

015 – Watch Out Behind You

Announcer: Do you dream of making a living as a speaker, writer, or performer? Do you want to learn to communicate with clarity, focus, and power? In each episode you will learn the secrets of dynamic communication so you can make a living doing what you love.

Welcome to the Art and Business of Public Speaking with your host, who, for over 30 years has helped men and women build exciting careers, Ken Davis.

Brian: Hello, this is Brian Scheer, your cohost for the Art and Business of Public Speaking, where we peek behind the curtain to discover how to create, grow and maintain a successful career as a communicator.

Hey, Ken, how are you?

Ken: I'm doing great.

Brian: What did you name today's podcast?

Ken: Hey Brian, watch out! Watch out behind you! Brian, that's what I named it. Watch Out Behind You. We've got to wait for Brian to get back to the microphone.

Brian: Where'd you come up with that name?

Ken: Well, just over the years I have observed situations where my ability to communicate was severely impacted by what was behind me. And again over the years, and you know this, I've given you all of this information, so that we can, as much as possible, take some special step – we're going to be looking at steps you can take today to control what's behind you. Because what's behind you makes a big difference on how the people who are in front of you are going to perceive what you're doing.

So that's what we're going to do, we're going to talk about those steps. And these are principles that are important, whether you're the performer, or you're one who produces a program. You and I both, Brian, have programs that we do. We have conferences that we present, that we offer. The LAUNCH conference, the SCORRE conference. And in all of those we take significant care to make sure that what's behind the presenter will augment what he's going; will accentuate what he's doing rather than distract.

Brian: You know, it's important to note here that many event coordinators don't take this into account. So you as the speaker who is actually coming in, you're actually doing them a service by having them consider this. By bringing it to their attention. Hey, what's my backdrop? What's going to be behind me? Is it going to be ferns all over the place where I'm lost in a jungle? Or is it a black backdrop? Or is there no backdrop?

As you're communicating with the event coordinator, they can tell that you have the expertise to help them make a better event happen.

Ken: That's exactly right. And that's the way you approach this. I think before we jump into any of this, we have to go back to something we discussed before, Brian. And that is,

you approach as someone who wants to help. Not, this is what I demand. This is what I need. But in many, many cases, I'm talking all the way from corporate to situations where a church is our venue, to situations where a gymnasium is a venue. And we've been in every kind of situation outside and inside that you can possibly imagine.

When you talk to them and gather this information ahead of time, right Brian? And then help them anticipate what some of the problems can be, you become the problem solver. Here's what's interesting.

When I go someplace to speak, Brian, this is the absolute truth. People consistently say, Brian and Matt, you and Matt, the two people who front almost everything we do, have helped us so much make this a great event. I don't think I've ever run into anybody that said, boy, what a bunch of prima donnas. Well, there was that one lady. I do remember one. Maybe someday we have to have a podcast on the one lady.

Brian: We do need to move on and get right into our content here. Seriously, you're going to hear from Matt Brady as well, who's Ken's road manager. He does an excellent job in bringing the event coordinators up to speed on what we need. Now Matt's approach with it is not to say, here are our demands. But he's rather educate them. And they come along and they appreciate that. And he has a very good way of doing that and it's fun to watch him work.

Ken: Well Matt understands the first step. He understands that it's important to know why your background is important. And it's important because what's behind you will either focus the attention on you or it will distract from your message. And it's as important as all of the other elements of communication. And we're going to get into that today.

So be aware of what can distract and why. Here's what's important again. Nothing behind you that moves, there should be nothing behind you that moves, makes noise, emits bright light, or at least light brighter than you. Bright backlights that are facing the audience distract. It makes it impossible for people to see you.

I was in Alaska one time and was asked to do a presentation with my back to a window. A big window. Now there were only – I'll bet there weren't more than 75 people in the room, but none of them could see me. Snow outside. Bright light. And I become a silhouette. So the simple solution to that was that as the program started, we realized it wasn't working and it was a small enough group so we could just simply switch everything around. And the very light behind us that was a distraction, when we switched it around in this small room, and I stood on the other side of the room, became the light that lit me and made it possible for me to do the presentation.

