



Commentary

Delivery of a speech is as important as its content

From Prof Haridimos Tsoukas, Warwick Business School, UK

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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

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