

# **ASTD 2003 INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE AND EXPOSITION S316**

## **How To Make an Effective Presentation in 99 Seconds**

Fifteen years ago we discovered the cure for conference boredom: Challenge presenters to make a point—a real point with useful content—in just 99 seconds. We have facilitated the 99-Second sessions at several international conferences in the USA and Australia. In the process, we analyzed hundreds of presentations and identified a list of engaging formats and best practices. We also discovered that the same principles and practices can contribute to the effectiveness and interest level of longer presentations and training sessions. After all, a 90-minute presentation is just a series of 99-second presentations. In this session, the presenters will demonstrate and discuss a variety of engaging presentation formats. Enjoy the session and master the skills that make you an efficient, effective, and entertaining presenter.

### ***LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

- Identify and explain the critical and desirable features of 99-Seconds presentations.
- From a collection of 30 different formats, select the most appropriate one for achieving a specific goal with a specific target audience.
- Use the 99-second formats to design and deliver effective, efficient, and engaging presentations.

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## How To Make an Effective Presentation in 99 Seconds

*Sivasailam Thiagarajan & Raja Thiagarajan, Workshops by Thiagi, Inc.*

99 Seconds is a special type of panel session that features 10 or more presenters. Each presenter makes a brisk, self-contained presentation that lasts for less than 99 seconds. Although all presentations deal with the same general topic, no attempt is made to sequence them in any logical order or to standardize the presentation format.

### **A Sample 99-Seconds Session**

Let's vicariously participate in a 99-seconds session to get a feel for what happens.

You are attending a session how to motivate your employees. You notice that the seats in the first row have a reserved sign, each with a name of a presenter.

**Alien Anthropologist.** At the beginning of the session a large timer is projected on a screen and it begins to count down the seconds from 99. Steve, the moderator for the session, introduces his co-presenter as an alien from a far-away planet who has transformed herself to look human. She is actually a well-known anthropologist in her planet. She is visiting Earth on a special mission to observe and record human behavior patterns in the workplace. She understands English, but prefers to speak in her native language that Steve can translate.

The alien says, "*Morba aayacharinama vishel anyana, lunna lewai resivaranlagai mepoodud godumai daputharom.*"

Steve translates: "One of the interesting things about humans is that they always punish their best performers. For example, if someone finishes ahead of the scheduled time, managers immediately punish the person by giving her more things to do. In addition, co-workers yell at the person for not being a team player."

The alien continues: "*Aalan mathapadi*".

Steve explains that the alien language is so efficient that it could convey a lot of information in just a few phonemes. He continues with his translation:

"These punishing consequences from managers and co-workers result in apparent alienation of the high performer. Eventually, this performer slows down her productivity until it is reduced to the lowest common denominator. This makes the manager happy because he does not have to worry about his job security. This makes the co-workers happy and they praise the high-performer's ability to appreciate important things in life."

The interaction between Steve and the alien continues in this vein, with an interesting look at principles of performance management from an objective alien perspective.

The countdown timer on the screen is now down to 10 seconds. Something that the alien says leaves Steve looking puzzled. He says something in the alien language, apparently asking for clarification.

The alien snaps back in English: "I said we are talking too much. They already got the point. Let's shut up and leave them alone."

**One Minute Survey.** The timer displays zero while Steve and the alien anthropologist leave the stage. When the next presenter, Diane, enters the stage, the timer reset itself to 99. It begins counting down as Diane begins to talk.

Diane asks each participant to think of the type of reward that would motivate her to work more efficiently. She asks participants to write this type of reward on a piece of paper and pass it to the back of the room. Ten seconds later, she asks each participant to write the type of reward that she most frequently uses to improve the performance of others. Diane explains that she would analyze the data later. She then proceeds to summarize the data that she had collected from earlier groups. She identifies the top three rewards that people prefer and compares them with the three most frequently used rewards. During the last 10 second of her time, Diane invites the audience to ponder on the discrepancy between these two sets of rewards. She suggests that people should try to reward others the way they themselves would like to be rewarded.

### ***Benefits and Limitations***

Here are some advantages of the 99-Seconds strategy:

**Efficiency.** The tight time limit forces presenters to focus on the key learning points and to avoid dwelling on trivial “nice-to-know” points.

**Interest.** The unusual format and rapid change of presenters maintains high levels of audience interest, especially with the new generation of learners brought on MTV programs.

**Variety.** Presenters talk about different points using different formats. This variety enables audience members to receive a well-rounded picture of what is happening.

**Participation.** Audience members have to actively organize different presentations into a coherent whole that makes sense to them. After the session, they may have to do some research to close any gaps. These responsibilities give additional ownership to the listeners.

