

# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION:

## 19 Big Mistakes Public Speakers Make on Panels and Fireside Chats

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# LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

Panels and fireside chats are everywhere today – but many lack substance, falling short of their potential as forums for great leadership communication.

Instead of inspiring audiences, these sessions often leave audiences feeling simply ho-hum. That's because panels and fireside chats get sabotaged by common mistakes made by public speakers onstage.



This e-book reveals these common mistakes – and tells you what to do instead as a public speaker – so you can master leadership communication the next time you show up as a panelist or guest at a fireside chat.

It's no secret I'm not a raving fan of panels and fireside chats, which have bloomed into a presumed staple at most conferences and corporate events worldwide.

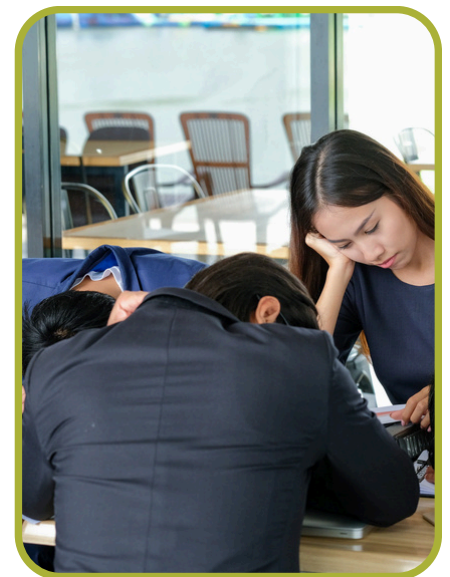
They're popular today for many reasons:

- **They seem like a lighter lift for busy public speakers**, who may not have the time it takes to prepare a careful, thoughtful, structured-from-start-to-finish keynote speech in response to a leadership communication opportunity.
- **They seem like an easy way to keep audiences today involved and engaged** in a lively, relatable, "authentic," personal conversation.
- **They seem like a good platform for sharing diverse perspectives** to be more relevant and appeal to wider, more diverse audiences.

But all too often, in my experience?

**Panels and fireside chats have little to no impact on the audience.**

And that's a waste.



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Over the past three decades, I've listened to scores of panels and fireside chats – mostly poor ones, very few good ones and hardly any great ones.

Why is this?

**In many cases, panels and fireside chats are not taken seriously enough by event planners, moderators, panelists and guests.**

As a result, panels and fireside chats are often not planned well, not moderated well and not rehearsed well. For example:

- **Topics are often way too broad** – so audiences quickly get bored.
- **Moderators are often chosen for all the wrong reasons**, based on their title or position in the corporate hierarchy, or as a reward for voluntary leadership in an association. This happens all the time, despite the fact that these “chosen ones” often have poor or no public speaking skills; no practice or training in the ability to moderate; and no ability to conduct interviews, make connections from point to point and person to person, keep dominant personalities in check, and move conversations along seamlessly to benefit the audience. In fact: Ineffective moderators, on their own, have the power to ruin the potential for a high-energy, high-impact panel discussion or fireside chat.
- **Participants often run out of time to run through even one rehearsal**, with all parties prepared, present and participating. This often leads to a series of surprises and awkward missteps onstage, during showtime.



**So what can be done about all this?**

If you are a panelist on a panel or a guest at a fireside chat, it's important to know and understand the 19 big mistakes public speakers make on panels and fireside chats.

**And then *do something else instead* to nail the impact of your leadership communication.**

Here's what you need to know.

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## Mistake 1: Winging it

**What happens:** Public speakers often perceive that a panel or fireside chat is **easier** than a more formal speech or presentation – so they **don't put in the time required** to prepare with intention. As a result, they get neither a discernable outcome nor a tangible business result from their presence onstage.



**Do this instead:** Follow this formula – a planning tool – to help you **AIM for Impact**.

- **A = Audience.** Analyze your audience to connect with your audience so you can change your audience in some way. (What does your audience already know and feel about this topic? What do you have in common with your audience?)
- **I = Intention.** Identify your intention. (What outcomes would you like to see? How will you change the way the audience thinks or behaves?)
- **M = Message.** Commit to a solitary message. (Does your solitary message involve your audience and inspire action? Is it easy to remember and repeat?)

