

CINDY SKALICKY

**RED
LIGHT
GREEN
LIGHT**

How Top Leaders Present With Polish,
Get Buy-in, And Become More Influential



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RED LIGHT GREEN LIGHT

How Top Leaders Present With Polish, Get Buy-In, And Become More Influential

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Foreword



At Hewlett Packard, I sat in plenty of meetings where a brilliant idea went unheard—not because it wasn't valuable, but because it wasn't communicated in a way that made decision-makers lean in and get to "yes." I've seen multi-million-dollar opportunities slip through the cracks simply because the message didn't land. The same is true today with the hundreds of engineers, academic inventors, and innovators I mentor, who now, thanks to this model, have a clear path to clarity, conciseness, and to yes.

I can only imagine how many strategic conversations would have gone differently. I remember sitting in a pitch to leadership, watching as a business leader struggled to explain an idea that had the potential to be a game-changer. The problem was not the idea; the problem was how it was communicated.

Over the years, I've seen thousands of people try to gain buy-in from audiences on technical, business, and strategic

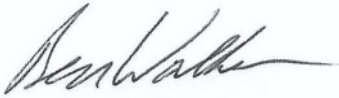
topics. Some succeed, and many don't. Why? Being clear and succinct and getting stakeholders to say yes isn't just about being smart or knowing your material—it's about delivering your message in a way that connects, convinces, and compels positive action.

That's where Cindy's model changes the game.

I first met Cindy at our startup incubator at an Innosphere SAGE (Social and Advisory Group for Entrepreneurs) meeting over ten years ago. I invited her to join the group immediately because, even then, she had a knack for observing, refining, and convincing entrepreneurs of a better way to help founders and scientists communicate complex ideas. I remember watching her first iterations of this framework back when it was called "Investor Pitch as Story." At the time, it was a focused approach for startup founders seeking funding. Since then, it has expanded into government labs, university TTOs (Technology Transfer Offices), and corporate America, proving its adaptability across industries. What makes this model so effective? It is a simple process with defined steps that are clear and concise and, when executed properly, lead to hearing yes. I've watched Cindy refine and teach this approach to founders, executives, and scientists, and the results are undeniable. When applied, this framework helps speakers become clearer, more directed, and more persuasive, ultimately getting them to say yes.

I wish I had this when I was younger at HP, working with startups and leading teams. It would have saved me time and frustration, and I would have reached yes more efficiently and effectively.

You're about to learn a model that works. My advice? Practice the techniques, make it your own, and trust this proven process.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ben Walker", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ben Walker

PREFACE



Why I Wrote This Book

Our global economy thrives on innovators, and I wrote this book because too many don't effectively sell their brilliance. These innovators know their technical gear, yet stumble over the persuasive gear needed to keep ideas from crashing onto the proverbial drawing room floor.

This book is for leaders who already excel in their area of expertise—having toiled tirelessly at their craft—and are ready to master another one so they can leave a lasting legacy: persuading stakeholders about their complex idea. It's for the "crazy smart" engineers, scientists, and technologists who advance economies worldwide. It's also for nonscientists in the C-suite who must communicate their technical teams' brilliance—in terms others grasp.

I am not a chemical engineer. I am not a mechanical engineer. I am a message engineer. I love dismantling the persuasive engine—spotting where gears hum and where they are stuck—so I can find the tool to unstick them. Helping

leaders solve their messaging puzzles fires me up as much as they love tinkering with their innovative puzzles.

This book owes its heart to the thousands of brilliant leaders who've trusted me to refine their stories with this model and the countless more whose innovative ideas will soar because of it. Maybe you're one of these leaders. If you are, this book is for you. It will teach you how to master your storyline and your confidence to propel your life's work into the market faster—messaging up to boards, out to investors and media, and downstream to teams.

You are the chief storyteller of your idea.

Great storytelling looks easy. This book makes it easy for you.

Let's get on with it because we've got a story to tell—

Yours.



PART I

**Why Mastering
Your Message
Matters**

CHAPTER 1

Watching A Tech Founder Crash And Burn



I remember exactly where I was the first time it happened. It was October 7, 2015. The tech founder in front of me was about to crash and burn, but no one in the room knew it yet.