**Assessment.** The 99-second format can be used as a performance test for presentation skills.

The 99-seconds format also has some disadvantages:

**Confusion.** Because the individual presentations are not synchronized with each other, audience members may find the ideas to be disconnected.

**Contradictions.** Another consequence of the individualized approach could be that later presenters contradict the ideas and opinions presented by earlier presenters.

**Incompleteness.** Because of the time limit, it is possible that presenters may ignore some critical elements of the overall topic.

**Passivity.** Also because of the time limit, presenters may not provide practice opportunities or feedback.

## **Types of 99-Second Presentations**

There are many different types of 99-second sessions. For our convenience, we have grouped 35 different formats into four categories in the discussion below.

### **Active Participation**

This type of 99-second sessions involve interactive strategies. A major problem with active participation is the time consumed by getting audience members organized and interacting. Here are two possible solutions: You can ask independent participation by individuals. Alternatively, you can bring a small group of people on stage to demonstrate the interaction. If you choose the second approach, be sure to rehearse the session with your demonstration group to get the timing right.

**Creative visualization.** Facilitator asks participants to close their eyes and takes them through a guided visualization exercise to encourage creative problem solving or empathic understanding. *Example: Everyday life in a refugee camp.*

**Introspection.** Facilitator asks a series of questions that provoke participants to arrive at some truthful insights. *Example: How would your career be affected if your sexual orientation were different?*

**Physical activity.** Performer demonstrates a physical activity, inviting audience members to follow along. *Example: How to relax by using yogic breathing technique.*

**Data collection.** Presenter asks all audience members to write down one or two words in response to an open-ended question. She then shares the results from a previous group. (The new data are analyzed later and the results are posted on a web site.) *Example: What's the most important benefit of e-learning?*

**Debriefing.** Facilitator asks audience members to focus on a common experience and conducts a debrief by asking a series of targeted questions and sharing a typical response for each question. *Example: Encounters with irate customers.*

**Each Teach.** Facilitator asks one half of the audience to close their eyes and cover their ears and explains how to apply the first step of a two-step procedure. She then asks the other half to close their eyes and cover their ears while explaining the second half. Audience members are encouraged to partner with one another and practice the entire skill after the session. *Example: How to say 'hello' and 'good-bye' in Malayalam.*

**Jolt.** A brief experiential activity that provides a powerful epiphany. *Example: An exercise in which two participants arm wrestle, ignoring the rules that actually support a cooperative approach ("Your score depends on how many times your hand touches the table")*

**Poll.** Presenter conducts a quick poll -- and reveals the data by asking audience members to raise their hands or stand up. *Examples: How many of you had meetings with SMEs that were (a) positive, (b) neutral, or (c) negative?*

**Questions and answers.** Prior to the session, presenter distributes questions to confederates in the audience. During the presentation she "invites" questions from the audience and responds to them. *Example: Legal aspects of sexual harassment.*

**Silence.** Presenter observes a minute of silence to encourage a review earlier ideas.

**Sing-Along.** Presenter invites audience members to sing along with her, using a well-known tune and words from a handout.

## **Brief Presentations**

This type involves effective presentation techniques that are usually incorporated as parts of lengthier presentations.

**Analogy.** Presenter suggests an analogy (by holding up a prop or displaying a graphic) and describes how it is similar to a real-world object or process. *Example: Bullying as an analogy to sexual harassment.*

**Cartoon.** Presenter displays a cartoon (or a comic strip) on screen and explains a powerful principle illustrated by it. *Example: Dilbert illustrating the uselessness of consultants.*

**Formula.** Presenter displays a formula and quickly explains the variables and functions. *Example: How to compute your daily rate for consulting services.*

**Joke.** Presenter tells a joke with a punch line that reveals an important truth. *Example: A small child exclaiming that the emperor has no clothes.*

**Magic Trick.** Performer does a conjuring act and uses it as an analogy for an important principle. *Example: Linking Rings magic trick to illustrate the power of belief.*

**Pithy saying.** Presenter displays an aphorism or a proverb and explains its application to the topic. *Example: Discussion of the impact of the German proverb on teambuilding strategies: Durch zusammenleben, lernt man zusammenleben. (By living together, people learn to live together.)*

**Poetry reading.** Presenter recites a poem that highlights critical principles. *Example: A ballad about office romances to illustrate performance problems.*

**Rap song.** Presenter performs a rap song that highlights important principles. *Example: New-hire orientation.*

**Story telling.** Presenter tells a personal anecdote or a short-short story that highlights an important principle. *Example: Frederic Brown's Sentinel in which the admirable soldier-hero turns out to be an alien invading Earth!*

## **Mediated Presentations**

We can incorporate different types of media productions in a 99-second presentations. An important precaution is to test out the equipment ahead of time and to have a back up.

