The Human Edge

Presenting, persuading and holding the room in an age of AI

A guide for people who develop leaders

THE PICKERING GROUP

Presentation skills
Business storytelling
Influence & persuasion

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www.thepickeringgroup.com

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The Argument, in Seven Lines

The smartest person in the room is about to be a machine. Here's what that means for the way your leaders communicate, and what to do about it.

1. AI isn't replacing your people yet. It's changing what they're for. Increasingly, that's judgement, and persuading other humans.
2. At the same time, written work has become suspect. When people know AI was involved, they trust it less.
3. So the room, under questioning, is now where a person is most accountable for their thinking. The presentation, the update, the briefing, the pitch, the meeting.
4. That's the human edge: wisdom, judgement and accountability. Together, in the room, they're what inspires confidence and trust.
5. Most of your leaders aren't good in that room, and they know it. Three quarters of the New Zealand professionals we've surveyed over seven years rate themselves average or worse.
6. The fix isn't more confidence. Confidence is what an audience decides they have in you. The fix is method.
7. That method is eleven speaker archetypes, three practices, and some time in the room with us.

Your Best Ideas Are Still Getting Lost

Two things have been true for as long as I've been doing this work.

1. It's the communication of great ideas that moves an organisation forward.
2. People give more credence to those who project confidence, regardless of how good the idea underneath is.

Put those together and good ideas fail because they're poorly communicated, weak ideas get adopted because someone sold them well, and the risk is that decisions get made on the strength of the loudest voice in the room rather than the best idea in it.

Nobody's career was ruined by one shaky conference speech. Careers stall in the small rooms: the board paper that didn't land, the pitch that lost the room in the first minute, the update nobody remembers.

None of that is new.

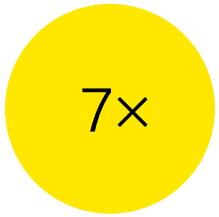
What's new is what happens when you add machines that think faster and write more fluently than most of us.

AI Is Changing What Your People Are For

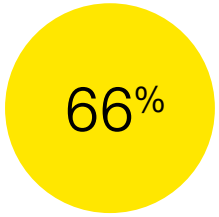
There's a comfortable story going around: AI does the routine work, humans do the "soft skills", everyone's fine. It's mostly right, for now, but the data is more telling.



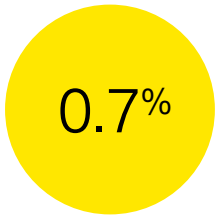
New tasks appearing in AI-exposed roles are two and a half times more likely to need empathy, judgement and creativity.[1] Once the machine takes the routine work, what's left for people is the human part of the job.



The most AI-exposed entry-level roles are seven times more likely to demand traditionally senior skills, like leadership.[2] The routine work that used to be the junior job, and the way people learned judgement, is what AI is taking first. Leadership and persuasion are now expected earlier in a career, not later.



Skills sought by employers are changing 66% faster in the occupations most exposed to AI. Up from 25% the year before.[3] The skills employers want are changing, and changing fast.



Of 2,884 work skills assessed across 53.5 million job postings, only 0.7% were rated very likely to be fully replaced by AI.[4] AI is changing jobs, not replacing them. Not yet, anyway.

Deloitte, surveying more than 9,000 leaders across 89 countries, concluded that competitive advantage is now...

"less driven by technology differentiation and more by cultivating the human edge." [5]

We've been calling it the human edge since 2018. It's good company to be in.

That's today. The pace of change is something else. In September 2026 Anthropic's co-founder Tom Brown told a G20 audience that frontier models are already as skilled as a top-100 mathematician, and predicted a once-in-a-generation scientist within a year.[6] Mathematicians themselves agree. AI has solved problems that stood open for eighty years, and Terence Tao, a Fields medallist, expects it to leave mathematicians "in much the same precarious spot as writers, artists and analysts."[7]

Organisations used to prize the smartest person in the room. Very soon, the smartest person in the room won't be a person. What's left for your leaders is what the machine can't supply: wisdom, judgement and accountability, and the ability to bring them into a room.

This thinking isn't new. More than two thousand years ago, Aristotle drew the line between smart and wise. *Sophia* is knowledge: knowing how things are. *Phronesis* is practical wisdom: knowing what to do, in this room, with these people, now.[8] The machine has sophia in abundance. It doesn't have phronesis. That's the human edge, and it's what the rest of this paper is about.

The Surge

I saw my first AI-written presentation in late 2023, in one of our programmes, for a payments company.

> Someone stood up with a deck that was fluent, tidy, one hundred percent not theirs, and nothing to do with the organisation they were standing in. I remember thinking: nobody in this room is going to trust a word of it. They didn't, but it was a curiosity then. Now it's a flood. As AI licences roll out across New Zealand at enterprise level, people are turning up to present ideas the machine has created. And the audiences are wary of it, just like I was.

When people know a message was produced with AI, they trust it less.

Oliver Schilke and Martin Reimann ran thirteen experiments with more than 4,000 people to test whether disclosing AI use changed how much the discloser was trusted. It did, in every setting they tried, and for the worse.[9] The work wasn't judged worse. It was judged less legitimate. People felt something had been skipped. And notably, being caught using AI cost far more trust than admitting to it.[10]

What the evidence doesn't say is that people can spot AI writing. They can't. Asked to pick it out, they score 50 to 52%. A coin toss.[11] Labelling something human-made earns nothing either; only being caught costs.[12]

Which is the point. If nobody can tell, every document now carries a doubt about its provenance. The room is where that doubt gets settled. Speak the idea, take the questions, and the thinking gets tested in a way no document can be.

So the room is worth more than it's ever been.

It's where people argue, persuade and get to the truth in real time, and it's about the last place left where someone has to be truly accountable for what they say. That's what being in the spotlight means now, and it's where trust gets earned.

Which raises the question: how do you get your leaders into that spotlight, comfortably holding that room? The usual answer is "just speak with more confidence."

A caveat

The evidence isn't unanimous. A 2026 review of 47 studies in journalism found no consistent AI penalty for disclosed content; it depended on the topic and on how far people trusted the outlet already.[13] The trust penalty is well established in organisational communication. In news media it's still argued over.

The Confidence Trap

As it turns out, confidence does buy status. But only in certain rooms.