**AIM for Impact every time** you have the chance to be onstage. It's a lost opportunity when you show up onstage and wing it (and then wonder after it's over what difference you really made).





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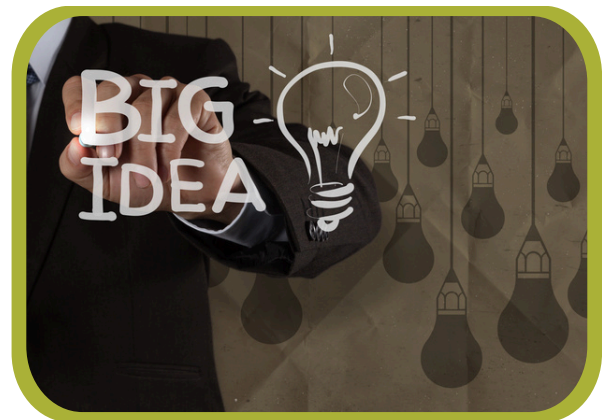
## Mistake 2: Doing no homework on the moderator, fellow panelists

**What happens:** Public speakers often focus only on what **they** want to say – and may come to the stage with little to no insight into what the **moderator** is going for, based on the purpose of the event and the audience's needs. In addition, public speakers may know little to nothing about the background, experiences and perspectives that fellow panelists may bring to the stage (which could surprise them later).

**Do this instead:** Do your own research: Get to know the moderator and the panelists **before** the rehearsal and **before** the event. Discover what you have in common – where your paths may have crossed – and where your thinking diverges. What is the moderator known for? What is each panelist known for? Determine how you can connect around certain themes while you are onstage (so you are not surprised in the wrong way).

## Mistake 3: Showing up without a Big Idea

**What happens:** Public speakers with a wealth of knowledge and plenty of confidence in the topic at hand may **believe** they'll be able to pull whatever they need, whenever they need it, out of their head: on the spot and on the fly. So they show up ready to **spill anything and everything** based on how the conversation evolves onstage.



**Do this instead:** Savvy public speakers do better with their leadership communication. They are **strategic** on panels and fireside chats. They show up with the need to share a Big Idea to change the way the audience thinks or behaves about some aspect of the topic at hand. Because they are intentional, they get an **outcome** – a clear business **result** – based on what they decide upfront to share onstage.

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## Mistake 4: Staying surface-level versus diving deep

**What happens:** Public speakers, when faced with a question from the moderator, often say what comes first to their mind, which is often a **shallow**, far-less-than-insightful response. Often, these surface-level answers are boring and predictable and may even come off as finger-wagging lectures (or worse: safe, sanitized public relations gestures).



**Do this instead:** During your prep work for a panel or fireside chat, skip what emerges first – what’s on the surface; dive deep to make a point that stands out in response to a question. Talk in specific, concrete terms; don’t default to the general or the abstract (because that’s forgettable). Form your answer by giving an example or telling a relevant personal story instead of providing “parental guidance” by pontificating on a point or delivering a series of overly polished talking points. (The audience **will** notice!)

## Mistake 5: Boiling the ocean

**What happens:** The moderator of the panel or fireside chat fails to provide any **structure, focus** and **boundaries** around the general topic of the conversation, which soon begins to go in unconnected directions. This can make the audience feel **lost at sea**, unconvinced that any real value will come from this conversation onstage.



**Do this instead:** Know the specific areas where **you** bring unique value to the conversation. Then set your own structure, focus and boundaries so the points you choose to make – with intention – resonate with the audience. *(Tip: If you’re unsatisfied with the prepared questions upfront, do you have an opportunity to suggest different questions that will produce better learnings and a meaningful experience for the audience?)*

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## Mistake 6: Sharing foggy takeaways, zero soundbites

**What happens:** Public speakers who lean too far into **self-promotion** ("I, I, I") forget the gift they need to give their audiences: clear, actionable, memorable takeaways that will change the way their audience thinks or behaves.