The large room seated sixty people at capacity, and it was nearly full. I was three rows back and four seats in from the left side. It was my first experience viewing the inner workings of an innovation lab. The tech founder's name was Jeff, and he had a big, exciting, smart idea.

Jeff had just presented for twenty minutes about his early-stage software application. He wanted to attract a few of the seasoned experts in the audience to come aboard as advisors for the next twelve months and help him get his idea to the next stage.

He wouldn't get actual capital, but if he did this pitch well, Jeff would get top-notch advisory assistance in a critical

growth stage. If successful, it would be like being awarded a \$40,000 labor grant.

Jeff's number one job was to present his ideas clearly, effectively, and with an air of inspiration.

And then it happened.

At the end of his pitch, the man in the row behind me raised his hand. It was time for the question and answer (Q&A) session.

"Jeff, can you go back to slide 4? I didn't fully understand the problem your technology is trying to solve."

There was a hum in the room from others. They nodded in agreement.

I swiveled to look at Jeff. I watched his shoulders sink. He tried to hide the deep breath he took.

He walked back a few steps and looked out at us.

You could almost see the cartoon thought bubbles forming above his head of what he must have wanted to say to us: "Wait, what? You didn't get all that? What part did you miss? I brought you thirty slides and so much data. I worked so hard! I told you everything I know—in just twenty minutes."

Maintaining his composure, Jeff dutifully grabbed his clicker and clicked back twenty-six slides to slide 4. He explained his big idea again.

I looked at the others in the room. There seemed to be a collective sense of relief—many of us had felt the same confusion as the audience member who posed the question. Initially feeling lost and confused, I now felt validated.

As the rest of the Q&A session continued, I thought about it.

Where was Jeff's mistake? Where did he go wrong? At what point in his pitch did he lose us? Did he miss a step, forget a step, or both? I could feel my eyes squinting at his slide deck and wondering which puzzle piece was missing.



Credibility Corner

Sometimes, audience members don't blame you when they feel confused—they blame themselves. They may feel uneducated, inferior, or inexperienced if they don't understand your idea or certain concepts. It is important for speakers to realize they might be creating a divide between themselves and their audience unintentionally, which they may not even realize is happening.

This is why it's so important to master the audience's mindset as best you can when preparing your message. What are they thinking? How can you meet them where they are? This takes time and intention. You are either building a closer relationship with your audience or distancing yourself. Do everything you can to ensure you're moving them in the right direction.

The Crash-And-Burn Problem At Scale

This same feeling—of audiences feeling confused, lost, and possibly at fault for it—happens countless times a day at

countless science and technology organizations, government labs, and in formal and informal conversations between executives and their stakeholders.

Maybe you've been the speaker.

Surely, you've been in the audience.

Likely, you've been both.

Incredible results emerge when we remove the roadblocks that cause confusion and muddiness in presentations.

When innovation storylines are crisp, clear, and confidently delivered, the innovation process itself can happen faster.

Fewer meetings are needed.

Buy-in and alignment are won earlier.

Credibility is earned faster.

Confidence grows.

Importantly, when innovation storylines are crisp, good ideas are much less likely to be lost due to poor communication. This happens all the time: A great idea never sees the light of day—and it's all because the communicator crashed and burned—and so the potentially amazing innovation also crashes and burns. It happens in start-up circles, off-site strategy sessions, in Zoom rooms, and boardrooms.

Some leaders have figured this out and have begun to reverse the trend, but not enough of them. Some leaders have learned to communicate innovation storylines with masterful precision and concise clarity, but not enough of them. Some leaders are supporting leaders downstream on their teams to harness these skills, but not enough of them.

We need more leaders who excel at telling their innovation stories. The pace of innovation is faster than ever, and as such, we need leaders who can level up their persuasive game.

Helping A Tech Founder “Nail It”

Fast forward to 2017, one year after Jeff’s crash-and-burn story.

I was in a private coaching session with an early-stage tech CEO, Jen Henderson. She was in the initial phases of her journey to get her innovation off the ground. We had no idea then of the momentous and upending event that would soon happen in the world—the pandemic. We also didn’t know that it would begin to eventually supercharge her concept and her journey.