Cameron Anderson and colleagues showed in 2012 that overconfident people are seen as more competent and end up with higher status, even when that confidence isn't warranted.[14] A follow-up found overconfidence isn't punished even when it's exposed.[15]

The critical idea here is that confidence and competence are different things. Emily Grijalva and her colleagues pooled the studies on the most confident people of all, narcissists, and how they fare as leaders. The narcissists were picked as leaders more often. Once in the job, they did no better than anyone else.[16] And in leaderless groups, simply the amount of time a person spent talking predicted who was seen as the leader, regardless of intelligence or personality.[17] Talk more, look like a leader. It really is that crude.

Then, in 2025, came the twist. Mauricio Palmeira and Timothy Heath found that with a thoughtful audience the effect reverses. People who take things at face value read high confidence as expertise. People who stop and think read it as a sign of incompetence. Advisers came across as more expert when they claimed less, and varied it with the evidence.[18]

So the loud voice wins in rooms that don't think hard. The rooms in your organisation are meant to be the other kind: rigorous, challenging, built so the best idea gets heard rather than the loudest. There, the skill is candour: matching how sure you sound to how sure the evidence lets you be. Claim exactly as much as you can stand behind, and no more.

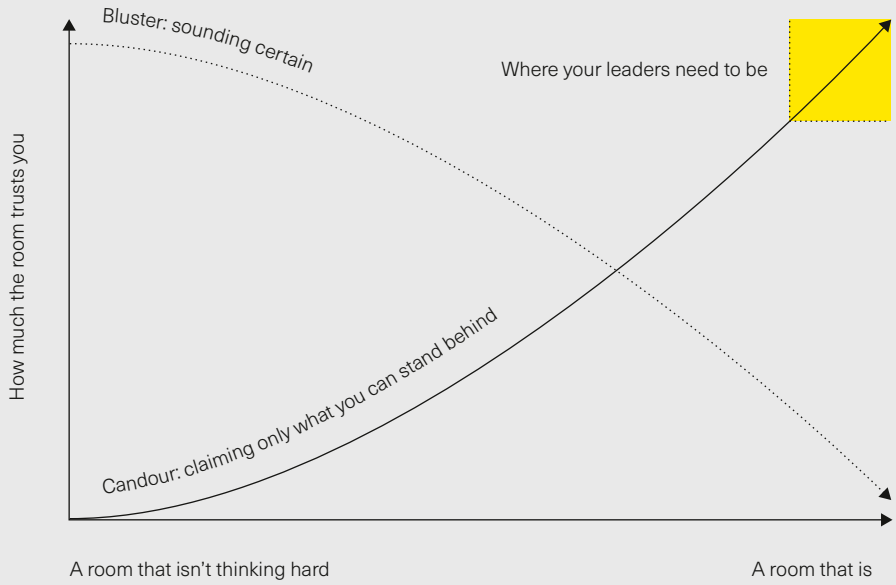
Which is why "just be more confident" and "own the room" never get said in our programmes. What people need to do is hold the room, and holding a room isn't dominating it, or bluffing your way through it.

Confidence isn't something a speaker manufactures. It's what an audience decides they have in you.

The loud voice wins in rooms that don't think hard.

So the measure isn't how confident your leaders feel. It's how much confidence their audience has in them. And who we see turning up at our programmes, year after year, are leaders with valuable ideas who find holding the room a challenging experience, and so struggle to get those ideas heard. As it turns out, it's the same handful of challenges that keep cropping up.

Over the page are the ten we see most often. Every one of them stops a capable person's thinking from reaching the room, and costs them the trust that comes with it.



How Many Of These Challenges Apply To Your Leaders?

- No point of view. You can't tell whether what they're telling you is good news or bad news.
- No clear ask. The room leaves without knowing what to do, or why it matters.
- Leaders who can tell you what's changing but not why, so the room hears an instruction instead of a reason, and a list instead of a story.
- Valuable insight buried in data and detail that nobody can follow.
- Twenty minutes for a message that needed five.
- Bluster and certainty doing the work that evidence and clarity should be doing.
- Capable people who shrink in front of senior audiences, or any audience for that matter.
- Presenters who come apart the moment the slides stop and the questions start.
- Virtual meetings held to a wall of black squares, where nobody can tell whether anything landed.
- Presenters reading out a deck. Increasingly, a deck a machine wrote for them.

If several of these landed, your leaders are presenting in the shadows. If none did, they're in the spotlight. Most people sit somewhere between the two. Either way it's a capability gap, and capability gaps are fixable. The first step is knowing where your people are.

What New Zealand professionals told us before we'd met them

74% rate themselves average or worse as presenters.

46% rehearse once, or never.

TPG Participant Information survey, seven years of responses, May 2019 – August 2026. Our own pre-programme data, not independent research.[19]



Are Your Leaders In The Shadows Or In The Spotlight?

First, a definition, because the whole model sits on one metaphor.

