

# 29 Things I have learnt as a TEDMED SpeakerCoach



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I have had the privilege of coaching at TEDMED since 2014. TEDMED is part of the TED family and follows the TED principles and practices, above all, the key underlying principle of showcasing “Ideas Worth Spreading”. TEDMED talks and speakers are all focused on the scientific, medical and health sectors.

TEDMED speakers are either leaders in their field or pioneers creating entirely new fields. Adding to the wide variety of tenured professors, doctors, surgeons, scientists and entrepreneurs who speak at TEDMED, the U.S. Army Surgeon General (a lady who broke two barriers by being the first woman and the first nurse to hold that position) spoke at #TEDMED2014 and the U.S. Surgeon General at #TEDMED2015.

The TEDMED program is curated by the TEDMED Team and a distinguished multidisciplinary board of experts representing a variety of fields and backgrounds ([learn more](#)). And, the science behind the talks that ultimately make the stage is vetted by their [research scholars](#).

You can learn about TEDMED's editorial process [here](#).

Topics range widely and are carefully curated into categories under a single overarching conference theme. In 2014 it was “Unlocking imagination...”, in 2015 it was “Breaking through...” and in 2016 it was “What if...”.

Delegates are high profile people too. You could find yourself sitting down next to a professor, a director of public health, the head of a hospital, an industry leader or a leading surgeon.

Here's my list for now...

## **About TEDMED**

1. **Global Reach.** Adding to the pressure on the speakers of being filmed talking without notes to a large, well informed audience, TEDMED is live streamed to over 100+ countries each year.
2. **You're Working With Professionals.** The TEDMED and TED backstage, editing, filming and production teams are as good as you can get. But it's far more than just the work during that week - the conference organisation, content creation administration, speaker selection, speaker vetting, the post production work - and everything else that I don't even know about - are year round activities.
3. **"A Grade" Health Sector Networking.** The networking possibilities for those who attend and speak at a TEDMED conference are fantastic. Everybody is worth talking to and the range and variety of events on offer mean that you meet people informally throughout the conference. The stunning La Quinta resort in Palm Springs, California is a great conference venue for a number of reasons, not least because everybody stays on-site and together for the whole conference.
4. **Same, But Not The Same.** There is no such thing as a standard TEDMED/TED style speech - although there are common ingredients and principles. If you watch TEDMED.com

or TED.com for a while you will soon see that there really are no rules... apart from the basic principles of:

- no selling
- the telling of vivid and memorable stories - often personal ones
- speakers speak without notes
- the VERY limited use of Powerpoint and, if used, not the dull slides of the corporate world
- self-effacing humour is welcomed and potent
- being human and likeable is key to successful talks

5. **Shared Interests.** TEDMED's speakers and audience are passionate and committed to actively contributing to shaping a healthier world. TEDMED is about the power of ideas specific to health and medicine.

### **For a TEDMED Speaker**

6. **You Must Have Something to Say.** In the words of TED - "ideas worth spreading". Aka something worth listening to. By the time you are confirmed as a TEDMED speaker this tick will have been crossed. But it's a great discipline for any communication.
7. **Global and Timeless.** TEDMED style talks are timeless and globally relevant. They are not designed to be valid only for this year or only for the United States. TEDMED is live streamed to over 100+ countries annually and it's impossible to quantify their global impact in terms of the adoption of new ideas or better practices.

8. **Geeks Need to De-Geek.** TEDMED talks are delivered by experts but they need to be accessible and relevant on a retail level as well as having the calibre and the credibility expected by other experts in the health, science or medical fields.
9. **The Red Dot is the Scene of Much Bravery.** There can be professional risk as well as profit from speaking at TEDMED. Some speakers are incredibly brave and challenge established wisdom and, on occasion, an entire industry or profession.
10. **Some TEDMED Speakers Have NEVER Spoken in Public Before.** Some TEDMED speakers are experienced and proficient speakers and have spoken to large audiences from a stage before and hardly any are professional speakers. But for some, this is the first time they have EVER spoken in public. Wow!
11. **Stories Sell.** Personal stories have impact. They stir up emotion - but they should not necessarily be “emotional”. Storytelling helps make your message sticky and accessible to medical practitioners anywhere in the world - as well as being understandable and relevant to non-science/non-geek policy makers, legislators and patients.
12. **Talk, Don't Act.** It's your voice that does the talking. It's a talk delivered on a stage - not a play. Staying within the famous red dot is important - moving about distracts from your message. Your words, your story and your delivery should be able to do everything required.
13. **Casual is Comfy.** Casual clothing is normal at TEDMED and speakers generally choose well - it helps to wear comfortable clothing. Wearing comfortable clothes and losing the corporate

uniform helps speakers calm down and be themselves.