**Do this instead:** Decide upfront what the **audience** needs to glean from your responses to the prepared questions from the moderator and the ad hoc questions that arise. Then decide the best way to make those clear, actionable, memorable points. Plan a mix of powerful punchlines, short answers, colorful anecdotes, quick stories. Push yourself to go beyond the ordinary and say something **extraordinary**.



## Mistake 7: Talking in circles

**What happens:** Some public speakers feel the need to set up their answer first by providing background and tangential points – which often prove to be irrelevant and without value. Speakers unable to answer succinctly and directly often talk **around** the question instead of getting **right to** the question.



**Do this instead:** Practice delivering your answers, anecdotes and stories by speaking from bullets and timing yourself. Refine your answers. Cut out details that add no value. Then repeat. Keep challenging yourself to get **even more succinct**, which tends to elicit more clarity and more simplicity – essential for good leadership communication.



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## Mistake 8: Playing inside baseball

**What happens:** Public speakers well-versed in the topic at hand may be too comfortable and go on autopilot, using words and phrases that only they and other top insiders understand – like undefined **acronyms** and **industry jargon**. Using these terms is detrimental because it immediately **drives a wedge** between the speaker and the audience. When this happens, the effect may be unintended, but the impact is wildly negative since the speaker is immediately branded as **above** the audience instead of being connected **to** the audience.



**Do this instead:** Rely on the audience analysis you did in the beginning, when you decided to **AIM for Impact**. Determine what your audience already knows (and doesn't know) about your topic. Meet them where they are, and don't confuse them by using unfamiliar terms and phrases that have the potential to **keep people out** rather than **invite people in**.

## Mistake 9: Defaulting to corporate-speak

**What happens:** Public speakers who want to sound smart sometimes rely on corporate-speak – which means nothing and does nothing to change the way the audience thinks or behaves. Here's what corporate-speak sounds like (we've all heard it!) and some examples of what you should **never** say when responding to a question on a panel or fireside chat:

- "We're leveraging our core competencies to drive synergies across business units."
- "At the end of the day, it's about finding win-win solutions that align with our mission-critical objectives."
- "We're focused on low-hanging fruit right now, but we'll push the envelope as we gain more traction."

**Do this instead:** Give specific examples of initiatives that replace corporate-speak with **"real speak"** for effective leadership communication. Describe events, times, dates and places. Talk about the people, the challenges, the wins. Add color. Name names. Be heard and remembered.



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## Mistake 10: Hogging the stage

**What happens:** Perhaps unintentionally, public speakers suddenly start to ramble, saying way too many words without making a point. These speakers miss **subtle cues from the moderator** on when it's time to wrap up a response and return control back to the moderator, who may want to invite another panelist to weigh in or move the conversation forward. These are the speakers who ignore time limits and **overstay their welcome onstage** (and people notice).



**Do this instead:** Rehearse your answers within the allotted time limit (confirm your time with the moderator) since your time onstage will fly by. Be aware that if you feel **nervous** onstage, you could start to **ramble**. Practice independently, before the panel or fireside chat, to avoid this trap.

## Mistake 11: Forgetting about the audience



**What happens:** Public speakers focus inward and forget to plan for and include deliberate ways to involve the audience in their responses to questions – so the panel or fireside chat feels like a **closed, exclusive conversation**.

**Do this instead:** Decide upfront where to strategically engage the audience based on the questions you are responding to. Encourage the audience to speak up, ask questions, make comments and respond to what you are saying. **Acknowledge** their input. **Keep reading the room**; if you see and feel the audience drifting, be ready to take the conversation in a different direction to recapture their attention.

