

The Choreography of Presenting

Second Edition

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The Choreography of Presenting

The 7 Essential Abilities of Effective Presenters

Second Edition

Kendall Zoller

 CORWIN

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Zoller, Kendall, author.

Title: The choreography of presenting : the 7 essential abilities of effective presenters / Kendall Zoller.

Description: Second edition. | Thousand Oaks, California : Corwin, 2024. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023057351 | ISBN 9781071902349 (paperback ; acid-free paper) | ISBN 9781071902356 (e-pub) | ISBN 9781071902363 (e-pub) | ISBN 9781071902370 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Public speaking.

Classification: LCC PN4129.15 .Z65 2024 | DDC 808.5/1 — dc23/eng/20231229

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023057351>

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

24 25 26 27 28 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword

This second edition of *The Choreography of Presenting* catapults the work of experienced presenters to new heights and supports those developing their presentation understandings and skills to sound results, sometimes exceeding conventional standards for excellence.

I know Kendall as a gifted presenter. What I was not prepared for in this book was the ease in which he conversationally offers intricate aspects of his own presentation excellence, his “secrets” if you will. Kendall takes us beyond the usual with detailed steps, making his mastery, with some work on our part, accessible to all of us. The refinements on first edition material brings valuable nuances to light. Here I will address book sections that are new in this edition: Chapter 8: Presentation Structure, Chapter 9: The First 5 Minutes, and Chapter 10: Presenting Virtually. For a novice or sage, this is an invaluable book.

Chapter 8 reveals nuances in structure (i.e., the plan you develop for the presentation) and addresses what you want your presentation to look like, sound like, and teach. Information about openings, the first part of any plan, doesn’t appear until Chapter 9. Why? Isn’t this an important part of structure? Of course. It’s so important that Kendall advises it’s best developed only after the rest of the plan is designed. How you frame is half the game, suggests Kendall. Plan your opening only after you’ve designed the entire presentation, because what you want to occur will be aided or damaged by the first 5 minutes.

For me, his description of the first 5 minutes in Chapter 9 is worth the cost of the full book. I think it alone would make an excellent group study and practice chapter.

Take openings, for example. He accomplishes five outcomes often in 5 minutes. Perhaps the most important is connecting the topic to group member roles and experience. Group members are at ease and engaged, the room feels safe, and it is abundantly clear who is in charge, which voice he should use here, and which group member voices he will address.

This is more important than I thought. We speak through the role we're holding. As a father, I have one voice; as a brother, I have another voice. He may choose his professor voice, that of a co-learner, or that of someone new to the district. The group members present have many roles: teacher, department chair, union representative, curriculum committee member. Whom does he want to hear what he says? His aim is to be clear, strategic, and confident. What is their current understanding of the topic, he asks himself. What do they know? What do they need? And how do they feel about the day?

For me, as a techno peasant, Chapter 10: Presenting Virtually was a first-semester course on presenting with camera. However, even colleagues with extensive familiarity with media tell me they've received several useful ideas from this chapter.

We are assured that most of the facilitation and presentation moves we make have their virtual equivalents. We modify what we do because presenting to a camera is different than presenting to a live group.

Virtual participants see only our image and a small amount of background. There is not enough incoming information to form a complete picture congruent with all we see when in person. Therefore, Kendall says in Chapter 10,

We have to create a frontal image. We do this by placing the camera at our forehead level creating a face facing image—just like taking a good portrait photograph. This strategy is used in television and is most commonly recognized when watching news programs or any show where the host is sitting. If you pay attention, you can tell the height of the camera. This height creates a presence where rapport is attained and sustained. The microphone is at the camera height since that is where you are looking.

Pausing, he says, is the most important nonverbal skill. Yet a pause, on camera, can look like your internet connection froze. (The *Zits* cartoon strip once showed Zit in a virtual lesson, frozen, staring into space, hoping the camera would move from viewing him and the teacher wouldn't call on him because he wasn't sure how much longer he could hold his breath, and thinking it frozen, she would not call on him.)

So cue, or give an activity when you plan to pause. Kendall will sometimes take a leisurely sip of coffee during the pause or will announce an upcoming pause by explaining the process and say, "I am going to ask a question and then pause for 5 seconds before calling on three people

for their responses.” You then ask the question to the audience. It is not unusual for the presenter to be silent while participants reflect. Gestures, Kendall reports, are still important but must be made for the camera that is only going to see a small portion on either side of your face.