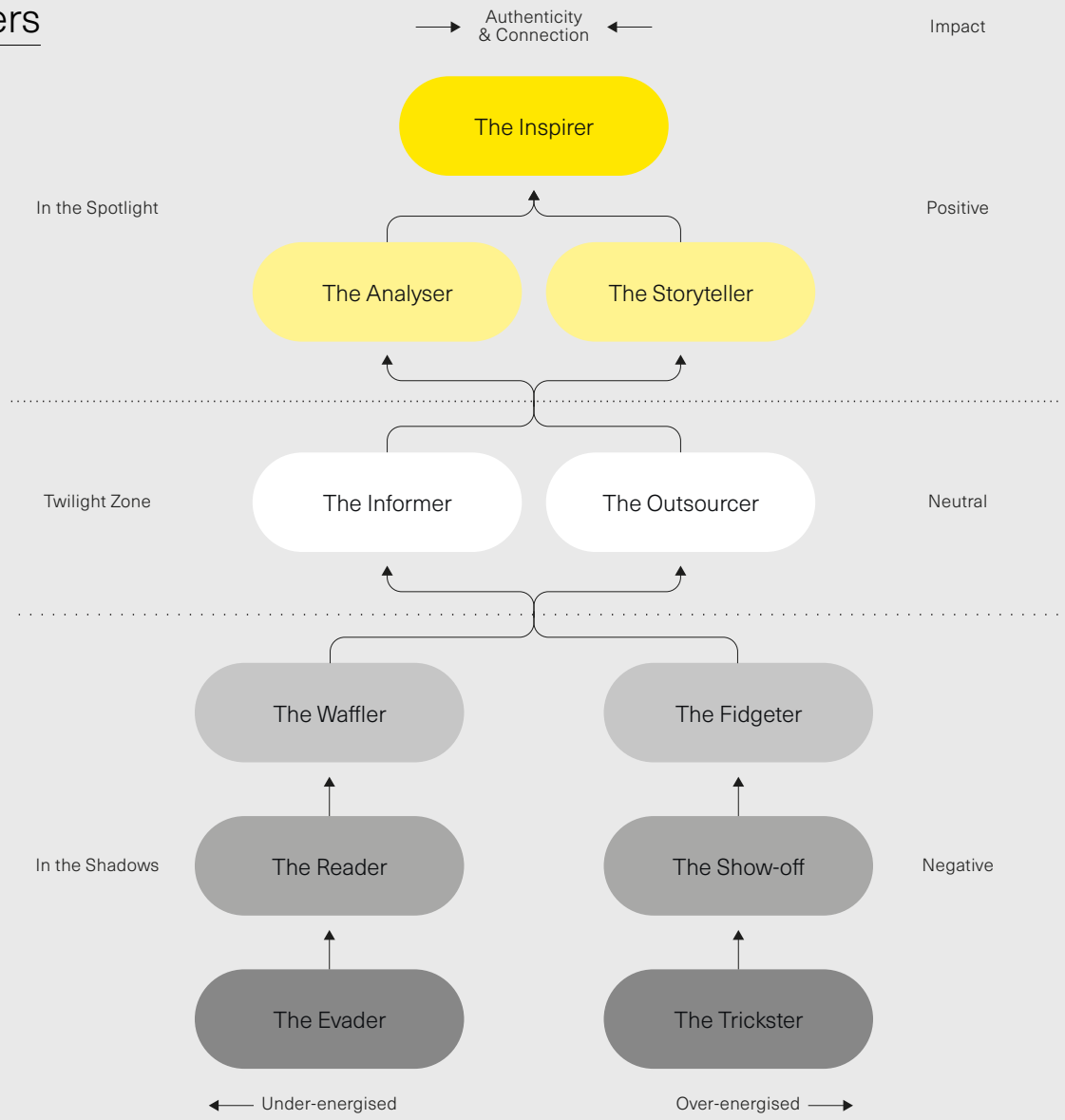
In the spotlight means working to your full potential as a communicator. Your ideas land. You can hold an argument under pressure, with all eyes on you and the hard questions coming, and the room leaves with a better decision than it arrived with. You inspire confidence and trust. In the shadows means you're not there yet. There's work to be done. The good news is it's learnable.

In twenty years I've watched thousands of people present, from the fearful to the fabulous and everywhere in between. The same patterns keep appearing. Those patterns became the Archetypes of Organisational Speakers.

Think about where you'd place your leaders. And yourself, if you're brave.

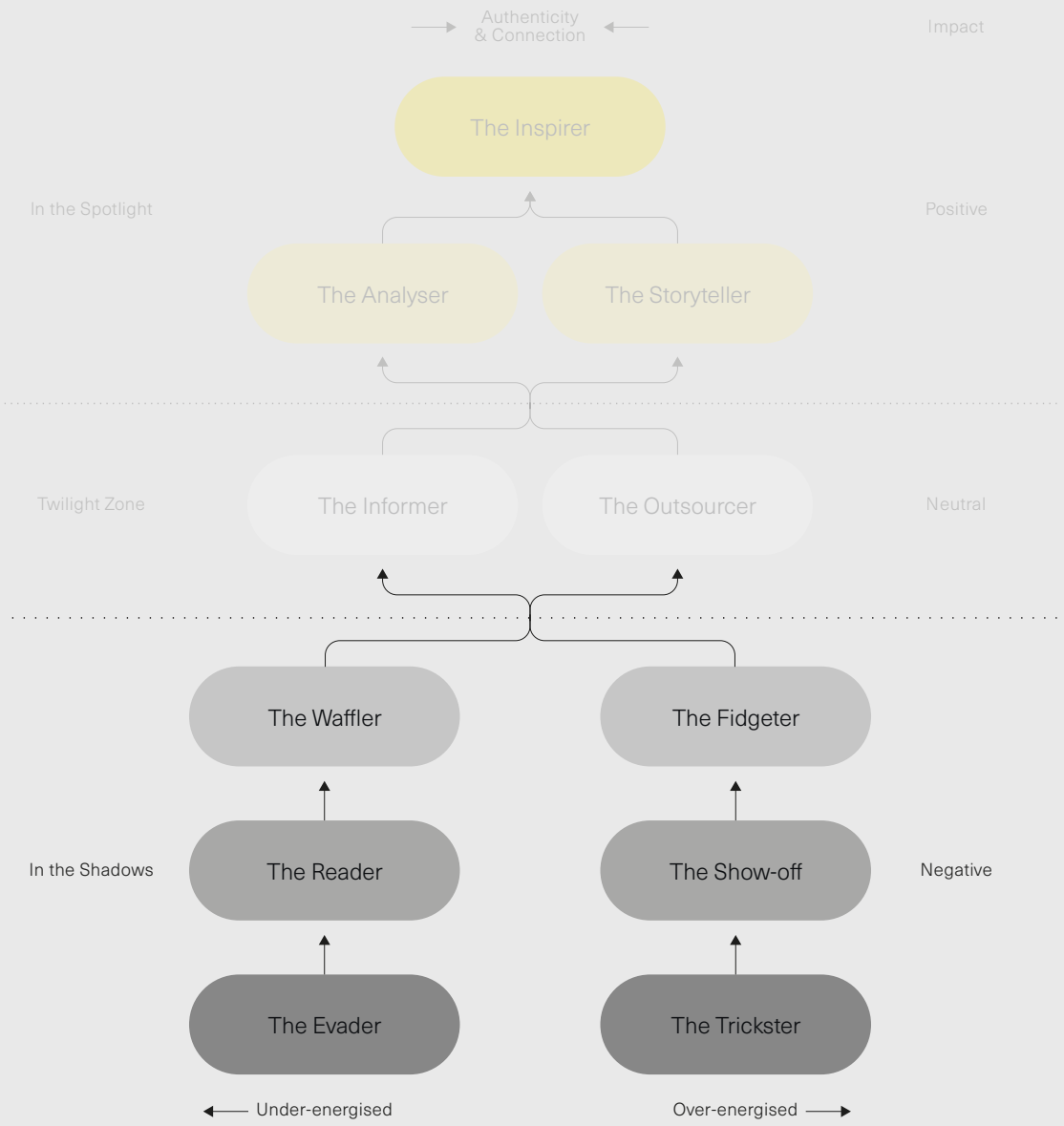
The Archetypes of Organisational Speakers

