



## Should I wear the Cape or the Kevlar?

Are you ready for your audience's reaction to your message?



# Cape or Kevlar?

The IT Director stood on stage before hundreds of his branch managers; he had achieved so much since they had first met and he was excited to share his victories with them, and yet he was

only a few sentences into his presentation when he realised that something was wrong – very wrong.

He had arrived on stage to what could be best described as ripple of polite applause, and proudly delivered his opening line

*“I shouldn’t really be wearing a suit today”* (pause for effect) *“I should be wearing a Superman outfit”* (pause for applause).

The audience responded with freezing deathly silence; broken finally by a lone voice which grumbled from the depths of the crowd *“More like a Kevlar jacket!”*

He continued with his presentation which ended with an even smaller ripple of polite applause, and

his audience quickly put the information that they had just heard into their mental recycle bins and moved on.

He had joined the company just a year previously and had inherited a mess, the old systems had been lashed together during days of rapid expansion and both the head office and the branch systems were out of date and barely coping with the demands of current business never mind the huge growth that was confidently being predicted.

Since then he and his team had worked non stop to create a brand new system that would provide all of the functionality that he knew was absolutely essential right now, and was also capable of evolving with the company as it continued to grow.

It was not going to be a quick fix, and there would be significant challenges along the way, yet he was justifiably proud of their progress so far and had a thrilling picture of life in the not too distant future to share with his audience.

His job that day had been to create enthusiastic support for the next phase of the project and he clearly hadn't got it.

## So what went wrong?

If Superman had taken a moment to see his endeavours through the eyes and experiences of his audience he would have realised that their reality was very different from his.

In the branches the new system had caused massive disruption, and in its current early phase it offered less functionality than their old system, less flexibility than their old system, and worst of all the Help Line didn't help.

Somewhere, deep down, his audience knew that these early stages were bound to be difficult and pain now would bring them gain later, but the day to day reality was loss of control, grumbling staff and having to spend ("waste") more time each day to do the same jobs.

If our hero had just stayed as Clark Kent, if he had acknowledged their frustration and concerns, if he had thanked them for their hard work so far, it is much more likely that they would have been sympathetic to his message.


## How then do you know if you should you be wearing a Cape or Kevlar?

Consider the instant gut reaction that people have when they hear your name, where would the strength of this reaction put them on this table?

If you don't know find some honest critical friends from your intended audience (not "Yes" men) who will help you with a clear picture of what people are really thinking and feeling.

If we accept that we only succeed with the support and good will of the people in our organisations, it follows that there is little more important to the success or otherwise of a leader than managing the simple, unscientific, and totally unfair judgement that this table depicts.

Gut Reaction	Attitude
+ve	Raving Fan
	Loyal
Neutral	Indifferent
	Disaffected
-ve	Terrorist



## Key questions to consider while you write your speech

Find the leverage for your argument.

What can you offer that will be of massive benefit to them?

What are the consequences to them of not following your lead?

What will really impress them?

What are their hot buttons?

What bugs them and what gets them mad?

What do they value most?

What are they currently worried about?

Consider the current affairs and politics in your organisation,

What's the company culture like at the moment?

Who's playing politics and what are they doing?

Who are the heroes and who are the villains?

What major events have occurred recently and how were they perceived?

### Consider their attitude to the event

What are they expecting from you? – as opposed to -

What would they actually like from you?

Why have they come?

Are they here voluntarily or is attendance compulsory?

What do they already know, think or believe about your topic?

What do **they** think they need?

What do **you** think they need?

A little time invested in thoroughly researching the current experiences and attitudes of your audience, and then demonstrating that you understand their reality before you move forward, will create agreement and common ground that will become the foundations upon which you can build a compelling argument.

Remember that while the logical journey described by your presentation may be flawless it is often the emotional journey that goes with it that will ultimately define your success or otherwise.

Of course the real answer to the Cape or Kevlar question is - neither of them!

It appears to be the lot of great leaders that when there are problems they are ultimately responsible for them, and wearing Kevlar or more precisely the attitude that goes with it would indicate defensiveness and division. It's far better to appear undefended and then find a way to move forward together.

Conversely when there are massive successes the same great leaders give the credit to the people who have implemented their vision, thereby ensuring that they behave in the same way next time.

It's far better to award capes to others before you claim one for yourself.