarity Session → messagehq.net/contact.html

Book Adam for a Talk → messagehq.net/speaking.html