From Evasion to Inspiration

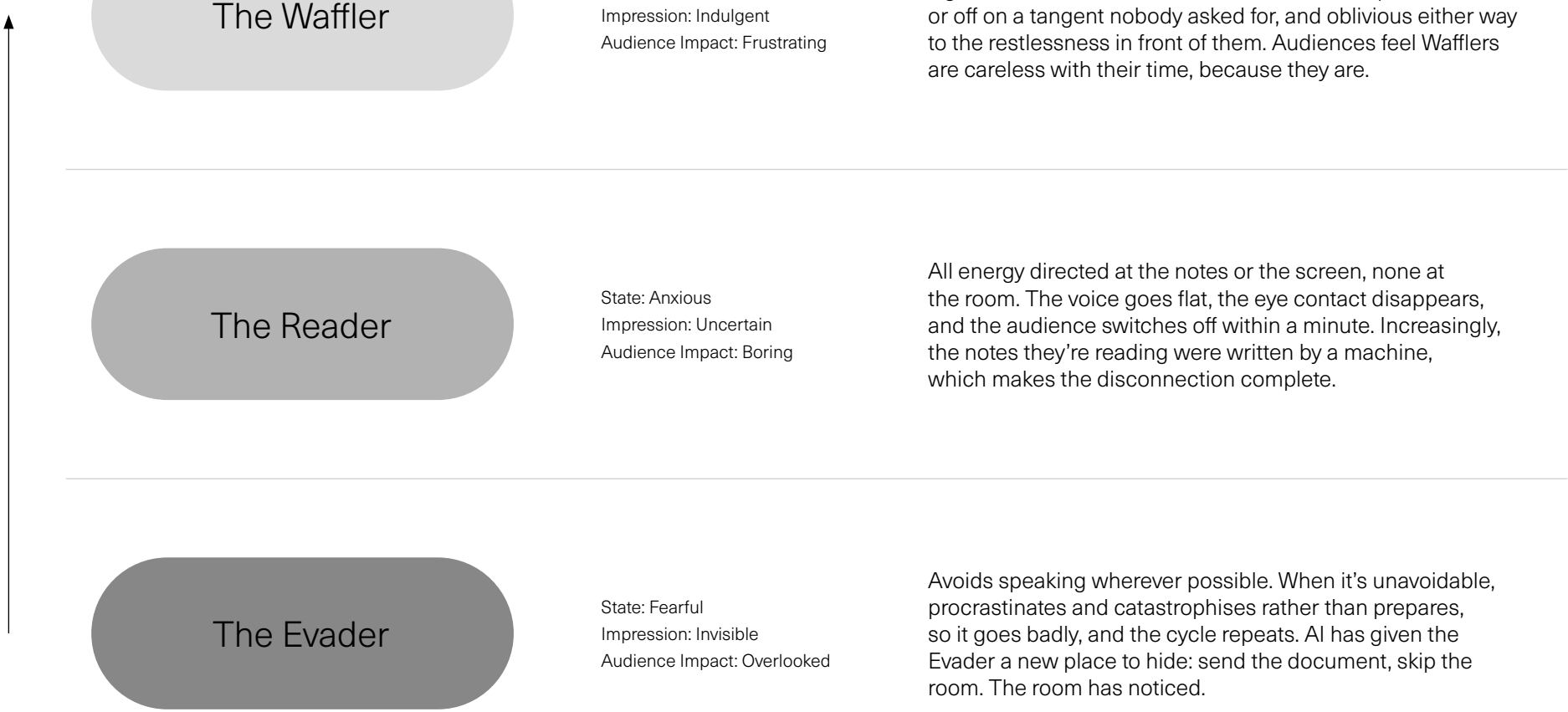


In the Shadows

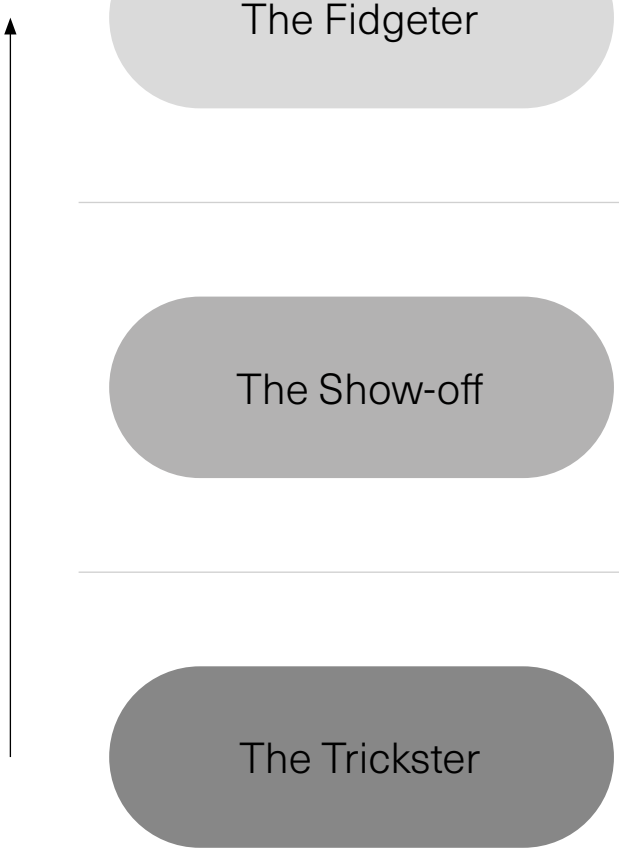
Impact is negligible, negative or invisible.
These speakers don't consistently connect,
usually because of an under-developed idea,
poor articulation of it, or both. Insecurity, anxiety
or inexperience then pull them toward being over-
or under-energised, and it shows in their presence.


Authenticity
& Connection
Impact
The Inspirer
In the Spotlight
Positive
The Analyser
The Storyteller
Twilight Zone
The Informer
The Outsourcer
Neutral
The Waffler
The Fidgeter
In the Shadows
The Reader
The Show-off
Negative
The Evader
The Trickster
Under-energised
Over-energised

In the Shadows: Under-energised



In the Shadows: Over-energised



The Fidgeter

State: Self-conscious
Impression: Nervous
Audience Impact: Irritating

Pacing, swaying, hand-wringing, playing with the pen, a lot of filled pauses and sentences that drift upward at the end. None of it is the message, and all of it is what the room remembers. The habits distract from the idea and amplify the nerves that caused them.