In sum, this is a book I plan to keep accessible near my desk.

Robert Garmston
Professor Emeritus California State University
Co-developer Adaptive Schools,
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Preface

Learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence.

—Abigail Adams

Learning is a social event, and effective presenters provide the social glue that binds groups together in the learning environment. Music and dance are cultural glues that bind people together. All cultures use dance as a way of connecting spiritually and emotionally and to transmit culture, story, and learning from one generation to the next; dance is the language of the soul. When music starts, you feel the beat. Dance steps flash through your mind; choices are made and the dance begins. Exhilarating, exciting, intimate—dance is the ultimate expression of nonverbal communication in humans. It gives us the social permission to be physically closer to a person than we might otherwise be in a casual or business conversation. Dance allows us the flexibility to either follow our partner or lead. Led by a skillful dancer, other dancers enter into a state of flow, a mental state that positive psychologist Csíkszentmihályi (2003) defines as an operation in which a person is fully immersed in what she is doing by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity. This book is about creating that flow during your presentations.

Dance can include two people, or it can include an entire room or even a stadium. Who among us has not experienced the energy of a live concert where thousands were engaged in dance? Now that is whole-room dancing! Rapport, group dynamics, and connectedness are through the roof in situations like these and together make for a very eventful and memorable experience.

You may be reading this book because you provide professional development to adult groups within your organization or to other organizations. You know the importance of being a subject matter expert. You also know that subject matter expertise is not enough if you want every professional

learning experience to be successful. How intrigued would you be if I told you that all effective presenters have in common specific dance steps they use to accelerate the development of rapport, positive group dynamics, and participant learning? What if, while reading this book, you discover that by using these skills you can dramatically increase your influence and effectiveness when teaching and presenting to adult groups? Would you be interested? Who would not say “Yes!” to that?

The choreography of presenting is about the choices we have made and can make to enhance the learning of participants when presenting to our peers, colleagues, and other adult groups. In the classic book *How to Make Meetings Work*, Doyle and Straus (1976) describe the presenter’s challenge as “a combination tap dance, shuffle, and tango to a syncopated rhythm produced by unpredictable humans” (p. 89). The presenter’s skills, knowledge, and abilities are the kindling that ignites participants’ passion for learning. At the core of this quote from Doyle and Strauss are fundamental beliefs we have about presenting and facilitating. One core belief is that each of us only has control over ourselves. Another is that each individual is unique in the ways they view the world and learn. With these two core beliefs, we are able to work from a conscious framework that, by being flexible, conscious, and strategic with the tools contained in this book, we can design and deliver presentations that target learning in everyone.

As we watch a well-choreographed dance, the seemingly effortless movements are fluid, graceful, and purposeful. The same can be said of an effective presentation. The session has just the right rhythm, cadence, and timing. Hours of practice, rehearsal, and skills are essential for each performance. Dance is a powerful metaphor for effective presenting because dance is about leading and following, building rapport and trust, sharing passions, and living in the moment.

I am not advocating that good presenters are formulaic, yet there is a formula. After all, there are specific steps to a tango, yet not all tangos look alike. It is here, in each step, that the deeper connection lives between the dancer and the audience. It happens in real time, and you adjust in real time according to the conditions, your state of mind, your intentions, and your goals. There is freedom to choose. The better the dance is understood and executed, the greater the experience is for everyone involved.

Like dancing, presenting has patterns, and you adjust to the changing patterns—sometimes leading, sometimes following. You have a plan and know the destination. The plan is the scope and sequence of the workshop. It may contain a PowerPoint presentation along with a participant

packet. Once you begin, however, constant microadjustments in your live performance are essential if you want the experience to be memorable for participants. This book is about seeing and learning the patterns of communication that effective presenters use. For many, these are patterns we have always looked at yet may have never actually seen or fully understood. In the following chapters we pull the curtain back to reveal the previously invisible structure of the choreography of presenting.

The tools and strategies described in this book provide the details of a micromodel of communication that can be applied to any presentation and with any audience. By employing these skills and strategies, you will enable participants in your sessions to experience positive group dynamics and to learn more, and more quickly, because you have created an optimum learning environment. Two elements that contribute to an optimum learning environment—what Caine and Caine (1994) call *relaxed alertness*—are emotional safety and cognitive challenge.