I did an outdoor graduation for a group that will go unnamed in Denver, Colorado. Brian, the stage was set up to the west. So first of all we've got a beautiful mountain view behind me as I speak. And second of all, it's in the late afternoon, so where is the sun?

Brian: Setting in the west.

Ken: Setting in the west. And there's 1,000 people with their hands, that held their hands up during the entire graduation ceremony. Held their hands so that the sun was not in their eyes. They couldn't look at the stage. It was impossible to look at the stage when the sun got low.

Brian: What can you do about that though?

Ken: There's nothing you can do about it. That's where we learned these lessons. There was nothing we could do about that. There might not have been anything that we could have done about it even in this situation if we had told them ahead of time. But at least you make every effort that you possibly can.

Maybe we could have bought 1,000 fans or something that people could have held in front of their eyes. Or something.

Brian: But the one thing they did not realize, if you were doing that pre-work, the advance work on that event, and knew that that was going to be a situation, you, as a speaker going into it, were prepared for it, were aware of it. You're going to be more comfortable than if you arrive there and go, oh my goodness. We're in trouble here. Your advance team can prepare you for that so you're not stressed out.

Ken: I've seen some very large music venues where we have been speaking at music venues that are set up like this every single year. And I realize the venue itself makes it impossible to set it up any other way. But here's what can happen. Over the years, if I'm not mistaken, I have to ask my friends about this, and maybe I'll let people know how this turned out, but I think over the years what they did was they started the speaking part earlier. You can listen to music without watching, but it's hard to pay attention to a speaker without watching. And so I think they started the event a little earlier and this is on the west coast, way out on the west coast so that the sun wasn't so intensely in the eyes of everybody sitting on this hillside.

We also had, Brian, and again I don't think you were with me this time, but we did a SCORRE conference one time in Chicago. And we were in a theater – picture this now. We were doing our conference from the stage, and the stage was set for the play Grease. So they had bought a half a car. Where you buy a half a car, I don't know. But it was up against the wall. You know a '57 Chevy or something like that. It was just the front half of the car. All of this is okay for me. I can handle this because I've got beautiful lighting. We've got kind of an unusual setting. People were surprised at it at first.

But to drape it, we couldn't do anything. We had to deal with what was there. That wasn't the bad part of it. It was a hotel. And the waiters and waitresses that were bringing food and whatever it might be from the kitchen to one of the places where they were serving people, walked behind us during the entire conference. So they would come through one door with that little cart that sounds like you're rattling every dish in the United States of America. And constantly people moving behind us.

And that's the way you learn. If I had it to do over again on that conference, I could have lived with the stage. But had I known about the traffic, had I been able to be smart enough to ask about, is there any traffic going to be behind us – and this is very common. I'll bet you there's people listening right now who have done events in hotel ballrooms where they've heard the rattling coming, and they know what's going to happen. Someone comes busting through a door and then they have to go through another door to get to one of the other places where they're serving people or whatever it might be. It happens all the time.

If you have a choice, put your stage where nothing will come through any doors that are in front of the people.

Brian: You know, it's interesting. As you're talking, I'm sitting here going, you know, I bet the people that are listening are going, well, there's hundreds and hundreds of questions you must ask in order to cover all the bases. And I really want to make this point very clear. One question leads to other questions. You have to know what you hear when you're talking to the event sponsor. What are the other questions you need to ask about that?

So when I hear hotel ballroom, I get an immediate reaction to that with a rash knowing that something bad is, I'm going to go find out what that is. Just know that you don't have to have all of the questions, but just investigate and go a little bit further. When they talk about spotlight, are they talking about lights that are up in the ceiling that are shining straight down? Or are they talking about lights that are supplemental lights coming in? You have to know what questions to ask.

It's not that you have to ask them all the time for every situation.

Ken: But there are certain questions you ask with a ballroom. Not only concerning lighting, but concerning background. Again, we're talking about background today so my question is, are there any doors that your staff has to use that are located behind us? And then the next question is this, and this is almost always when you're offsite, when you're not in a theater or whatever it might be. What is behind me? Can you describe it for me?

Well, hotel ballroom. This has happened maybe five times. And by the way, experience is the best teacher. That's where you learn most of this. But a hotel ballroom – What's behind me? Well, there's nothing behind you. Is the stage going to be draped? Well, no, we really haven't planned to drape the stage, but there's nothing behind you.