The Show-off

State: Unprepared
Impression: Inauthentic
Audience Impact: Distracting

The performers of the organisation: engaging, likeable and light on substance. They relish an audience and rely on charm to wing it rather than prepare, hiding thin preparation behind jargon or complexity. AI has made this one easier to be.

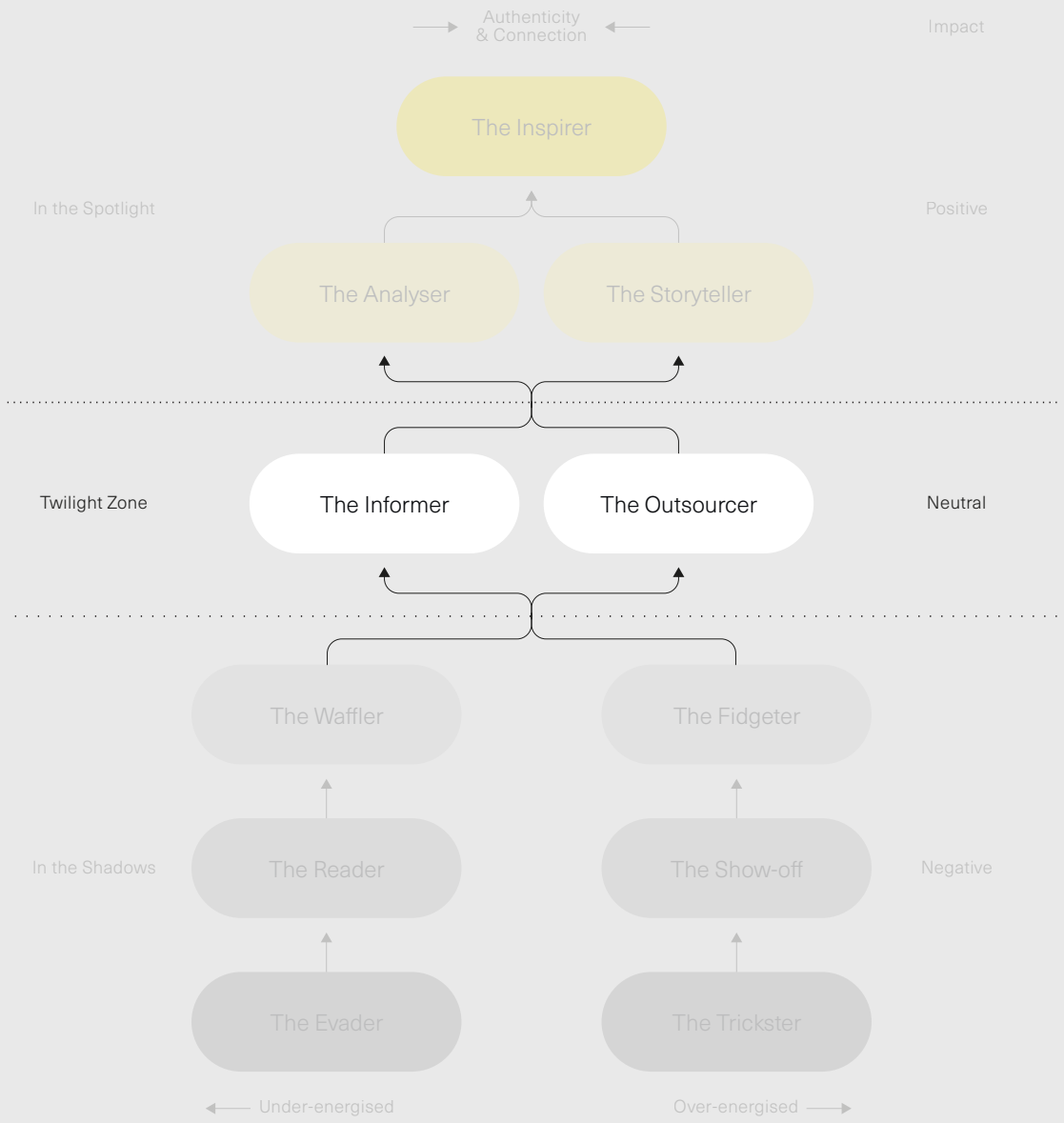
The Trickster

State: Cocky
Impression: Arrogant
Audience Impact: Divisive

Manipulates, deceives or intimidates toward the outcome they want. Charming, and too slick by half; the energy feels too deliberate to trust. Even so, plenty of people mistake their confidence for competence, which is why you find Tricksters at every level of an organisation.

Twilight Zone

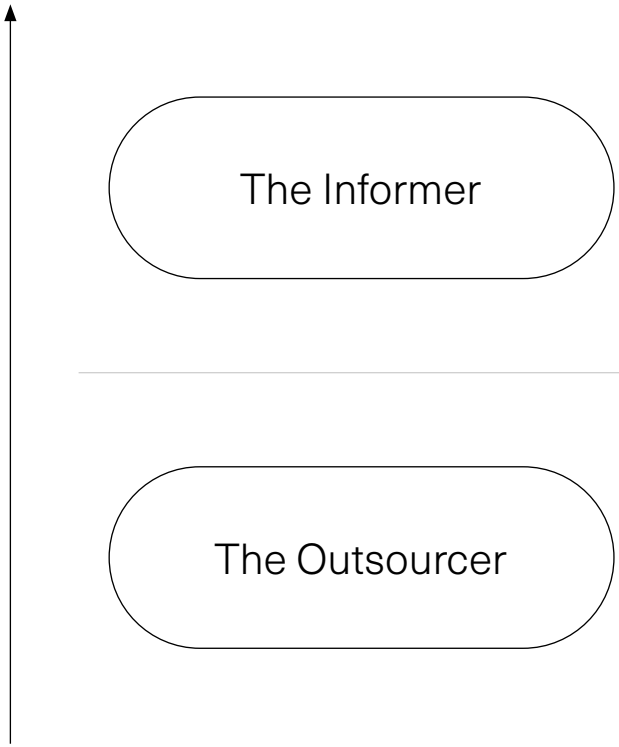
This is where most of your organisation's communicators live. Neither in the shadows nor in the spotlight.


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Under-energised
Over-energised

Twilight Zone

A new archetype in the world of AI

Since I published the model in 2021, the Twilight Zone has had one occupant: the Informer. Then AI arrived, and the zone got a second. The Outsourcer is the model's eleventh archetype, and the first I've added. Why do people hand their thinking to a machine? Because it's quick, because the result looks better than their own first draft, and because they've come to trust the machine more than themselves. Often all three. The machine's polish feels like confidence. It just isn't theirs.