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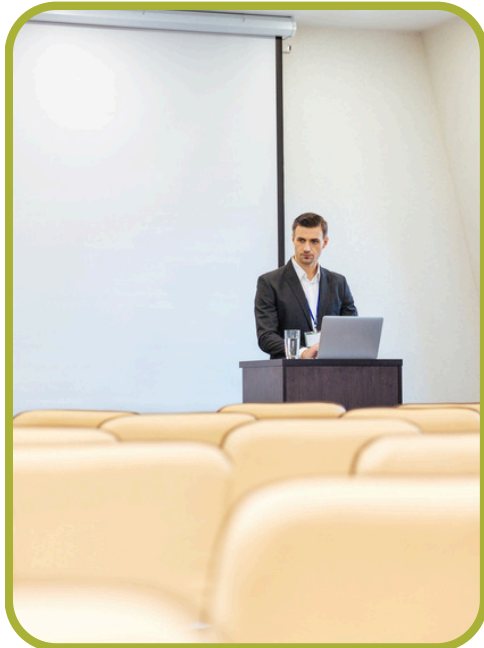
## Mistake 12: Overlooking the moderator, fellow panelists

**What happens:** Public speakers deliver siloed answers, forgetting about the **person** asking the question and the **persons** sitting next to them who may also have valuable perspectives to add.

**Do this instead:** Address the moderator – and your fellow panelists – by name so it's clear that you are a friendly, respectful **collaborator** contributing to a **balanced conversation** among colleagues. Strive in your answers onstage to build a **relationship** with the moderator and a **relationship** with your fellow panelists. Show gratitude: Thank the moderator by name, and thank your fellow panelists by name.



## Mistake 13: Addressing no one in particular



**What happens:** Public speakers on panels and fireside chats sometimes share their answers by looking up into the air, connecting with no one person in particular. To the audience, these speakers feel **distant** and **aloof** – sometimes even arrogant.

**Do this instead:** When answering a question, look at the moderator who asked the question. Then turn to the audience, make **eye contact** and share more. If a panelist suddenly tosses a comment or question to you, take the baton and respond directly to that panelist before turning again to the audience, making eye contact and finishing your response.

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## Mistake 14: Delivering a monologue versus conversing (and piggybacking on others)

**What happens:** Public speakers on a panel who come with more content than they can possibly share, or who over-rehearse (and deliver like they're reading a white paper or making a mini presentation), can come off as a ***lone wolf out in the wild*** instead of who they really need to be onstage: one of several people on a curated team contributing to a larger, connected conversation.

**Do this instead:** Make your point – then graciously toss the spotlight back to the moderator for a follow-up question, or possibly to a panelist you know has something of value to add (since you've done your homework on all your fellow panelists). Look at the person who responds, and listen to the response. If a point strikes you, or reminds you of something, consider ways you can bring up that point later, when it's your turn again. Name the person, remind the audience of the point they made, then link your point to that point, connecting the dots for the audience. Focus on finding ways to make the discussion more of a ***back-and-forth*** versus isolated, one-way deliveries in leadership communication.

## Mistake 15: Being caught off-guard

**What happens:** Someone in the audience asks a tough, controversial or uncomfortable question, or the moderator or another panelist goes in a direction a public speaker did not plan or anticipate. The speaker ***gets rattled*** – and ***loses focus***.



**Do this instead:** First, take a breath to center yourself. Pause. Don't be in a hurry to answer. When you're ready, say what you know or believe. Then give an example, share an experience, or tell a story. If you don't know something, and you don't have a relevant example, experience or story, acknowledge that. If you do, you will be respected for your ***honesty*** in leadership communication. Don't mislead, pretend or make something up. (Again – the audience ***will*** notice!)



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## Mistake 16: Skipping independent rehearsals

**What happens:** Public speakers put thought into preparing good answers – but then they don't carve out time to rehearse their responses **on their own**.

**Do this instead:** Bullet points on paper are never enough. Practice how you will respond to the questions so you don't take too long or sound too stiff. (*Can you pare your answer down to 60 seconds? One sentence only – then a couple of expanded points, if needed?*)

## Mistake 17: Missing the dry run with the moderator, fellow panelists

**What happens:** Public speakers who say they don't have time for a rehearsal with the moderator or fellow panelists miss their chance to not only review and confirm the ground rules and expectations around the questions – but also set up **warm and friendly connections** now, before showtime, with everyone who will soon be onstage together. They also miss their chance to confirm that prepared answers are not redundant among speakers but instead offer twists and a fresh perspective.