Whatever your definition of a good presenter is, this book is designed to challenge and expand it. It does not teach you tricks or tips for presenting. Nor does it teach you how to make a PowerPoint slide, use a laser pointer, or create attractive handouts. Rather, this book is about becoming more conscious, purposeful, intentional, and present in the moment when presenting or facilitating through the use of nonverbal patterns. This book also dives into planning your presentation. Plan with the audience in mind because it is their experience that is most important. When thinking about how you choose to present, consider a mindset where you are the most flexible and conscious when presenting. By being flexible and conscious, you impact your agility as you respond to the ways participants engage with the content. Done well, this maximizes learning.

All journeys have a destination, and I believe that choice lives within the journey. The more extensive your repertoire, the more options you have and the more successful you are as a presenter. The framework of the repertoire has multiple levels: the specific skills, their contexts (when they are effective, not effective, when to be proactive and reactive), patterns, and the ability to recognize and react to them. Navigating through the unpredictable while anticipating potential challenges to seek alternative paths is best facilitated when you have a set of tools that you can consciously access. The better you know these skills and their applications, the more likely your success will be.

When presenting to adults, your subject matter expertise is important; however, knowing how to present and how to react to the unpredictability of participants is more important in terms of making a difference in participant learning. If it is only about content and subject matter, why meet?

People can read the content on their own. So why do we meet in order to learn? Because learning is a social event; it is a conscious act whose level of achievement is directly proportional to the ardent diligence the learner brings. I believe the passion for learning is facilitated, nurtured, and developed by the dance that the skilled presenter engages in. It is the dance that creates and sustains relationship between participants and presenter and among participants. This complex and dynamically rich social intranet of learning is the dance, and the choreography determines its level of success.

Have you ever had an event in your professional life that resulted in a personal transformation so profound that your newly discovered frame of mind resulted in a new clarity? You can think of it as discovering a new universe right in front of you that you had always looked at yet never seen. My hunch is that each of us has at least one in our life. Here is a story about one of those events from my perspective.



First Contact

In January 1993, I was promoted to a science curriculum coordinator position for a large school district in California.

In that role, professional development, curriculum development, assessment, and standards emerged as focal points of responsibility. In February, the director of curriculum asked me to come to her office. With excitement beaming from her eyes and a welcome rhythm to her voice, Lynda told me I would be attending a 5-day session on nonverbal classroom management by a wonderful presenter. She went on about how fantastic the presenter was and that she was sending me so that I could bring the content back to the district to provide training to classroom teachers.

The idea of attending a 5-day session on nonverbal classroom management was not on my list of the 100 things I want to do before I die. After all, I thought with smug arrogance, I was the science coordinator and wanted to attend workshops on inquiry, on hands-on science, and learn real stuff about how our universe works. Besides, I grew up in Los Angeles in the 1970s and was familiar with Erhard Seminars Training, transcendental meditation, encounter groups, and body language. In fact, I even told my boss about these experiences and said, "Come on, I don't think learning about body language is going to be useful; it's all a cliché anyway. Besides, I grew up in L.A. and know all that." As I reflect

back now, I think how smug I was. I also realize now how encouraging, forward thinking, and wonderful Lynda was because that event changed everything.

So I anticipated this 5-day training with my customary dread and reluctance, despite reports that the presenter, Michael Grinder, was very good and that his work was sound. On a cool spring morning in March, I arrived at the training site and wondered how I would endure 5 days of this stuff. The session was to start at 8:30. As the start time grew near, sitting in the back row near the door, I grew more angry and frustrated, thinking, "This is 5 days I won't get back!"

Little did I know that a transformation in the way I thought about presenting, delivering presentations, teaching, and learning had begun. About 15 minutes before the session formally began, the presenter greeted each of us and moved about the room with deliberate moves. He moved like a dancer, effortlessly shifting his steps and becoming a colleague and peer when he came to greet us, instantly developing rapport with each of us. I say rapport, but at that time in my life I did not have a name for it or a way of describing it. By the end of the first hour, I knew something significant was happening. My reluctance shifted to keenness, and my resistance shifted to an embrace of the content that started the wonderful lifelong journey that continues to this day.

What made such a difference? It was not just the content. Yes, the content was solid and good quality, but initially I did not want it. Had I heard all those messages before? Of course! But it was the presenter's dance that made the most significant difference in my receptivity and openness to consider what he had to offer. And it was not that the presenter sang and danced. As Bennis and Biederman (1998) say in *Organizing Genius*, "One can sing and dance. Or one can create an environment in which singers and dancers flourish" (p. 70). In this workshop, I watched the presenter's song and dance, consciously unaware that he was also creating an environment in which we participants flourished and learned to sing and dance to the tune of classroom management.