Brian: Just a note. That's not how all event coordinators sound. But it's a good impersonation. Thank you, Ken.

Ken: That's how this one sounded. So just back off. There's nothing behind you. It's just a wall. I know it isn't purdy and fancy like you're used to, you prima donna, but there's nothing behind you.

Do you have spotlights? Yes, we have spotlights. We have two spotlights. Good. Ask all the other questions.

Get there. Get to the venue. There is nothing behind me on the wall except wallpaper and a four foot mirror all the way – now not a mirror that you would comb your hair in. Mirror material with some kind of etching in it. Now tell me Brian – Matt, maybe you'd like to jump in here. What happens when you shine two spotlights at a mirror?

Brian: It blinds the audience.

Ken: It blinds the entire audience. And especially when those spotlights are moving. Now, as we're going to talk about later, draping solves so much. Just a little bit of draping that will allow spotlights or whatever kind of lighting that's to be used to show on you. And I don't remember who was with me. Were you with me during that time? Did they provide something to help us there?

Brian: With the mirror? I wasn't there for that one.

Ken: Okay, it might have been Danny. But if we're in a hotel, guess what? They have draping. And because – sometimes it may cost you a few extra dollars, but you put just enough draping up to keep that problem from happening.

Here's another background that can distract. And I want Matt to jump in here. Matt, when I say poor IMAG, tell the people what that means, and describe the rash that you're breaking out in right now.

Matt: I'd say it's two things. It would be either IMAG is not necessary or –

Ken: And when is that? When is eye mag not necessary?

Matt: If you're in a room with 100 people sitting in close proximity to the stage, or maybe there's not even a stage. You're on the floor. It's probably not necessary and it can become more distracting.

Ken: It's more distracting, isn't it?

Matt: Yeah, and the second one is when they don't know how to do it. We've said this before. They don't know how to keep proper head room. It's blown out. You look like a ghost. It's poorly operated. Jerky. They don't keep up with you. That's way more distracting.

Ken: Tell people, because a lot of people don't have the same – you've worked with this kind of stuff virtually all your life. When it's blown out, tell them what you're talking about.

Matt: Sure. It's when you look as white as a ghost. So the camera is not set up to look at a bright person on a stage. If I were to use a camera and look at you in the daylight and you in an office, it would look great. But then when I put thousands of watts of lights on you, all of a sudden you're as white as Casper the Ghost. And you can't tell facial expressions. You can't tell who you are. Then that's blown out, and that's horrible.

Ken: So poor IMAG. And we have run into situations where people have been set up with IMAG, where their iPhone is propped up on some books and stuff like that. And it's not

going to work for the situation. And you have diplomatically handled that situation. How have you helped them to realize that this isn't going to work? Do you just say, hey, you guys don't know what you're doing, so shut that off? How do you do that? And how do you know when it's not going to work?

For instance, I want you to talk a little bit about, if someone's on a camera that doesn't know how to follow, it's jerky, it's not a good head.

Matt: First, Lauren over here is asking the question, what is IMAG, which if some of our listeners don't know, that's just image enhancement. So you're on the stage performing and they have cameras on you to put up on the screens on either side. Or it might be fed to some external monitors in the lobby.

I think, in answer to your question Ken, if they don't know what they're doing, chances are they're not going to get to know what they're doing in the time you're performing. And I don't particularly want them to be learning while you're performing. So I would usually say, the good thing about your presentations is that you show slides, which I'm sure many listeners do as well. And you can use that and say, hey, Ken shows a lot of slides, or I have a lot of slides I'm showing in my presentation. Let's keep it on the slides. And we'll work through there.

If you're in a huge auditorium where there's thousands and thousands of people and they're going to need IMAG, chances are in that situation they're probably going to know what they're doing because they're used to it.

Ken: Now I get to do something for you, Matt, that you're always doing for me. Look at me when I'm talking to you. You're looking away now. I want you to hear this. They're not slides. They're pictures. Slides come from that little machine that goes click click. Like that. And so they're pictures. Because you're always on me for saying video tape. But we want you to watch this video tape, and it's really not video tape. It's – what is it now?

Matt: It's a DVD. Thank you for clarifying.

