

Project Interview Coaching Can Lead to Wins

By Sandra Zimmer

[The Self-Expression Center](#)

Project team leaders are often brilliant at their technical expertise but may lack the presentation and persuasion skills to win a project. If they are stiff and boring at the project interview, they may lose a project for which they are the best choice.

The success of your company depends on developing new business and the ability of your team leaders to present persuasively in project interviews. To win new projects, team leaders must not only be able to present their technical expertise, ideas, and processes in a credible manner, they must also be emotionally engaging and compelling so that the client selection panel feels your project team is the clear winner.

The Real Purpose of Project Interviews

When you are short-listed, the client already deems your firm capable and competent. Your job in the project interview is not to tell them you can do the project; rather, it is to connect with the clients. The client selection panel is looking for the team to trust. So, your experts must show the clients that they can trust your team to guide them safely through the project.

Setting up a Preparation and Practice Process

It often falls to the proposal manager or marketing director to help technical experts and team leaders plan and prepare for the interview presentation. It takes time to prepare a winning presentation, often more time than presenters want to spend. I will most often schedule two-and-a-half days, with time in between those days for presenters to write their talks.

The following schedule of steps can be helpful in guiding presenters through the process of planning and preparing to present. Time periods for each step will adjust according to the amount of time available.



Sandra Zimmer, founder of [The Self-Expression Center](#), makes a key point during a presentation he delivered to the Greater Houston Chapter of APMP on Oct. 3.

Day 1 – A Full Day of Collecting Ideas

Welcome and Overview – About One Hour

- Define the intent of the interview
 - What is our intention?
 - What do we want to happen?
- Set the tone of the interview
 - How do we want this interview to feel to us and the clients?
 - What do we want it to look like?
 - Qualities we want to come through?
 - How do we get the clients engaged?
 - What do the clients need from us?

Collect Key Issues and Messages – About Two Hours

- Identify key issues to present

- The main theme? What is the golden strand that weaves throughout? The ONE key point that makes the difference?
- What are the persuasive stories to tell?
- How can we give them a SURPRISE about what we can do for them?
- What is each person's intention?

Preparing for Q&A During Lunch (Someone Needs to Scribe) – One Hour

- What are the competitors going to do?
- What are the hard questions to answer?
- How do we answer the hard questions?

Clarify Structure of the Interview Presentation – About One Hour

- What will be the order?

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- Who will speak?
- How much time will each person have?
- How will they interact with each other?
- How will they interact with the clients?
- What will the room layout be?
- How will we set the stage?

“Alone Time” – About One Hour

- Each presenter thinks through and writes out his or her thoughts

Verbalizing the Individual Messages – About Two Hours

- Identify visual aids, slides, boards, etc.
- Warm-up exercises
- Grounding meditation
- Talk through their parts (say it as if you were really saying it to the clients)
- Listen to the others for ideas and concepts with which to connect

Day 2 (One Week Later) – A Full Day of Rehearsal

- Begin the walkthrough: Make it physical
 - Define the space and set-up
 - Start to “physicalize” the presentation (who will be where and how will you move?)
 - What will your physical presentation be like? Sitting? Standing? Moving? Interacting?
 - Look for ways of delivering that allow each presenter to be comfortable and natural
- Continue the walkthrough: Stand up and deliver
 - Put the presentation on its feet
 - Break it into segments for rehearsal
 - Put it all together
 - Practice several times

- Discuss problems and issues

Day 3 – Dress Rehearsal – About Four to Six Hours

- Discuss problems and concerns
- Final preparations
- Physical warm-up and grounding relaxation exercise
- Run dress rehearsal in front of live audience mock client panel
 - Feedback and suggestions from the mock panel
 - Any cleanup based on feedback

Coaching Skills

Coaching is not criticism. It is facilitating the process to make it easy for the team to prepare and practice. The following coaching skills will help you help them shine.

- *Help them relax and develop presence.* Bring in some out-of-the-box exercises to get them relaxed in their bodies. Stretching, muscle-shaking and visualization exercises will help them release the tension of presenting. I use a grounding exercise that develops presence and gets people comfortable in their skins. While it is too long to explain here, you can get a copy of it from [my Web site](#).
- *Help them find stories that make the presentation compelling and persuasive.* Ask them to make a list of roles that they have played in their professional lives like project manager, construction manager, principal in charge. Have them ask this question for each role, “Can I recall a time when I was in this role and I experienced a conflict, a decision, a discovery or a success?” That question will cause stories to pop up to memory. Then direct them to evaluate the lesson learned from that story. Use stories and lessons learned to introduce the important points in their talk. Stories can be from projects in the past that are relevant to this project, but

they can also be personal stories that have a universal message that applies to this situation.

- *Help them connect.* Coach your experts to talk one to one while they are presenting. Encourage them to have a one-to-one conversation with different people in the client selection panel. This makes them feel safer and creates a conversational tone.
- *Give feedback that supports their confidence rather than tearing it down.* Presenters are nervous, anxious, and vulnerable even if they don’t show it. Don’t focus on what they are doing wrong. Instead, use a “yes, and” approach to feedback. For instance, don’t say, “You are not connecting.” Instead say, “Wow, the way you expressed that was excellent. Now when you do it again, I want you to talk one to one with individuals in the audience, so that you make more connection while sharing that point.”

Achieving Good Chemistry, Unified Teams

Skillfully guiding your teams through a complete presentation preparation process helps each person connect to his or her natural abilities to speak comfortably, passionately, and persuasively. Because the whole team is co-creating the presentation, they establish chemistry and appear as a unified team before the client selection panel. The chemistry established among team members carries over to group communication when your team begins the project.

Sandra Zimmer is president of Sandra Zimmer & Associates, Inc., and founder of [The Self-Expression Center](#). Her programs help transform the way professionals express who they are so they feel confident to share their ideas and expertise when they speak, sell, or persuade. Ms. Zimmer holds a master’s degree in theater from The University of Houston, teaching certification in voice and speech from renowned voice trainer [Arthur Lessac](#), and a bachelor’s degree in psychology from the University of Texas.