As I sat in this workshop, I realized that my own internal resistance and skepticism ebbed, as did that of others in the room. Most important, I realized that the shift in my thinking, my attitude, and my participation was in response to the presenter's nonverbal moves. At the end of the first day, I had a glimpse of a great presenter leading a great workshop and I was beginning to see things in ways I never had before. I began

(Continued)

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to see the interplay of communication patterns between presenter and audience and the presenter's skillful ability to choreograph his steps to support our learning every step of the way.

The presenter created a learning environment in which we flourished because we felt as if we were his partners—being a partner is essential to constructing meaning. As he changed his steps, we changed with him. As we changed our steps, he changed with us. Ever respectful and entertaining, he kept a keen eye focused on our learning. That gifted presenter demonstrated what Doyle and Straus (1976) recognize as a challenge, the ability to do “a combination tap dance, shuffle, and tango to a syncopated rhythm produced by unpredictable humans” (p. 89). What the presenter did can be reduced to a single idea: he was respectful to the audience. The skill sets he mastered and demonstrated were the steps that make up the dance of the presenter. What does honoring an audience look, sound, and feel like? This book will lead you through the steps of this exquisite dance.

About This Book

In the chapters ahead, I explicitly describe how to plan, think, choreograph, and dance like a presenter. I am not talking about presenters who want to just get through the presentation and look good while doing it. Nor am I talking about presenters who merely talk to showcase their expertise. Effective presenting, like dancing, doesn't just appear in our midst. It has to be planned and adjusted in the moment—a challenge that runs counter to the powerful urge for some to simply rely on their content expertise or on the coattails of their own charisma. Given that presenters are experts in their field does not necessarily make them experts at presenting. Leo Tolstoy famously contended, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” Effective presenters are all alike, and all ineffective presenters are ineffective in their own way.

This book unpacks and describes the skills that effective presenters have in common. When used effectively, these skills can increase the good and decrease, if not eliminate, the negative impact of unpredictable situations and disruptive behaviors found in all settings where people come together to learn and to conduct business. By learning and practicing these skills, you will become more conscious of the profound influence these patterns have on participant learning, rapport, and relationship.

When used congruently and appropriately, these skills can significantly enhance the delivery of presentations.

This book describes how to think like a presenter—leading to proficiency in declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge. Effective presenters know what to do, how to do it, and, most important, when and if to do it. The what, when, and how of nonverbal and verbal patterns are dependent on specific content and contextual knowledge as well as a high level of proficiency at understanding and influencing group dynamics.

The focus on the similarities among all effective presenters is framed in the 7 Essential Abilities of Effective Presenters, which incorporate both verbal and nonverbal patterns of communication and can be learned and mastered in order to effectively address the wide range of behaviors that participants display.

Humans are unpredictable; therefore, it is unlikely that a presenter can consistently predict what participants are going to say or how they are going to respond or react to a given situation. What is predictable, however, like a changing dance step, is that there is a menu of plausible participant behaviors that can positively or negatively influence a presentation. Some negative behaviors may include asking many questions, side-talking with a neighbor, processing out loud, sending text messages, reading e-mail, or playing Sudoku. The gifted presenter, adept in the skills described in this book, has a vast repertoire of strategies that effectively engage participants, increasing the likelihood of participation and interaction while allowing flexibility during those unpredictable moments.

To enhance your learning while reading this book, embrace a model from the arts. Artists practice, and practice usually entails a focus on individual skills and moves. Next, they rehearse. Rehearsal is a safe learning environment in which performers put their skills to test in real-life simulations. After many practices and rehearsals comes the performance. The performance is your presentation. The work you do in this book, in the practice sessions and rehearsals, will make a difference in the quality of your presentations and in the learning of those who attend. Engaging in deliberate and focused practice and rehearsals contributes to a well-executed performance. By learning and practicing these skills, you will become more conscious of the profound influence that these communication patterns have on participant learning, rapport, and receptivity. When used congruently and appropriately, these skills will significantly enhance the delivery of your next presentation by elevating your craftsmanship and providing you with a toolbox for navigating the unexpected.

