Commentary

Delivery of a speech is as important as its content

From Prof Haridimos Tsoukas, Warwick Business School, UK

OCTOBER 6, 2017

Sir, Theresa May’s physical struggle to get through her speech at the Conservative party’s conference was a reminder that even in a digital world, where we increasingly spend our lives, materiality matters. No matter how expertly the image is stage-managed, if the body does not co-operate, the speaker is at a loss.

It takes work to articulate ideas and make proclamations. When delivery is impeccable, the work involved — the subtle mind-body co-ordination, the management of rhythm, the control of the speaker’s intonation, the making of a stable infrastructure that enables delivery — is concealed. When delivery is problematic, the work is revealed through its deficiency.

Making a speech is a performance. Delivery is as important as content: it signifies more than what words mean. A cracking voice symbolises weak authority. A passionate, flawless delivery signals determination and control. Oratory is more than the powerful use of words. Delivery yields results. Can you imagine Martin Luther King’s speech “I have a dream” interrupted by coughing fits?

Mrs May’s unintended service was to remind us that uncertainty cannot be eliminated in a material world and that authority is always a precarious process to be accomplished. The weakness of the flesh may come to symbolise the fragility of the leader’s persuasiveness.

Prof Haridimos Tsoukas

Warwick Business School, UK

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2017.