**Do this instead:** Always carve out time in your schedule to show up for the meet-and-greet and dry run with the moderator and every person on the panel. This is your chance not only to get all your final questions answered but also to relax, get to know one another, and gain insights into everyone's personality and speaking style. This upfront time ahead of the event will help establish the **right vibe onstage faster**, eliminating that early feeling of awkwardness and contributing to a better experience for the audience.

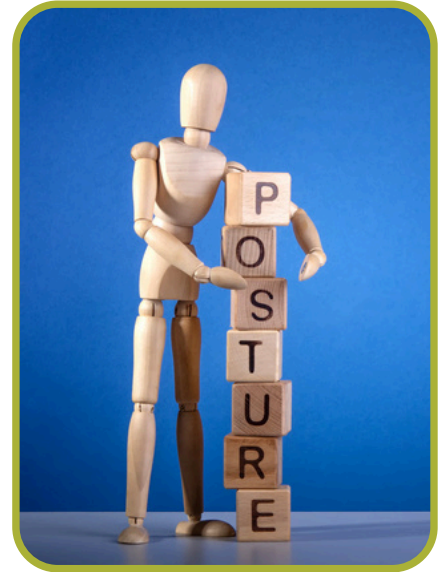


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## Mistake 18: Closing yourself off

**What happens:** Public speakers who are **nervous** will inadvertently close themselves off to the audience by crossing their arms onstage, avoiding eye contact and speaking to no one in particular.

**Do this instead:** Focus on your **posture**. Sit up straight. Smile. Use your arms and hands to convey openness and friendliness to the moderator, panelists and the audience.



## Mistake 19: Leaving the stage without a strong close



**What happens:** Suddenly time is up! And the public speakers have missed the chance to leave the audience with a final thought that **punctuates the points** they've made throughout their conversation onstage. The ending of the chat or panel feels abrupt, and speakers are not as memorable as they could have been.

**Do this instead:** Check with the moderator to ensure that you, and your fellow panelists onstage, will have a chance to leave the audience with **the last word**: one compelling, memorable statement or question that puts a bow on everything you have shared.

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## A wrap-up for you

**Panels and fireside chats can go wrong for many reasons – but by far the biggest disasters come from public speakers who make some of these 19 mistakes:**

- ▶ Mistake 1: Winging it
- ▶ Mistake 2: Doing no homework on the moderator, fellow panelists
- ▶ Mistake 3: Showing up without a Big Idea
- ▶ Mistake 4: Staying surface-level versus diving deep
- ▶ Mistake 5: Boiling the ocean
- ▶ Mistake 6: Sharing foggy takeaways, zero soundbites
- ▶ Mistake 7: Talking in circles
- ▶ Mistake 8: Playing inside baseball
- ▶ Mistake 9: Defaulting to corporate-speak
- ▶ Mistake 10: Hogging the stage
- ▶ Mistake 11: Forgetting about the audience
- ▶ Mistake 12: Overlooking the moderator, fellow panelists
- ▶ Mistake 13: Addressing no one in particular
- ▶ Mistake 14: Delivering a monologue versus conversing (and piggybacking on others)
- ▶ Mistake 15: Being caught off-guard
- ▶ Mistake 16: Skipping independent rehearsals
- ▶ Mistake 17: Missing the dry run with the moderator, fellow panelists
- ▶ Mistake 18: Closing yourself off
- ▶ Mistake 19: Leaving the stage without a strong close

When you make these mistakes, you chip away at your credibility, connection and impact. And you risk leaving your audience disoriented, distracted, disengaged – and in the end, disappointed in the leadership communication you are sharing.

**Don't be that person.**

Instead, be the panelist or the guest at a fireside chat who takes the time to prepare with intention, communicate with clarity and close with purpose.

Avoid these 19 mistakes, and you'll be the one who surprises the audience with a memorable, high-energy, high-impact panel discussion or fireside chat that audiences deem **great** because it moves them – and changes the way they think or behave.