At the time, her company was called Career Allies. Within a few years, legitimate acquisition conversations began, and a fundraising journey allowed her to scale up significantly.

Jen and I sat in the empty basement of Wild Boar Cafe in Fort Collins, Colorado. We found a quiet corner where no one would bother us. She pulled up her slide presentation and walked me through her “sloppy copy”—her rough draft.

Glancing at it while she advanced the slides, I felt the same way about her presentation as I did about Jeff’s. This time, I had a system. In less than a minute, I knew exactly what was wrong and how to fix it.

Beta-Testing A Solution

Jen reached the last slide, and I sat with a wrinkled brow. Something was missing. But now, at least, I could help her. I had some ninja moves ready to be tested, and I had a hunch they’d work.

Having studied hundreds of presenters and presentations since Jeff's crash-and-burn story, I'd identified a pattern where most leaders went wrong. I found the gap.

Jen's story was in there, but it was hiding. Her audiences would not see a story; they'd see a disjointed pattern of information coming at them in bullet-point style but with no thread—no narrative to pull them through. To create her sloppy copy, Jen did what many do: she followed the same free advice available online to anyone—vague, general, and lacking substance or specificity to the speaker's situation.

Jen had skipped a vital step. She missed the step of sitting squarely in her audience's minds as them—not as herself—and then clearly explaining the pain from their point of view, not hers.

I pulled out my trusty notebook and began to show her the steps. I drew the familiar shape of the five-step model I'd created. I showed her how it works, including the persuasive theory that fuels it—so she'd know why it works.

I explained the power of our HOW-TO Model—the blueprint this book will teach you—the five steps that will map your step-by-step path to persuasive perfection.

By executing these five steps in order, Jen—and soon, thousands of leaders who'd follow—would acquire the power she needed to harness her message with any audience. All she had to do was follow the logical order of the five steps.

Jen and I sat long past the end of our official session, reworking her argument and the slides. She quickly and easily understood the power of the HOW-TO Model.

She jumped on her edits and adapted her presentation to fit the model we'd sketched. Within months, and faster than her peers, Jen closed her first \$500,000 investment. That seed investment would prove to be just the beginning. Much more would grow out of that seed, which would lead to bigger results faster.

Jen placed at the top of her class at a competition sponsored by Colorado accelerator Rockies Venture Club, the longest-running angel investing group in the United States.

One of her earliest investors was Tim Jones, COO of Innosphere Ventures. Tim said of her performance, "When I heard Jen pitch, she was very persuasive and exuded confidence. Her ability to communicate the problem and solution resonated and drew folks into believing in her vision. Her pitch performance differentiated her from other founders."

Jen soon changed the name of her company to Tilt (Talent in leave technology) and began winning competition after competition.

Clarity: Your Competitive Advantage

Jen's story contains an insight worth highlighting that is relevant to all innovation leaders. Jen was building a tech company entirely around the process of parental leave in organizations. She had a revolutionary way to make this process markedly smoother for employees and employers.

Enter stage left, the COVID-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, parental and related leaves became a requirement of employers nationwide. Moreover, they were being asked to comply with these at an intense speed—before the ink on the legislation was even dry. The leave process, which already had its share of problems, was in the spotlight. Before long, thirteen states in the union had passed paid leave legislation. They had all structured the programs differently, making it extremely difficult for HR and employees to navigate.

COVID changed the leave-of-absence game. A solution was urgently needed, and Jen had already thought of it. Many factors led to Jen's ability to seize this pivotal moment. One was that she could clearly articulate her solution to organizations and investors with conviction, clarity, and command. At a time when the market desperately needed her innovation, she and her message were ready.

When the market needs your innovation before you expect it, will you be ready?

As of this writing, Jen has closed over \$35 million in funding and has a team of more than one hundred employees. She is a job creator, a bolt on the innovation engine, and she is fueling our economy.

One year after learning the HOW-TO Model, she shared an insight with our podcast audience. "Cindy, every time I edit a deck or draft a new one, I sketch your model and go.

I know it'll work. The HOW-TO Model has become a trusted staple in my process of presenting to stakeholders, inside and out."