Ken: DVD. So what we're talking about is you just want to know that there's nothing behind you that can distract. Here's some other things that can distract. Ready? Here we go. People don't have people behind you. Our good friend Mike Hyatt, we talk about Mike a lot on this show because we believe in what he's doing with Platform University and the leaders that he's empowering around the country. But for a while, you worked with him. Tell the folks what happened when he got a chance to speak to some high powered executives in a high rise, an unbelievably beautiful glass building.

Brian: Yes, we were in Oklahoma City, and in Oklahoma City they have one building that's 100 floors. It's tall and had a beautiful view. As he was presenting, I noticed something in the corner of my eye. Out of kind of a little bit of a distance away, window washers. And I thought, well, I don't think anybody's going to see it, but then they started swinging down to right behind Michael. As a person who is traveling with him, this was very distracting. In fact I watched the audience as they started laughing and Michael

was wondering what they were laughing at. Eventually somebody pointed for Michael to turn around and they were there for his entire presentation. I did everything in my power – I literally went to the general manager of this huge building and said you've got to get them down. But to no avail. They stayed there the whole time and worked on the windows. Actually they were fixing something. It wasn't even window washers.

Ken: That's amazing. So watch what's behind you. And it doesn't always have to be a window washer. I spoke at some of the early Promise Keepers meetings. 55,000 people in a stadium. And they have IMAG there. And the IMAG that they had, the image thing – the screens were 100 feet high. Just huge, and beautiful screens. The cameras were set back maybe 100 yards – it wasn't that far. But the cameras were set back 25-30 yards maybe.

And they were telephotoed in, so they could catch a fairly close up of me. When you telephoto in to get a bigger image of the speaker, the people behind the speaker are telephotoed even more. They become twice the size of you. And there was a man just behind me without a shirt. A large, very large man. Sound asleep. And his head was to one side. His mouth was open. You could see him breathing. No shirt on. And the image of him was twice as big as me and probably 40 feet high.

This is what's interesting, Brian. Back at that time we had requested, as a part of our fee, because they didn't pay the full fee, we negotiated – can we at least have a movie of that presentation. We were never able to use that movie because Jabba the Hutt was back there. We just could not use the movie. So, bless is heart. I don't think he heard any of the messages either. But he did manage to steal the show. And you don't want anything behind you that can steal the show.

I've done programs with choirs behind me. And that's okay because most of them have been instructed to stay still. If you have a choice and you're going to have somebody on stage – and Brian, we've done this with overflow audiences – put them to the sides instead of directly behind you.

We've had people on the stage and to the sides, and then as a speaker I get a chance to interact with them. And that works quite well. But, if you have the opportunity, please request that it be adults on the stage and not children. Children and animals will steal the show every single time. Every single time. Those are just some tips that I'd like to give.

Another thing you should not have behind you – by the way, let me just go through this list again. Bright lights, no traffic behind you, people of any kind – don't let that happen. Large, empty spaces. If you're going to speak outdoors, try to build some kind of backdrop that separates you from the rest of the outdoors.

I used to do hayrides. When I was speaking to youth I would do hayrides. As long as it was dark it was fine. Because they would light it from the front. Everything else behind me was black. But if we got in early, and all of that stuff was back there. There's cows back there sometimes, there were birds flying around. All of that is more interesting

than you are. So if you have a little backdrop that kind of narrows the space and creates your own space, that's absolutely wonderful. You shouldn't have anything behind you that is more interesting than you.

There's a beautiful place in the mountains that has a marvelous church. And behind the pulpit is an open view of the mountains. The Rockies. You can't beat that. That's more interesting than you, no matter what.

When you're on a stage, and I would like you guys to address this. Maybe you don't agree with me. But when I'm on a stage, I have a choice of speaking in front of the curtains or with an open stage that sometimes it has musical instruments from a band that was there, or a set up for a play or something like that, or an empty stage. I say it's okay to perform in front of a curtain. It's perfectly okay. And I have no problem with that.

But I prefer having a little space so that you open that up and maybe put a couple of chairs or some kind of – something to give it depth. I think that helps. What do you think about that, Matt?

Matt: I think it varies in the situation. Some nice theatres you go into have really great thrust on the stage, so you have 10-15 feet until the curtain.