**Audio recording.** Presenter plays an audio recording in the form of a new item to highlight key principles. *Example: "Scientists report a simple technique to prevent repetitive stress injuries in the workplace ..."*

**Conversation with alter ego.** Performer plays dual roles by having a conversation with her "evil twin sister" presented through an audio or video tape recording. (This recording is produced ahead of time with suitable pauses to permit a simulated conversation.) *Example: A debate about the advantages and disadvantages of teamwork.*

**Movie excerpt.** Presenter uses an excerpt from some popular movie to highlight an important principle. *Example: A 1-minute excerpt from the movie Gettysburg to show visionary leadership in action.*

**Music.** Presenter performs or plays the recording of a piece of music and quickly highlights the critical message. *Example: John Lennon's Imagine followed by an exhortation for performance technologists to work on world peace.*

**Puppets.** Performer conducts a conversation with a puppet to highlight important principles. *Example: Importance of environmental protection.*

**Puzzle.** Presenter displays a puzzle on screen and asks participants to solve it to identify a critical principle. The puzzle is gradually solved to speed up the process. *Example: A "Wheel of Fortune" puzzle with a statement about rewards and reinforcement.*

**Silent slide set.** Presenter displays a set of slides (in an animated form) that explain a process. *Example: Five steps in rapid instructional design.*

**Video recording.** Presenter plays a videotape recording to highlight some important points. *Example: Videotape recording of a typical office room to identify different safety hazards.*

## **Co-Presentations**

More than one person can present a 99-seconds session. The key element in this approach is for the co-presenters to rehearse the presentation and to time it tightly.

**Conversation.** Two presenters discuss a common paradoxical topic, highlighting the pros and cons of the extremes. Audience members realize that the paradox has to be managed effectively to reduce the disadvantages and to utilize the advantages. *Example: "Individuals cannot produce significant results" vs "Teamwork results in wasted effort".*

**Drama.** A small group of people (in suitable costume, if possible) act out a skit that highlights key elements of an effective procedure, usually by presenting a before-and-after segments. *Example: How to conduct a rapid performance analysis.*

**Gibberish.** In this improv-theater technique an alien or a guru is interviewed by an expert. The alien talks in gibberish and the expert translates what she says. *Example: What a Klingon has observed about human behavior during staff meetings.*

**Interview.** Presenter interviews one or two experts to highlight important strategies for achieving a goal. *Example: How to handle cross-cultural clashes.*

**One word at a time.** In this improv technique, three or more participants respond to questions from audience members or present an important message, taking turns to speak one word at a time. *Example: The importance of equal participation.*

**Panel.** Three or more presenters quickly present a series of strategies for achieving an objective. *Example: How to motivate the online learner.*

**Roleplay.** Two presenters (or the presenter and a "volunteer" from the audience) conduct a role-play that illustrates some important interpersonal skill. *Example: How to present bad news to the client.*

## **What Does the Audience Want?**

Based on interviews of hundreds of audience members from previous 99-Seconds sessions, here are five important guidelines.

- Balance learning with entertainment. Deliver powerful learning content, but don't bore people. Use attention-getting devices but avoid 99 seconds of fluff.
- Keep your session self-contained. Make sure that participants receive immediate value in these 99 seconds. Don't use the session to sell your other sessions or publications. Don't even mention them.
- Be realistic about what you can present within 99 seconds. Rehearse your session so you can deliver it in 90 seconds without talking fast and running out of breath.
- Think auditory. Think in terms of story telling and radio. Don't distract audience attention with too many slides or crowded handouts.
- Use interaction, but don't waste time with elaborate instructions. Focus on cognitive interaction rather than physical interaction.

## ***Suggestions for Presenters***

- Choose a single concept, principle, or tip.
- Choose a topic that you can explain to someone in a minute's time. This leaves you some extra time for additional embellishments.
- Practice your presentation with a timer. It's difficult to estimate the passage of 99 seconds. It is a longer period of time than you think. But if you are a long-winded person, the 99 seconds appear to shrink.
- Don't memorize your presentation. But be sure that you can recall the key ideas in the correct sequence.
- Practice your presentation with an audience of a one or two friends. Revise your presentation based on the feedback.
- You don't have time to use elaborate media. Use your imagination to create memorable props.
- If necessary, you may use a couple of PowerPoint slides. Make sure that each slide has fewer than 6 lines and each line has fewer than 6 words.

## Musical Interludes

### **Key Idea**

Perform (or play the recording of) a piece of music and quickly highlight the critical message. For example, you may play John Lennon's *Imagine* followed by an exhortation to performance technologists to work for world peace.

### **Extended Example**

Play a 50 second recording containing three musical excerpts, each a dramatically different performance of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* of the same musical phrase: The first performance is a symphonic recording; the second is Billy Joel at the piano, and the third is the California Guitar Trio's recording. Make sure that the recordings you use are dramatically different in tone, sound, and style. Also, choose any piece of music that is well-known and familiar to your audience: *Jingle Bells*, *Happy Birthday*, or *I Want to Hold Your Hand* by the Beatles. At the end of the recorded playback, point out that although the content was the same, our reactions to each performances were very different.