The Informer

State: Flat
Impression: Forgettable
Audience Impact: Neutral

Knows the subject well enough, but turns up with no intention or outcome in mind. They report the facts, relay the figures, recount what happened. The delivery has no oomph, and there's no attempt to drive action, land an insight, hold a point of view or generate any emotion. The room is left to work out what mattered.

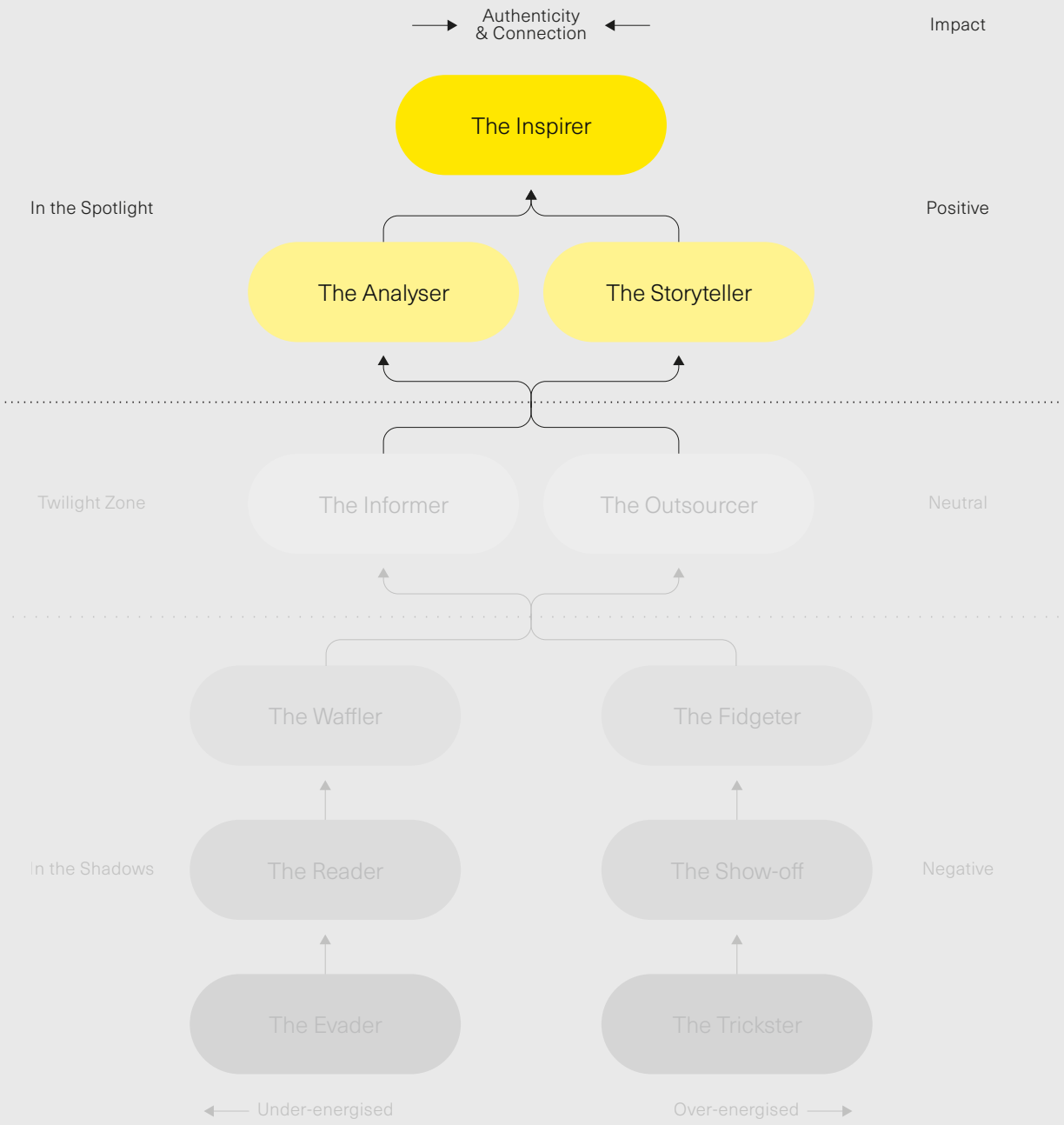
The Outsourcer

State: Uneasy
Impression: Borrowed
Audience Impact: Neutral

They don't do the work. They ask a machine, it gives them something fluent and tidy, and they read it out. The old Informer presentation was "show up and throw up". This is what my partner delightfully calls a slop rocket. The thinking is borrowed, and so is the accountability: what's the insight, why does it matter, where do we go with this? All of that becomes the room's burden instead of the presenter's.

In the Spotlight

Considered, persuasive communicators.
Connected to the needs of their audience,
trusted, and present. The wisest people
in the room, and the most valuable.


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Over-energised

In the Spotlight

The Inspirer

State: Humble
Impression: Wise
Audience Impact: Trusted

Where the two come together in balance, you get the Inspirer: an argument built from the right mix of evidence and story, judged for the audience in front of them, so the room makes a wiser decision. Powerful but never forceful, sure of themselves without needing to perform it. The wisest person in the room, in Aristotle's sense. The name can mislead: no rah-rah, no hype, measured not in applause but in the quality of the decision that follows.

The Storyteller

State: Present
Impression: Authentic
Audience Impact: Motivating

Where the Analyser connects with our minds, the Storyteller also connects with our hearts. They're comfortable with the most powerful tool in persuasion, the story, and use it with judgement: creative but appropriate language, regular metaphor and analogy, a vocal presence that's animated without being a performance. AI can hand a Storyteller a metaphor in seconds. It can't hand them a story from their own experience.

The Analyser

State: Composed
Impression: Competent
Audience Impact: Persuasive

Takes complexity, data and detail and communicates it as clear insight, so the organisation makes a better decision. Terrific at making the complicated simple, with precision in their language and a grounded, unhurried presence. Having the detail is not the same as being an Analyser; the conversion is the skill. Give an Analyser AI and they get faster, not thinner. The tools do the digging. The insight is still theirs.

What Keeps People Trapped In The Shadows?

Whether someone is in the shadows or stuck in the Twilight Zone, one of three things is usually holding them there. I call them the Shadow Keepers.

- Insufficient subject knowledge. They don't know their stuff well enough to hold a point of view on it.
- Poor preparation. They know it, but they haven't done the work to say it well.
- Self-limiting belief. They know it and they've prepared, and they still don't trust themselves in the room.