Ken: Tell the people what thrust is.

Matt: The section of the stage that goes in front of the curtain. So you have your curtain that closes your main curtain, and then in front of it you've got fifteen feet to the very edge of the stage. And that works well in many places.

Sometimes, though, if you get a stage that is – you're on a stage, and like you said, it's just a deep cavern with nothing to it, it's not interesting. It's not appealing. It gets boring after a while. So yeah, I'd say if there's a stage and you can get something set on it, just dress it up a little bit. And in front works if you have the room to move, but if the thrust of the stage is two feet, that's obviously not going to work.

Ken: Matt is truly an expert on this. And when I say expert, I mean the dude is an expert. He turns a hotel ballroom, which, by the way, is one of the most boring venues I can imagine on earth. Churches used to be one of the most boring, but they've really stepped it up. They've got some great lighting, and they've come to understand what's important. I'm really excited. I love working in church venues. I really do.

But Matt is an expert. And here's what he's done. We want you to check out the backdrop that Matt made. And you can see this in our Show Notes. Get a hold of it in our Show Notes and it's a picture of how he created the backdrop for our SCORRE conference. And he did this at minimal cost to us. Probably saved us several thousand dollars. And it was absolutely unbelievable.

When we did the "Under the Influence" DVD, which, by the way, if you don't have it – hey, let's put that in the Show Notes, too, so they can get that comedy DVD. When we went to do that, we had invested tens of thousands of dollars in doing that video. Got

there and we had rented a backdrop. And the backdrop, when it got there, it was for the back of a stage, looked like a funeral parlor. It was horrible. Big white swaggy with a little bit of glitter to it. It was nasty.

And I stamped my little diva foot and said, I don't care how much we spent, we're not putting that backdrop. Were you there Brian?

Brian: I was there.

Ken: So we opened the curtains and there was this marvelous back stage. And the back wall had some kind of – it wasn't cement. It was some kind of textured fabric or something on it. So we changed the lighting, brought in a couple of props. And if you get "Under the Influence" – in fact, let's include one scene from there that shows the backdrop there that we created. And we were able to save that video, save tens of thousands of dollars. But it was important for us to know that there was nothing behind the stage.

If you're going to do a gymnasium, do it on a stage with the bleachers, your audience, and put – have them build a little stage and put a backdrop behind you. Don't put that empty gymnasium for them to see. You can make so much of a difference – change what you can. Turn off a few lights.

When I'm in a gymnasium, I ask them to turn off all the lights behind me, if they can, and leave the lights on in front of me. You can just make little adjustments. Take a few steps to change your background so that it can make a difference.

Here's my Road Tip for today. And it applies to everything that we have talked about. Change what you can to make your background bring you to the forefront. And then make the best of what you have when you get there. Once you get there, your job as a performer, is to use whatever you ended up with to do the best you can and treat people with dignity and do the best program you can. The secret is to ensure your speaking environment so that the focus is on you and your message. The attention needs to be on you, not what's behind you. Look out for what's behind you!

Brian: You know, great information. I'm going to stress again, a lot of this can be handled on the front end. And it's so important to ask those questions and to get the information you can to create the scene in your own mind. What is it going to look like?

We're also going to tell you a little bit more about our Communicator Coaching program that actually does go into this in more detail, and we help you in this coaching program to ask those questions. You can go to DynamicCommunicators.com. Check out more about the Communicator Coaching program. We'd love to have you check it out. Ask us some questions. We'd be happy to engage with you, give you more information about that program and how you can take advantage of it.

Ken: Before we go, one little closing story. Because this podcast never goes the way we plan. I was speaking in a place where there was nothing but glass behind me. I had a good talk prepared. There were about 700 people in that place. Behind me, in the glass area,

was a garden. In the garden was a cat stalking a little duck. Nobody knows what I said that day.

Brian:

Thanks for tuning in to another episode of the Art and Business of Public Speaking. Be sure to check out the full Show Notes at DynamicCommunicators.com where you can find the resources we discussed today and a downloadable transcript of the podcast.

By the way, if you enjoyed today's episode, we would love for you to rate the podcast in iTunes. This helps us get in front of more people who are interested in our message. Thanks so much for your help, and we'll see you again next week.