Here are the learning points:

- How we convey a message (the form) is as important as what the message says (the content).
- Our choices for how we communicate the message should be based on our purpose.
- Different people are affected differently by the form of performance. So we should select the form based on our audience.

### **Sample Applications**

- Communication skills: There is a difference between what is said and what is understood.
- Cultural diversity: There are different (and equally valuable ways) to experience what's around us.
- Cultural diversity: Different people have different preferences to musical styles.
- Musical Appreciation: Acknowledging and valuing different interpretations of music.
- Motivation: How background music can affect our mood.
- Interpersonal Skills: Choose an appropriate recording with lyrics that communicate a key principle.
- Technical content. Create lyrics to present the content to a favorite tune.

### **Troubleshooting**

**Problem:** The stereo output device you use (boom box or computer and speakers) or your recording (cassette tape, CD, or MP3) fails to work.

**Solution:** Have back ups. Make sure you have another playback device and another copy of your recording in case something happens.



## **Gibberish**

### ***Key Idea***

In this improv-theater technique, introduce your co-presenter as a visitor from an alien planet (or a guru from the Himalayas). The alien talks in a made-up language that sounds like gibberish to the audience (because it is gibberish). You “translate” what she says. In the process, you make up insightful observations about human interactions as they would appear to an alien. This enables you to present serious messages in a humorous context.

### ***Extended Example***

At the beginning of a session, you introduce your co-presenter as a visitor from a far-away planet who has transformed herself to look like a human. She is on an anthropological mission to observe and report human behavior patterns to scientists on her planet. Now, on the eve of her return to the home planet, she has agreed to share few of her insights about human motivation principles. She can understand English, but she prefers to speak in her native language which you can translate.

The alien say, “Romba aachariyamana visesham ennana, nulla velai seiravangalai epoodum kodumai padutharom.”

You translate: “One of the interesting things about human beings is that they always punish their best performers. If someone finishes a task ahead of time, managers give that person more things to do. Coworkers yell at the person for showing off.”

The alien continues: “Aanal mathapadi”.

You explain that the alien language is so efficient that it could convey a lot of information by using just a few phonemes. You continue with your translation:

“This type of consequences from managers and co-workers result in apparent alienation of the high performer. Eventually, this performer controls her behavior patterns and slows down her productivity until it is reduced to the lowest common denominator. This makes the manager happy because he does not have to worry about his job security. This makes the co-workers happy and they praise the high-performer’s ability to stop and smell the flowers.”

The interaction between you and the alien continues in this vein, with you plugging in basic principles related to the topic of contingency management.

Near the end, the alien says something that leaves you puzzled. With a quizzical look, you say something in gibberish, apparently asking her to explain what she said.

The alien snaps back in English: “I said you are talking too much. They already got the message. Let’s go do something useful.”

### ***Tips***

Choose someone who speaks a foreign language (preferably some language that is unfamiliar to your audience) as the alien. Let the alien speak in this language rather than

doing total gibberish. However, make sure that the alien can resist the temptation to use strings of expletives in case someone else can understand the language.

Practice uttering long strings of gibberish in a fluent fashion. Use strange-sounding intonation patterns and changes in volume. Learn to gesture wildly.

Prepare your message carefully. Chop into suitable chunks. Practice interacting with the alien, talking alternatively.

Work out a series of cues to subtly signal the alien to stop.

Carefully work out the timing so the last piece of dialogue ends at the 95<sup>th</sup> second.

Get audience involvement. Prearrange with an audience member to ask a question. Translate that into gibberish for the alien. Translate the alien's response into English.

### ***Sample Applications***

You can use the gibberish at the beginning of a session to suggest ground rules and guidelines such as these:

- Suspend your disbelief and have faith in what the presenter is saying.
- Stop thinking, "What's in it for me?". Instead, ask yourself, "How can I change my behaviors to make use of the new ideas?"
- Think in terms of how you can apply the new principles and procedures within the next 24 hours.

Present basic (and obvious) principles with an alien spin:

- We do not listen actively.
- We seldom walk the talk.
- We enjoy playing the role of victim rather than being accountable for our behaviors.

### ***Troubleshooting:***

Problem: You cannot convince anyone to play the role of the alien.

Solution 1: Play both roles yourself. Put on a weird contraption on your head and claim that you are channeling with an alien. Talk gibberish. Remove the contraption and translate the message into English.

Solution 2: Make a talking-head videotape of yourself with a robot helmet, talking in gibberish with suitable pauses. Claim that you are having a video interview with an alien.