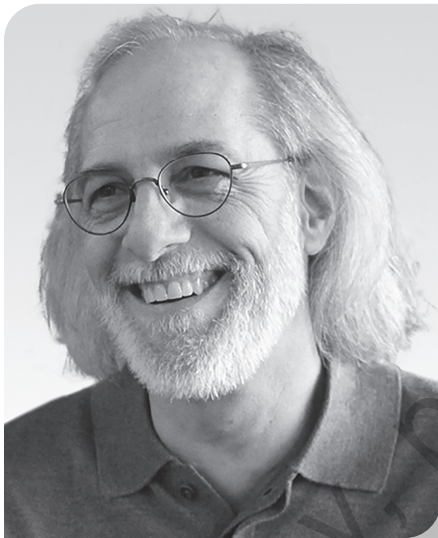
Three new chapters appear in this edition: Presentation Structure, The First 5 Minutes, and Presenting Virtually. Each chapter is a result of two factors: (1) a decade of new research on communication accompanied by unprecedented social unrest and (2) the impact of a pandemic on how to communicate virtually.

Chapter 8: Presentation Structure is the result of many participants over the decades asking me how I plan. The ideas for this chapter came about during COVID and it was during that time that the planning document at the end of Chapter 8 was created. In brief, it is my brain on planning. The planning document begins with the intel a presenter gathers about the audience prior to the event. It then takes you through the choices a presenter makes about their mindset and identity. What follows is a frame for planning the content and it ends with the creation of an opening statement. This chapter is useful for presenters who wish to refine their skills in planning so they can make an impact on the audience that is spontaneous and memorable.

Chapter 9: The First 5 Minutes offers a way of thinking about what effective presenters do in the first 5 minutes that impacts credibility and group dynamics. On the surface it may look like a checklist, which it can be. However, the deeper meaning is found by unpacking the individual skills and identifying how each skill, when deliberately choreographed, results in a series of moves that frame the participant's experience in a positive and relevant context ready to learn.

Chapter 10: Presenting Virtually is exactly as titled. This chapter situates the nonverbal skills in the virtual environment. It explains what they look like and how to use them so as to be more impactful in the initially challenging virtual environment. I believe virtual engagements are here to stay, and rightly so. It is therefore on you to embrace the new niche and master the skills that enhance the virtual world so people look forward to it and are surprised at the positive impacts that come about by effectively presenting virtually.

About the Author



Kendall Zoller, EdD, is a global consultant, an author, educator, and researcher. His work in communicative intelligence, presentation and facilitation skills, storytelling, leadership, coaching, and adaptive schools has taken him to 23 countries in person and 70 countries virtually, and hundreds of U.S. and international schools and districts globally. He is co-author of *HeartSpace* (2021),

Voices Leading From the Ecotone (2019), and *The Choreography of Presenting: The 7 Essential Abilities of Effective Presenters* (2010). Kendall is president of Sierra Training Associates and graduate faculty at California State University, Dominguez Hills. With over 70 publications, he has authored more than four dozen reviewed book chapters and journal articles on topics of communication, community, and leadership for educators and corporations. Kendall has a doctorate in educational leadership and a master's degree in educational management. He can be reached at kvzoller@sierra-training.com

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Introduction to the 7 Essential Abilities of Effective Presenters

The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it.

—Edward R. Murrow

All effective presenters establish credibility; build and sustain rapport; read the group; balance task, process, and group development; listen to and acknowledge participants; respond appropriately; and recover with grace. Combined, these abilities make up the cornerstone necessary to dance masterfully. Within each of these 7 abilities are five to eight specific skills and moves. Consequently, more than 50 discrete skills are described in the chapters that follow. This book is organized around the 7 Essential Abilities, each of which corresponds to a particular chapter.

Essential Ability 1: Establish Credibility

This lays the foundation for participants to attribute intelligence, competence, confidence, and expertise to the presenter. Credibility is a presenter characteristic perceived and assigned by the group. The specific skills associated with credibility include voice tone, use of the still gesture, credible stance, and abdominal breathing patterns.¹

7 Essential Abilities of Effective Presenters

- Establish credibility
- Build and sustain rapport
- Read the group
- Balance task, process, and group development
- Listen to and acknowledge participants
- Respond appropriately
- Recover with grace

Essential Ability 2: Build and Sustain Rapport

This involves strategies and moves that create a short-term psychological state in which the lines of communication are wide open. When rapport is high, participants are cognitively responsive and therefore receptive to considering new understandings that challenge their current models of knowing. Knowing how to establish rapport, break rapport, and reestablish rapport are critical skills in the learning environment that support student thinking and problem solving.²

Essential Ability 3: Read the Group

This entails recognizing, processing, and responding to participants' nonverbal patterns. The presenter reads the group to anticipate their learning needs as well as their psychological and physiological needs. By reading the nonverbal behaviors of participants, an effective presenter can anticipate resistance, recognize receptivity, and choreograph facilitation moves that support positive group dynamics.

