

CPA Australia Podcast

Episode 30 – Transcript

- Introduction: Hello and welcome to the CPA Australia podcast, your source for business, leadership and public practice accounting information.
- Ben O'Halloran: Hello and welcome to a special edition of the CPA Australia podcast, as we connect the biggest minds for CPA Congress, a conference of thought leaders, games changers and technological innovators, delivered across 13 locations and seven countries.
- My name is Ben O'Halloran, I'm the Content and Social Media Manager at CPA Australia. Today I'm joined by Brendan Hargreaves, CPA, Divisional Manager at Cleanaway Waste Management Limited. Brendan has just now stepped off stage, as a keynote speaker at CPA Congress, Melbourne. Hello, Brendan and welcome.
- Brendan H: Thank you, Ben.
- Ben O'Halloran: Brendan's career has seen him head up finance and management positions across several blue chip Australian companies, including Coles, Village Roadshow and Qantas, before landing in his current role with Cleanaway, earlier this year.
- Today's topic, effective communication of data and digits to influence stakeholders. Brendan, you've just stepped off stage at CPA Congress, Melbourne. Your presentation, effective communication of data and digits to influence stakeholders. You talked about five steps for impactful presentations. Can you run us through a few of those?
- Brendan H: Well, interesting Ben, you've actually picked the old title to my presentation.
- Ben O'Halloran: Okay.
- Brendan H: So I didn't actually like it, because I didn't think it actually compelled the audience to come and listen to me, so I actually insisted that we change it.
- Ben O'Halloran: Thanks for picking that up.
- Brendan H: That's okay.
- Ben O'Halloran: What is the correct title?

Brendan H: Influencing for success; how, in challenging economic times, to get your stakeholders to say yes.

Ben O'Halloran: Very good.

Brendan H: Yeah.

Ben O'Halloran: Very contemporary. I like it.

Brendan H: Indeed. Well, I thought I had to demonstrate the skills that I was up there presenting on, so ...

Ben O'Halloran: Absolutely. I think the first of the five steps, you talk about an ice breaker.

Brendan H: Yeah, it's really to warm up the room, and you tend to do that through a story. I used a video clip today. It was a video clip from Media Watch, which was pointing out that a whole bunch of journalists attempted to do what we do as financial professionals, and tell a story about numbers. They didn't do it so well. They got the size of the iceberg wrong. But it ... thought it was quite compelling in terms of setting the scene that, even journalists try and tell stories with numbers. And it's easy to remember that the iceberg was twice the size of the ACT and ... rather than 5,800 square kilometres and a trillion tonnes.

Ben O'Halloran: Yes. I think you pointed out that we use numbers to tell a compelling story because it's easier to remember.

Brendan H: Yeah. I think the challenge you've got, as you start to go through your career is, how do you make numbers more than just numbers? Data's interesting, it's what you do with data that is really, truly impactful. And I think when you understand how to move from being the guy or gal that can put numbers together, and actually turn those numbers into decisions or influence the future, I personally think that your level of satisfaction from a career point of view, your ability to influence an organisation and really make tremendous difference, just steps up a notch.

Ben O'Halloran: Right. That'll take us into the second step.

Brendan H: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Ben O'Halloran: Personalising your message. How do we go about personalising our message if we're talking about impacting stakeholders?

Brendan H: Well. I think the first thing to say is, you've got to understand your stakeholders. And I think in my presentation today, I said you had to understand that people are going to bring different perspectives to the room.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: And in the example I gave today, we talked about the 700 site managers who are sitting in the room, wanting to hear how fantastic I'd been at delivering a record year of property growth. And I remember doing that presentation, because we rehearsed it, and we had someone critique it for me and I think she ... fell asleep, was the expression she gave me when she first heard it was, I talked about how wonderful I was.