Ask your leaders which keeper is theirs.
Most people know.

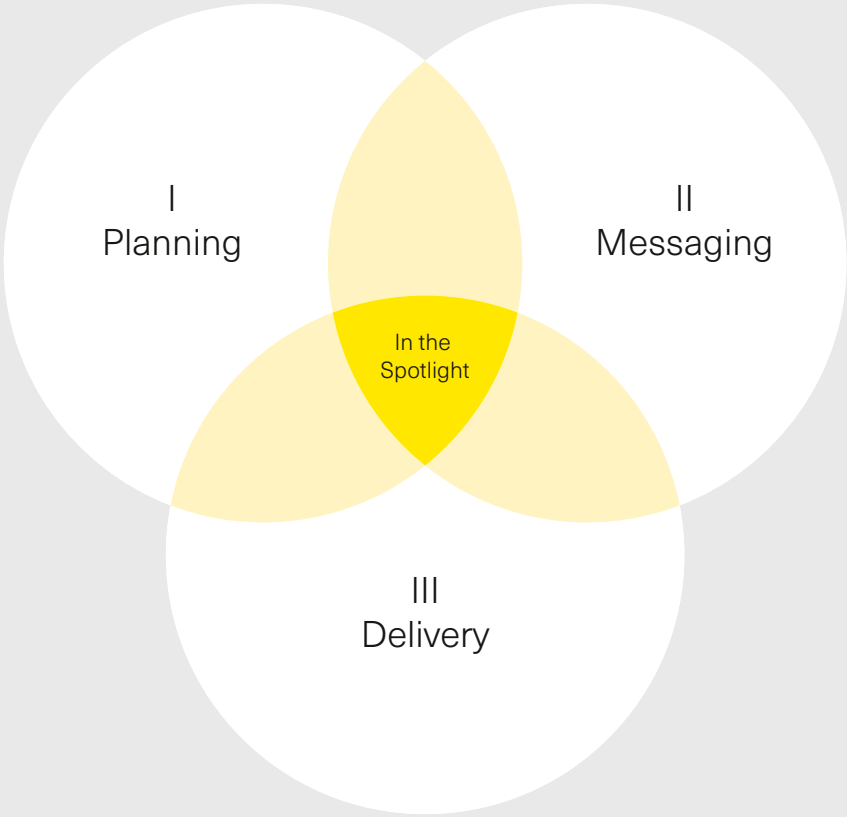
So how do you move people into the spotlight?
That's the Three Practices.



The Three Practices

Everyone who inhabits the spotlight has developed competence across all three practices. This is the pathway, it's learnable, and it's the method every one of our programmes is built on.

And note the order. We start with Planning and Messaging, not Delivery. Most organisations I walk into start somewhere else entirely. They open PowerPoint and build a deck. Or, now, they open PowerPoint and have AI build the deck. The artefact before the thinking.



I Planning

Analyse the audience (Point A), set a clear and achievable objective (Point B), and design a structure to carry the content.

Point A is what your audience already thinks before you've said a word. Point B is where you want their thinking to be by the end. The art of persuasive speaking is moving an audience from Point A to Point B. Point B has three parts: the Big Idea (your core insight in three sentences or fewer), the Outcome (what you want them to think, feel and do), and the Obstacles (what's in the way, and how you'll get round it).

II Messaging

Generating the content that carries them from A to B. Three kinds of content: evidence and argument, story and metaphor, supporting visuals.

The judgement that matters most is the ratio. How much reason, how much story, for this audience? All data and you're the Informer; all story and you're the Show-off. Slides should reinforce the spoken message, not repeat it.

The last piece of Messaging is anticipating and preparing for the questions you haven't been asked yet. Treat the difficult ones as carefully as the presentation itself. You may not get through the first slide before they start.

III Delivery

Connecting the idea with the audience. Most of the time that's not a stage. It's a small room, a screen, a table. Great delivery is a form of respect, for an idea and for an audience, and has nothing to do with the speaker's ego.

Eye contact, an engaging voice, open body language: these are muscles, and they can be trained. Then comes practising your responses to the questions. And be heartened that it's in the back and forth of those questions that the room makes up its mind.

Where AI Fits

It belongs in all three practices, and we encourage people to use it: for research, for finding the metaphor, for distilling a mass of material, for sharpening slides, and above all for testing their thinking. Used that way, it amplifies a leader.[20, 21] Used to replace their thinking, you get the Outsourcer.

The Nine Elements

Each practice breaks into three elements.
This is the structure every programme follows.

Where do the questions sit?
You prepare for them under 5, Your Core Content.
You practise taking them under 7, 8 and 9.



1. Audience (Point A)
2. Objective (Point B)
3. Structure

4. The Open and Close
5. Your Core Content
6. Visual Aids

7. Practice
8. Courage
9. Connect

Experienced, and Never Taught

Everything in the previous pages is learnable. Here's who turns up to learn it.

Who walks into our programmes

Since 2019 we've surveyed every person who comes through, before they arrive.[19] These are not beginners. Two-thirds present six or more times a year, yet 77% have never had a single day of presentation training.

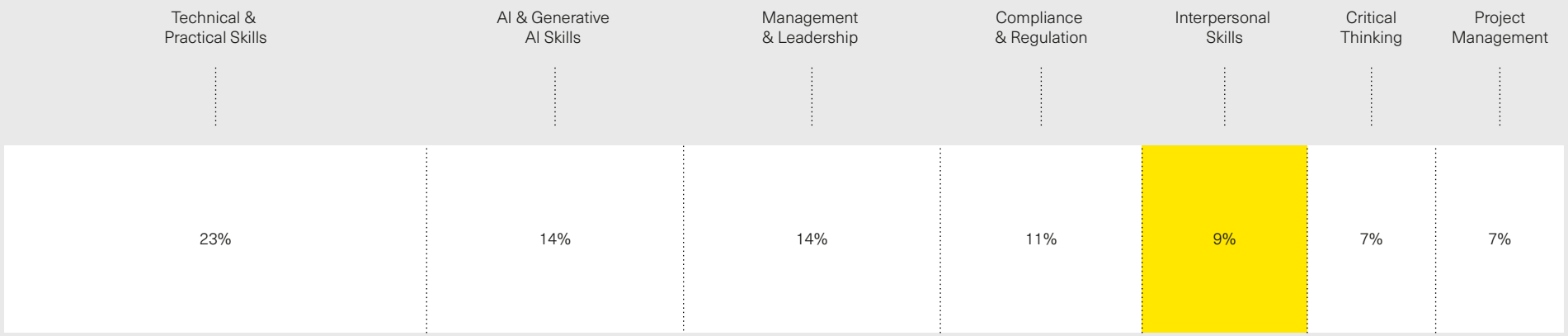
That's the pattern, seven years running: experienced people, presenting often, who were never shown how.