14. **One Point is Enough.** Make one point, maximum three - but often just one will do! I constantly tell my political and corporate clients that they should focus, be precise and cut the waffle - that they should “make points, not noise”. You are not downloading everything you know. Any audience struggles to remember more than 3 points. More than three points will muddle your message and probably be boring too - so concentrate on three points maximum and deliver them amazingly well.
  
15. **Pretend You Have Eye Contact. But...** You can't always see from the stage. In 2014, TEDMED was at the Kennedy Centre in Washington, D.C. where the lights are intense. The audience is hardly visible from the stage and the speakers speak blindly into the lights. But the audience need to see you looking at them. Now, with TEDMED in Palm Springs, you can see the first few rows from the stage. I have had speakers who want to be able to see me when they are on stage and others who want me in the room but invisible. This is a very personal thing - but a key question for you as a speaker. Should you have spouses, family members or friends visible to you in the audience? The question is - will they distract or encourage you? Your decision should be final - it's your gig.
  
16. **There is Fluency, Genius and Urgency in Now.** There is nothing like NOW for coaching. TEDMED speakers generally schedule speaker coaching slots in advance - but some suddenly decide they want coaching as soon as they see you arrive. That's fine too - we just grab a free coaching room and off we go! Then another speaker grabs you as that speaker leaves and off we go again. The pace is crazy and the adrenalin is pumping - but it works. There is no weakness or indignity in putting up your hand

and saying - "I need time with a speaker coach." Google's Eric Schmidt said "Everyone needs a coach!" Why not you?

17. **Take The Coaching.** Even the most experienced speaker can learn from a speaker coach. At TEDMED2015, I coached someone who has been on stage professionally for over 20 years and who was very sceptical about the benefits of speaker coaching. She ended up taking a coaching slot. After her talk (aimed at helping caregivers cope with patients suffering from a debilitating and widespread condition) we headed to the bar. We met a mischievous conference veteran who had heard of her initial scepticism and watched the talk .... and then challenged her - in front of me!! - to list what she had learnt from the coaching. She instantly ticked off four points on her fingers that we had tweaked. Even a 5% improvement is noticeable - and everybody can improve with coaching.
18. **Less Is More.** A talk is not a thesis. You are not there to download all you know. You can say a lot in a very limited period of time if you work on your content. TEDMED talks are limited in time - the maximum time being 18 minutes. Most are only 3, 5, 8, 12 or 15 minutes long. I am a TED/TEDMED geek and I still dither about watching an 18 minute talk. Easily digestible and accessible talks are best - this means being brief, focusing on a core message and delivering it really well.
19. **You Need To Put The Work In.** There is no shortcut to being ready for the red dot. There is no silver bullet. Giving a good talk means putting in a lot of time and effort. You can't outsource or delegate this. You are alone on the stage when you speak in public and your performance will be related to the work you put into it.

## For a TEDMED coach

20. **Coaching Time is Very Short.** Tweaking the delivery of a speech while coaching someone for TEDMED is comparable to fine tuning a racing car. The speech and the speaker are over 95% there. They have (almost always) worked hard on their speech and their delivery for months. But in a very short period of time you have to help them do one or more (or all) of the following:
- optimise their timing
  - put some magic in their introduction
  - focus them on the key messages and lines
  - calm and bolster their nerves or get their heads in the right place
  - or sort something else that came in the room with them that's messing with their head
21. **Outcomes Are Everything - Time Taken Is Irrelevant.** One of the biggest surprises for me as a SpeakerCoach at TEDMED was discovering just how much you can impact a speaker and a talk in very little time when both you and the speaker are completely focused on the same outcome. The stunning beauty of coaching at TEDMED is that it's not about how much time you spend coaching people - it's what you achieve for them. This is so refreshingly different from the business world of authorisation forms and billable hours! I guess it's a little like successful surgery (or a plumber stopping a massive leak) - as long as your problem is fixed, it doesn't matter how long it takes. It's one of the reasons I prefer retainers to bill-justifying clock-watching.
22. **You Better Know Your Stuff.** As a TEDMED SpeakerCoach, you never know who is coming in the room and, more importantly, what state they are in, how polished and finalised



their talk is and, above all, what they need from you. Often they don't either. This is not a job that you can predict, prepare for or brush up for on the night before. There is no speaker coaching course or YouTube channel that could possibly prepare you to successfully coach so many people, one after another, from a standing start in such short time slots. I have nearly 25 years and 25 000 hours of speaker coaching experience and my experience is often still tested, pushed and challenged with TEDMED speakers. They all have one thing in common - they all need bespoke, effective - and instant - coaching. There are no short cuts or standardised, 'cookie cutter' approaches. When I am working at TEDMED I need to be "in the zone" and kicking the whole time.