And so we tried to turn that around, say ... last session of the day, they're bored out of their mind. Or the last thing they want to hear is about the fact that we opened 23 new sites this particular year. Ho-hum. How do I make this personal? And so what we did, was we talked about careers and that was one of our pillars. And then pillars was creating great careers. And the line in the end of the clip is, building great careers powered by building a great property network. So we brought the two together. Suddenly the people in the room, it meant something to them. Opening 23 sites meant 23 new site managers.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: Career opportunities for someone who potentially didn't have that chance beforehand.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure. We all like to hear about ourselves. We all like to talk about ourselves a bit, so that personalising the message takes the attention off you, puts it on the crowd and then engages them.

Brendan H: Correct. I think we've been to many of those presentations, you get up there and you just go, man this is their autobiography. You know, it's the history of them and how exciting are they, sort of thing. And you just go ... I mean, I probably could have listened to this on a podcast.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: I didn't need to come in person to see that.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure. And so that definitely moves into the involve your audience, the third pillar of the five steps to impactful presentations.

Brendan H: Indeed. Well, this is when we get into feelings, which is always the one that gets the most interesting reaction when I ... I've done this in real life, where I've had someone present to me and I then said, "Well, how do you want the audience to feel at the end of it?" Or, "How do you think they felt coming into the presentation?" which is step three. How they feel coming in.

And they look at me, particularly finance professionals, as though, are you out of your mind? We don't do feelings. It's not one of the things we learn at university.

Ben O'Halloran: Right. Sure.

Brendan H: It's not debits, credits and feelings. But I think when you truly understand that people will bring a perspective into the room, and you've got to make sure that you embrace that and you understand that, because then you can be truly impactful there. I think I showed the Kevin Rudd clip of where he acknowledged as we walked in, as he walked in to give that speech, there was going to be a whole bunch of Australians going, "I don't know why this bloke is saying sorry."

Ben O'Halloran: Yes, and that was the apology speech.

Brendan H: That was the apology speech, for the Stolen Generation. And there was a whole bunch of people just ... The reason they didn't get it is, they just ... it wasn't personal for them. They'd never been taken away from their family. They'd never had a situation like that. So it was all a bit ho-hum for them. I think what he was able to do very effectively in that, and why I selected that clip was, he just faced straight into those two issues. He said, "I'm here to give an apology for these reasons and you got to put yourself in their shoes." And suddenly, people are going, "Oh, yeah. Hadn't thought of it that way. Actually, yeah. Maybe that does mean something to me, now."

Ben O'Halloran: And you just mentioned there, what do you want people to do after the presentation? How, when you're in a group as big as we had today, at the CPA Congress, Melbourne, how do you cater for so many different styles or types of people?

Brendan H: Yeah, good question. I guess what I was thinking about, if I was coming to that session, what would I be thinking? I'd probably thinking I'd like to do better presentations. I'm really nervous about giving presentations, it's not my natural suit. I know I need to do it. So I'm feeling nervous as I walk in the room. I feel like there's something I could learn. How do I want to feel at the end of it? I want to feel a bit more confident that I could step up and actually give a presentation, and take on some of those tips. And I guess what I was hoping that I'd achieve at the end is, with step five, which is make sure there's an action at the end of it is, actually there's five things I think you can do. Go away and practise those things. And I think I said at the start, start by talking about yourself. In an impactful way.

Ben O'Halloran: Yeah.

Brendan H: Yeah. You're not just an accountant, you're not just a bookkeeper, you're not just an auditor. I think you can, if you do your job really, really well, I think you can be truly influential.

Ben O'Halloran: Yes. And we've covered that, in not so many ways, today, the importance of story telling. Most of us are accountants, we are bookkeepers. We deal in numbers. But that's not ... You said yourself that you like to be taken through a story, taken to ... painted a picture. But you have a background in finance, you're a CFO, so do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Brendan H: Yeah, absolutely, Ben. I think that's because, as finance professionals, when we start our career, our audience is financial professionals. They've been trained the same way. They know debits and credits. In fact, you get promoted because you're really good at doing those sorts of things, you know.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: And you step up and you do even more of it and you get even better at it and you get promoted again. And suddenly, before you even know it, you're presenting to the senior partner of an organisation or the managing director or HR director, and suddenly the perspectives change. And I think, I gave five examples in the presentation of stakeholders that I had had frustrations with.