Where the training budget goes

Across the Tasman, the Australian HR Institute surveyed 612 senior decision makers in January 2026.[22] Training budgets are rising: 60% expect to spend more. Asked where the money goes, employers put technical skills at 23%, leadership at 14%, AI skills at 14%.

Interpersonal skills: 9%.

Less than a tenth goes near the capability that does the persuading. McKinsey's rule for AI is that for every dollar on the technology, three should go on redesigning the work and five on building people's capability. Most companies, they say, invert it.[23] The human edge is learnable. Nobody's teaching it, and nobody's paying for it.



Share of Australian employers naming each as their biggest training priority for the next twelve months. AHRI, January 2026, 612 senior decision makers.

Where to from here?

It's the communication of great ideas that moves an organisation forward. That capability is learnable, it isn't being taught, and it's where we can help. Building a culture where leaders can hold a room, whether it holds three people or three hundred, starts with an honest look at where they are now. Then a method, rather than a pep talk.

We have that method. A model that shows you where your people are and where they can get to, a way of seeing what keeps them in the shadows, and three practices that get them out. Work at it and people improve, and so does the trust they're given and the quality of the decisions your organisation makes.

We're now in a time when any message could have been written by a machine. The communication people trust most is what happens between people in a room, and, at least for the medium term, that's where the human edge lives. What the long term holds, nobody quite knows.

Your leaders can be ready for what's already here, or surprised by it.



Ready to get your leaders into the spotlight?

Email russell@thepickeringgroup.com

or call +64 21 357 750

find out more www.thepickeringgroup.com

Our Suite of Development Programmes

I Presentation Skills

The Spotlight

The fundamentals of business presenting

The Boardroom

Advanced presenting for high-stakes audiences

The Arena

A mastery programme for senior teams

The Virtual Spotlight

Presenting well online

Step into the Spotlight

One-to-one coaching for a specific presentation

Keynotes and short workshops

Speaking and working sessions for larger groups

II Business Storytelling

Leading with Stories

Spoken storytelling for leaders and their teams

III Influence & Persuasion

The Secrets of Influence & Persuasion

Getting things over the line

First cohorts early 2027

Working in a dynamic, intrinsically hazardous environment requires subject matter experts to build trust and influence across a range of internal and external stakeholders. Russell's coaching has helped my team of safety business partners build their presentation skills and confidence in delivering messages with clarity, impact and purpose.

Rob Mair, General Manager Health Safety and Wellbeing, Port of Auckland

Russell has been working with our people for nearly twenty years, through every change of name, structure and leadership this business has been through. Suppliers don't last that long unless they keep delivering. He does. Every programme is built around what our people actually present, and they walk out able to do it better.

Mary Meki, Sales Director, At Home, Coca-Cola Europacific Partners New Zealand

We've partnered with The Pickering Group across presentation skills, influence and persuasion, and storytelling. What stands out is Russell's ability to adapt his programmes to the needs of very different audiences, from technical specialists to senior leaders.

Justine Slattery, Learning & Development Manager, Danone New Zealand

Russell Pickering has become our most highly valued facilitator, both for team communication programmes and one-on-one coaching focused on impactful presenting. Our team at Lane Neave consistently rate Russell highly and we never struggle to fill his courses.

Yvette Hooper, Head of People and Capability, Lane Neave

We've had a number of employees attend Russell's Fundamentals of Business Presenting programme over the years, and the feedback has consistently been excellent. Participants come away with greater confidence, practical presentation skills, and techniques they can immediately apply in their roles.

Anna Pule, Director, People & Culture, Matariki Forests

Russell Pickering is STELLAR at his craft, absolutely the best in New Zealand. He exemplifies presence and connection. My clients rate him as a top-notch presenter and executive coach. If you need to ramp up your impact as a leader, Russell is the man to call.

Harold Hillman, PhD, Managing Director, Sigmoid Curve Consulting Group

Hugely popular courses, with immediate, tangible results. Well over a hundred of our people are now more impactful, confident speakers because of The Pickering Group's programmes.

Kerry Dewar, Leadership & Capability Manager, Mercury

The ability to communicate your ideas with clarity, to inspire your audience to action, to share stories that bring your business strategy to life: these are all essential qualities for leaders in the modern business world. Nobody helps you do that better than Russell and his team at The Pickering Group.

Joanna Simon, Chief Executive, Starship Foundation

The 'Leading with Stories' programme empowered our senior leaders to continue telling the stories of our transformation, to lift our strategy out of the spreadsheets and PowerPoints and into the hearts of our people.

Wayne McNee, then Chief Executive, LIC

Read more at www.thepickeringgroup.com



Russell Pickering

Founder and Principal, The Pickering Group

Russell is one of New Zealand's leading specialists in presentation skills and business storytelling, and has spent twenty years developing spoken communication capability in senior leaders.

Before founding The Pickering Group he ran the Auckland communication skills consultancy SpeakEasy. He has worked with thousands of people in some of New Zealand and Australia's most visible organisations.

Originally trained as a professional actor and director, he was awarded a Bob Hope Scholarship to study for a Master of Fine Arts in Acting at Meadows School of the Arts (SMU), and has appeared in commercial television, feature film and on regional theatre stages throughout the US and New Zealand. He later completed his MBA through the University of Auckland's Executive programme.

He's the author of *Step into the Spotlight* (2021).

Born and raised in the Waitomo district, he now lives in Auckland, and runs programmes across New Zealand, Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong.

His recent clients include: Reserve Bank of New Zealand · Auckland Airport · Danone Nutricia · MinterEllisonRuddWatts · Coca-Cola Europacific Partners · Fletcher Building · Mercury · Forsyth Barr · Realestate.co.nz · Hamilton City Council · Ministry of Justice · Compass Group · Sony NZ · Pinnacle Life · Rural Leaders.

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The argument here comes from twenty years in rooms with people who have had to present, to inform or to persuade, and from a model I first published in 2021. AI was used to analyse the survey data, search the literature, proofread, and argue with. If you find something in here you think is wrong, I'd like to hear it.

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