

The Power of Clear Explanations

Friday, March 15th, 2013

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity. Oliver Wendell Holmes

If you haven't seen it, I suggest you watch Joe Smith's four and a half-minute explanation of how to use a paper towel. His simple explanation changed my life.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FMBSblpcrc>

What makes Mr. Smith's explanation so effective?

There are at least four strategies Mr. Smith uses to make sure we know exactly what he is describing. If we apply his strategies to our own explanations, I'm convinced we can be much clearer as teachers, instructional coaches, or presenters.

Why: How to use a paper towel is not that sexy of a topic, but in just a few words, Joe gets our attention and explains why we should care about what he's describing. One paper towel per person per day would save 571,230,000 pounds of paper in a year. Wow. Even if I'm not that concerned about the environment, I would find it hard to resist those numbers. If nothing else, Joe has captured my attention at the start.

Simple: Smith doesn't give us a lot of extra information. In fact, his talk is built around two words: shake and fold. By telling us only what we have to know, he makes it extra easy for us to learn and remember what he is explaining.

Modeled: Mr. Smith shows us several times how to do this. He even sets up a little sink on the stage so that we can see exactly what to do. Some of the viewers the TED website give him grief for using too many paper towels during his explanation, but I think he does exactly what needs to be done. He makes sure we get it by overdoing it. Too often modeling is cut too short and people are left a little confused. Joe leaves no doubt in our mind how to do what he's describing.

And, for the record, I've already saved dozens of pieces of paper thanks to his explanation, so I've made back the few he used up modeling.

Memorable. Smith helps us remember his explanation in simple ways: getting the crowd shouting out "shake and fold," displaying a sense of humor, connecting the twelve shakes to twelve to the twelve

apostles, twelve zodiac signs and so forth. After less than five minutes, he makes it almost impossible for us to forget what he has to say.

These are simple strategies, but they are powerful. If we (a) explain why, (b) keep our explanations simple, (c) model, model, model, and (d) make our talk memorable, more people, (children and adults), will remember what we say. Our explanations might just change people's lives.

Joe Smith changed mine.