Ben O'Halloran: You did. I found that very interesting.

Brendan H: Indeed. And I had gone into many of those engagements, assuming that it was all their fault and not my fault. And I think, over time, what I had to learn was, actually, I played a role in that. And actually I was impactful on them as much as they were impactful on me.

So I had to understand my audience. Once I started to understand my audience, started to understand the different stakeholders, and started to understand me, as well, because I'm part of that and I learned, over time, that I'm not a ... Whilst I love numbers and I love to have a factual conversation, I actually like people to take me on the journey, take something from complex to simple.

And I actually, I do quite a bit of banter in a meeting, where I'm bouncing off the person that I'm meeting with, and really just testing if I've picked that up correctly. Have you explained it to me correctly? Am I on the right path? And I'm trying to now understand, how well do you know what you're doing and what you're saying? And how confident are you of your presentation or the data that sits behind it? So that's just something I've got comfortable with over the time, but that's not every stakeholder, as I demonstrated in that presentation.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure and what you're saying there is, if you want to have influence you need to be able to adapt.

Brendan H: Absolutely.

Ben O'Halloran: Yeah.

Brendan H: And I didn't realise that for quite a length of my career, where I, as I said to you before, I thought that it was them, not me. And when I started to realise the role I played and started to adapt, as you say, I suddenly went from being very frustrated to, I think, impactful. And hopefully that's what I shared today about my journey.

Ben O'Halloran: Absolutely. Yeah. I certainly took that away. One of the final things we'll wrap up with, you mentioned in your talk, think like a CFO, act like a CEO. Do you want to talk us through that a bit?

Brendan H: Well, CFOs are renowned for the fact that they know their numbers. They've got a huge amount of integrity. The work that they do comes with a gravitas and a credibility-

Ben O'Halloran: Absolutely.

Brendan H: ... and so that's really, really important. And that's one of the reasons you hold that role. But if you can then add the think like a CEO, so if you can add the storytelling, the inspiration, and actually taking the numbers from just being numbers, taking you on a journey and actually telling the story round those numbers, you get the benefit of both worlds. You get the credibility of being the CFO and you know all your numbers and knowing the detail, and you get the storytelling and inspiration of the CEO, and suddenly people want to come to you and ask for your advice or seek you out and even get you to present at a CPA Congress.

Ben O'Halloran: That's right. You've held CFO roles, you've held ... and now in CEO roles-

Brendan H: Yes, correct.

Ben O'Halloran: ... how have you found balancing between the two? Can you take one ... ? Can you take aspects of the CFO role and bring them into the CEO role, or are they different in that one's numbers and one's storytelling?

Brendan H: No, I'd probably say, it's ... I've always had a commercial approach to what I did. So I've always tried to think like the CFO and act like the CEO. So it probably has been fairly natural for me. But I guess what I would say there is that, again, why did I get the job I've got today? It's probably because of that credibility. It's because of my ability to understand numbers and put them together in a meaningful way, but I think what I've been able to add to that is that storytelling element.

So I said in my presentation, I'm now leading a business, for the first time. I've never lead a business before. It's in the waste industry. I've no experience in the waste industry. But I think I was able to demonstrate to my current employers, and at that time, future employer, that we use numbers to make really powerful decisions. And we take in some risk. And I talk in my presentation about our job

is to balance consequence and likelihood. You can't eliminate risk. And I think once you know that, and you embrace that, I think that's the when the power of you as the CFO, knowing your numbers, knowing that there is risk, how you're going to face into that, but charting the journey, charting the vision, charting the future, and taking us on that journey. I think that's when you've become truly powerful. And so I've had to use both, depending on the scenario. You can't be one or the other, I don't believe.