Essential Ability 4: Balance Task, Process, and Group Development

This involves an interaction between content and the learning outcomes (task), the protocols used to engage participants in the content (process), and relationship by always working on developing the quality of the group to ensure participants feel known, loved, and safe (group development). Effectively balancing the three ensures acquiring a tangible outcome while promoting maximum learning and optimal participation in the time available.

Essential Ability 5: Listen to and Acknowledge Participants

This involves deliberate steps in a delicate dance. Adults offer several challenges in learning environments, one of which is the willingness to reveal what they know and don't know as well as what they are learning. Effective listening requires Ability 2 (Build and Sustain Rapport) as well as specific voice, eye, gesture, and stance patterns to give participants the perception of being sincerely listened to and acknowledged. Participant engagement and learning depend on being understood and having the sense of feeling safe enough to divulge their thinking to the group.

Essential Ability 6: Respond Appropriately

This is dependent on the effective implementation of the skills related to Ability 5. When a person feels listened to and acknowledged, the effective presenter can then deliver an appropriate response. Responding appropriately requires evaluating, synthesizing, and delivering a congruent verbal and nonverbal message. It is about making the person and the group *right*, meaning that participants feel safe to be wrong, to reveal learning, and to reveal what they do not know to others.

Essential Ability 7: Recover With Grace

This involves the ability to recognize when the participants stop thinking and you have lost group rapport or group attention, or perhaps even just lost your place. Graceful nonverbal moves ensure that the group will stay present, focused, and engaged. This intriguing ability includes the nonverbal moves associated with changing location, pausing, gestures of location, and stance.



Reflection: Exploring the 7 Essential Abilities

To more effectively engage in the 7 Essential Abilities, take some time to complete the following reflection.

Step 1: Begin by reading the first ability again. Then, to surface your interpretation, paraphrase it in your own words.

Step 2: Think of a situation you observed in which you noticed an effective presenter using that ability.

Step 3: Repeat Steps 1 and 2 for each of the 7 Essential Abilities.

The patterns within the 7 Essential Abilities are ubiquitous in communication; people use them constantly and seamlessly at an unconscious or habitual level. By reading this book, you may experience a new consciousness in your own patterns—patterns that up until now you have always engaged in but perhaps never recognized. The gift of consciousness is found not only in recognizing the patterns but also in developing your perceptual acuity to recognize the influence these patterns have on your communication and how improved your relationships will become. Patterns of nonverbal communication are used by everyone and unconsciously understood by most. The enculturation of nonverbal patterns in communication is tacit in nature, and only a few written texts of rules and descriptors exist. Michael Grinder, a colleague, mentor, and friend, has authored several useful nonacademic books defining these patterns, including *ENVoY: Your Personal Guide to Classroom Management* (1993) for teachers and *The Elusive Obvious* (2008). Readers familiar with Grinder will recognize the parallel and interweaving ideas between his work and the 7 Essential Abilities. For the academically inclined, the most complete academic text on nonverbal patterns of communication within and across cultures is the three-volume magnum opus *Nonverbal Communication Across Disciplines*, by the linguist Poyatos (2002a, 2002b, 2002c).

You may discover some intriguing connections between the information in this book and things you already know. One is how intertwined the 7 Essential Abilities are with Gardner's (1985) model of interpersonal intelligence. This connection is made even stronger in the model of nonverbal communicative intelligence (Zoller, 2008), in which critical thinking, problem solving, physiology, neurology, and metabolism are all interconnected and interdependent in communication. Another significant connection is found in Goleman's (2006) *Social Intelligence*. For Goleman, social intelligence is rooted in empathy and rapport, both of which are expressly dependent on nonverbal cues.

As you read this book, the hope is that many discoveries emerge for you through the practices and rehearsals on your way to using your new learning in future presentations. A hunch is that the value in learning will come from knowing what the skills are, why they are important, how to do them, and what their potential benefits are. So let your own dance begin.