

Note Worthy

CAREER SKILLS

A Stand-up Approach to Presentations

"A finance manager walks into a bar ..."

Comedy and corporate finance rarely are mentioned in the same sentence, although that might change thanks to a new approach to developing presentation skills. ExecuProv, a firm based in Santa Ana, Calif., uses improvisational comedy techniques to show corporate managers and executives how to sharpen their communication skills.

"When finance executives give presentations, they're often thrown questions about their numbers or about their financial reports," says Cherie Kerr, ExecuProv director. "Yet I don't think they expect the unexpected. They have to remain agile and focused when difficult questions come at them. Finance types, in general, tend to be linear thinkers, more left-brain oriented. The minute they're thrown a curve, they're thrown off center. Improvisational skills help them handle the curve balls better."

Kerr says improvisation, a process that focuses on finding solutions to problems, can help finance managers reclaim the spontaneity that lurks within the right side of their brains. Bill Camp, vice president of finance for Kia Motors America Inc. in Irvine, Calif., enrolled in ExecuProv to work through his stage fright.

"In the past, if I wasn't 100 percent certain of my facts and figures, I would tell people that I'd have to get back to them on their questions," says Camp. "Now, I'm much more comfortable answering questions, even if I'm, say, only 80 percent sure of my figures. I do much better in less analytical conversations, and I respond to questions in a more positive, upbeat way."

Camp and other ExecuProv students use the following exercises, which also appear in Kerr's book "I've Asked Miller to Say a Few Words" (ExecuProv Press, 1996), to help hone their scene-stealing abilities:

■ Object lesson:

Participants are given an object and told to present it as anything other than what it actually is. The delivery takes the form of a one-minute commercial in which presenters must explain what the object is and pitch its benefits.

■ **Expert talker:** An onstage panel grills participants, who adopt nonsensical titles (such as "ribbernort," "pollicist" and "dorflum") on their areas of expertise. Participants field questions from the panel in a press-conference format. "It's amazing to watch the transformation," says Kerr. "At first, they're absolutely freaked out, but then they get into the role they're

creating. Once they do, you can't get them to sit down."

■ **Scene stealing:** Participants select a popular movie, then devise original scenes, based on the title, that do not have anything to do with the actual film. "The Thin Red Line," for example, might have to do with a smudge of lipstick rather than the battle of Guadalcanal.

■ **Pet peeves:** Students pick a subject and rant about it. Traffic on the freeways and the IRS are favorites of Kerr's students. "This," says Kerr, "helps you stimulate the mental spark and energy you need to perform in front of groups."

—EK

Concern Growing About Year 2000's Financial Implications

The nation's CFOs are becoming more concerned about the financial implications of not having Year 2000 remediation efforts completed in time, according to a survey of 1,400 CFOs conducted by RHI Management Resources, Pleasanton, Calif. More than 60 percent of the respondents indicated they were somewhat or very concerned about the financial ramifications of the Year 2000, compared with 51 percent surveyed in 1998.