23. **It is Hugely Rewarding.** Although it is incredibly demanding, working for TEDMED is massive for me. Watching speakers get standing ovations the same day or the day after you have worked with them is obviously immense. But working with so many speakers on communicating ideas around the world that could improve, or save, the lives of hundreds of thousands of people or more is off the scale. What better job can there be?

24. **Delivery On The Stage With The RED Dot is My Job.** The beauty of coaching at TEDMED is the speeches are agreed and finalised with the TEDMED. In comparison to much of my work which can range from big picture strategy coaching to storytelling coaching to speech writing and speaker coaching, speaker coaching at TEDMED is 100% focused on the delivery - what I call "Stagecraft". It is fantastic to be able to focus on delivery for a week.

25. **Head, Mouth, Body.** Getting the speakers in the right head space is a big deal and key to the coaching. Wimbledon winner

Pat Cash's tennis coach, Ian Barclay, coached me as a tennis coach many years ago. He told me that coaching beginners is 95% technique and 5% head but the ratio tilts as they become more accomplished and by the time they get to Wimbledon it is over 95% head. The TED and TEDMED stages are the Wimbledon finals of the speaking world and the same ratios apply. TEDMED speakers are already leaders, experts and revolutionaries in their field. Our job is to get their heads in the right place, push their delivery and their body language from good to great and send them out on the Red Dot "in the zone" and kicking.

26. **The Head Rules.** You never know where the speaker's head is. Some speakers need calming, some need pulling off the ceiling, some need livening up, some need to stop acting and focus on speaking, Some just need an extra 5%. Some need more. Some need pushing to keep to their strictly enforced time limits and every now and then someone needs slapping out of their complacency. As a TEDMED speaker coach you need to be calm, decisive, confident - and right. Every time.
27. **Direct, clear, fix-focused coaching counts.** Some coaches have a standard, all-purpose "antibiotic" that is supposed to be a cure-all. Some coaches feel the need to explain the thinking and the science behind their advice. Some coaches give what is known as a "shit-sandwich" with a bit of praise on either side of the negative feedback. I have never been good at ANY of these. Least of all when coaching time is short and the speaker could be on the stage within hours. TEDMED speaker coaching thankfully suits my direct "style" - focusing on what the speaker needs to change. End of. No need to confuse their heads with stuff they are doing right or muddle their heads with unnecessary science. Just focus on a bespoke, memorable fix for

them. However....

28. **Experts, leaders and revolutionaries are still vulnerable.**

The challenge for any coach in any discipline is to challenge and push people as far as you can to get the best out of them - without hurting or breaking them. The extra challenge of being a SpeakerCoach at TEDMED is that you hardly ever know the people you are coaching and the first time you meet them is usually when they walk into the coaching room. You have a tiny window to push these people from good or very good to great. TEDMED SpeakerCoaching is hugely draining because it is a massive responsibility which often demands many different facets of my technical experience - plus every ounce of human and emotional understanding I can beg, borrow or steal.

29. **It's All About The Speaker** A SpeakerCoach is not a restricted term or trade. Anyone can call themselves a SpeakerCoach. I often hear about new or insecure speaker coaches starting coaching sessions with self-indulgent bio bragging. This just chews up billable hours and is of no use to the speaker. TEDMED SpeakerCoaching is all about the speaker, their delivery and you had better know what you are doing. You get very little time together and you need to make a tangible, positive difference fast. I have been doing what I do for nearly 25 years and I sometimes have to stretch and use every bit of my experience to diagnose AND fix an issue or to elevate a speaker or a talk to the next level in the short time we have together. The confidence (and the authority) of over 25000 hours of coaching also helps me to say "No - you're not saying that!" to a speaker who wants to rewrite the script at the last minute or say something that would distract from the message.

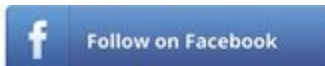
*You can watch TEDMED talks, find out more about TEDMED and register for the next TEDMED conference at [TEDMED.com](http://TEDMED.com). Follow them on Twitter too! @TEDMED.*

*Based in the UK, I have been helping business and political clients with their strategy, storytelling and public speaking for nearly 25 years. My clients include UK politicians and businesses and business leaders in the United States, Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia - you can read more about them [here](#) and the type of work I do [here](#).*

*I have been coaching at TEDMED since 2014 and have coached over 90 TEDMED speakers. Some of their talks have been showcased on TED and together these talks have already been viewed millions of times.*

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