DEAR Labby

My Talk Runneth Over

Dear Labby,

I am a fourth-year graduate student getting ready to give my first talk at a meeting. It is supposed to be 12 minutes and then three for discussion. I did a trial run with the lab and it was 25 minutes. That was a learning experience. I chopped it down and in the next run it was 14. I thought all was cool, but my PI said I needed to get it down to 12. I thought she was joking, but when I replied in a kind of flippant way she got quite edgy and started to lecture me and the lab members about staying on time.

I was really surprised by how intensely she argued this. What if my talk is 14 minutes? I had been really looking forward to getting this talk ready, but this last run and her response bummed me out. I got so upset I decided to ask Labby.

—Over Time

Dear Over Time,

Your reaction is understandable, but here’s the thing: When a mentor provides advice there is often more behind it than is immediately evident. For example, one of Labby’s professors said, “Never tell a joke in a talk unless you did it at a party and it killed. The dilution of impact in a scientific meeting is four orders of magnitude.” As you might guess, that advice was given because he had once experienced that “dilution.”

Maybe your mentor didn’t spell out all the reasons for her intense position, so here are some of her possible concerns. First, running over when there is a tight timetable and one or more speakers to follow can lead some audience members to conclude you are insensitive or, worse, arrogant. Second, even though two minutes over 12 sounds trivial, the moderator has usually announced at the start of the session what the time limit is and typically there is also a rostrum light that, in your case, will go yellow at 10 minutes and red at 12, so going beyond 12 becomes vividly evident. That sets in motion the most toxic factor of all: Audience members start to take note that you are going over and stop listening, or at least become distracted. This is particularly injurious to you because this is when you may be making your concluding remarks and even if they are delivered with soaring rhetoric, many will be thinking “she’s/he’s going over.” Finally, whether your mentor and lab members are there for your talk or not, you are representing them.

Those two minutes can be excised without reducing the impact of your talk. Take a scalpel to your opening sentences (this is not a “speech” in the usual sense) and try to get right into the first data slide. Many talks like the one you are likely planning are before an audience of peers working in a narrow field, and many speakers consume much valuable time with unnecessary introductory words and slides.

Finally, bear in mind one other reason not to go over—one of the most important. Because some audience members may not get to ask their questions, you will correspondingly miss their ideas and insights. All of these reasons are probably why your mentor was as forceful as she was. She really cares about you and her lab. Shave off the extra two minutes and give her warm thanks.

—Labby

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