Ben O'Halloran: Yeah. Okay. You mentioned in your talk, going from a historian to a forecaster. I think that's part of that. You become a desirable person within the business, if you can do the work of others and sort of forecast what's coming, rather than doing a wrap up of months past, of quarters past.

Brendan H: The number of finance professionals that I speak to, Ben, who go, "I'm really frustrated in my job. I put all this analysis together and no one does anything with it." And I ask them to go back and have a look at what they're doing. Are they historians? Are they just telling me, as I showed in the presentation, just showing me a \$1 million increase or a 10% increase, which I can read on the slide. It's on the table there and let's hope we have some level of financial literacy at the most senior levels of our organisations. So you can read.

I think when we then added those other bits about why was ... what was driving the price increase or the variance, the positive variance? What were the implications? And how you could help, at the start of the month, change the future direction of the organisation. How, suddenly, you're now important to the general manager of operations or the CEO, because you're telling him or her at the start of the month, "We've got to get 5% more sales, or else we're not going to hit the number." He's got a chance, or she's got a chance, to go and influence that outcome today.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: Now you've become truly powerful.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: And as you say, people will come to you and seek you out. No I think ... I say in my presentation, Ben, you've got to practise. Okay. This doesn't come naturally. You've got to challenge yourself. And I say, start with talking about yourself.

Ben O'Halloran: Okay.

Brendan H: And start to tell a great story about yourself.

Ben O'Halloran: That should be easy, for most of us.

Brendan H: I hope so.

Ben O'Halloran: Yes.

Brendan H: If you can't tell a good story about yourself, God help you with the numbers.

Ben O'Halloran: That's right. If you could give our audience three to five tips about improving presentations, what would they be?

Brendan H: Well, I go through the five tips, my five tips. So first of all, you need to know yourself and your own style and what you're comfortable with. Secondly, you've got to understand who you're presenting to, the audience you're presenting to. And the fact is, they're going to bring different biases and perceptions and levels of understanding and knowledge and sometimes even motivation, to the presentation. Then you need to know what the purpose of your presentation is. Why are you standing up there in front of this audience or group of people?

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: Because that will also influence how you go about presenting. And then the fourth thing I say is, then go and take your own style, the audience who you're going to present to, and the purpose, and meld it all together.

Ben O'Halloran: Right.

Brendan H: And then, jazz it up. And I give the example of Simon McDowell, who I worked for at Coles-

Ben O'Halloran: Yes.

Brendan H: ... who was the guy who came up with the down, down hand and-

Ben O'Halloran: The big red hand.

Brendan H: The big red hand, yeah.

Ben O'Halloran: We're all familiar with that.

Brendan H: He would say to me, he'd always say, at the end of any presentation, is make sure you put jazz hands on it.

Ben O'Halloran: Okay.

Brendan H: So that's tip number five. Make it impactful.

Ben O'Halloran: Sure.

Brendan H: Jazz hands.

Ben O'Halloran: Okay. Those are five simple tips for our audience to take, to improve their presentations and get a yes from stakeholders-

Brendan H: Absolutely.

Ben O'Halloran: ... or influence their stakeholders. That's what it's all about. Brendan Hargreaves, CPA, I want to thank you for your time today. We've thoroughly enjoyed your presentation at CPA Congress in Melbourne. You'll be travelling next week to CPA Congress, Sydney.

Brendan H: Correct.

Ben O'Halloran: So all the best for that and thanks for joining us.

Brendan H: My pleasure, Ben. Thank you.

Ben O'Halloran: Thank you.

Outro: Thanks for listening to the CPA Australia podcast. To download the transcript and find more information on today's episode, visit www.cpaaustralia.com.au/podcast/30.