Five years after that, Jen wrote: "The maturation of the skills I have learned with you and this model show up in various ways as we've grown. As my message situations change, I find myself using the skills I learned with you to:

- Be sure I make my audience the hero of my story
- Vary my delivery more when presenting
- Work to get on the same side of the table and see the world from my audience's world map more intentionally."

She continued, "Now, I use words they use, parrot back ideas and concepts the same way they say them, and try to get their lizard brain to see safety, not threat, from what I propose."

Avoiding A "Small-t Tragedy"

When an executive stands in front of a room of stakeholders to explain an innovation, a lot is at stake. The leader has a great deal of responsibility to ensure clarity of the message, not to mention a logical argument, sense of urgency, passion, confidence, and so much more.

A "small-t tragedy" occurs when speakers don't know how to continue the original thread of the message they hope to pull through the presentation. That nanosecond of confusion is the small-t tragedy. As soon as the audience does not understand what's actually going on, doubt creeps in.

Doubt sinks innovation.

When a speaker loses or confuses an audience, there's a noticeable void, a break—a break of trust, flow, and understanding.

This is a serious problem. Confusion is a barrier to that leader's growth. It's a roadblock to the advancement of their innovative idea. It's also costly. Consider this:

- A 2018 survey by The Economist of 403 senior executives, managers, and junior staff in US companies cited miscommunication as a direct cause of lost sales, 30 percent of which were valued between \$100,000 and \$999,999.¹
- A 2025 report by the software company Superworks estimated that businesses lose \$62.4 million yearly due to communication breakdowns.²
- Grammarly's 2022 *State of Business Communication* report assessed that up to \$1.2 trillion is lost yearly due to poor communication among businesses worldwide.³

Confusion Clogs Innovation

When addressing stakeholders, you need buy-in, alignment, and approval. Now, switch places with your audience for a minute.

If you are the stakeholder listening and don't understand the rationale for moving to the green light of "go," you'll likely stay right where you are—and not move.

When the time comes to decide, the muddiness is enough to keep you from saying "yes" to the speaker's wants. During the presentation, you're also likely to check out mentally, grab your phone, or do other work while you

pretend to pay attention from behind your laptop screen. (We've all been there.)

And really—who would blame you for not giving the green light to the speaker? Why would you buy into something you don't fully understand? Why would you move toward an idea that's cloudy, hazy, unclear and lacks certainty?

You wouldn't. And that's exactly the point.

Confusion clogs, stalls, delays, and, in some cases, thwarts innovation completely.

When The Mentee You're Guiding Is The Presenter

Executives who mentor other leaders on *their* teams often face a unique situation. As a leader, you're responsible—to varying degrees—for mentoring leaders under you.

What if you helped develop the leader who is speaking in front of your division, in front of your peers, and those above you? Now, it's your credibility on the line, too. What if they are crashing and burning like Jeff? Or what if they're nailing it, and your mentee is like Jen? Now, your credibility is going up, too.

Early on in my work with leaders, too many were losing credibility. They were losing deal flow. They were wasting people's valuable time and encroaching on time that could be spent doing the next step—faster.

When it came to their approach to crafting presentations, these leaders often needed to go back to the drawing board. Many didn't realize this, but some did. Some realized they had to figure out where the storyline was broken, reconfigure it, and find another audience who would listen.

If your mentee's idea is not fully articulated and understood by stakeholders who can green-light it, competing teams in your group or industry will swallow it up.

Your competitors will get the money and resources you might deserve instead—and perhaps it's primarily because they were clearer, more compelling, more concise, and more confident than you were. This is the trend the HOW-TO Model can reverse.

Here's The Good News

There is a method to the messaging madness out there.

There is a method that can be followed in a step-by-step, organized fashion to help executives in innovation present tight business cases that clearly communicate what they want to communicate, establish them as highly credible experts in the space, and get them to the next-step conversations and the buy-in they need.

There is a way to avoid confusion.

There is a way to use story as our helper.

There is a way to go through the madness of data and into mastery.

There is a way to become a messaging engineer.

That way is the HOW-TO Model.



Scan here to hear Cindy interview Jen Henderson.