**Motivational Mondays interview:**

**Chris Scheeren – *Airing* 04.19.2021**

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:02] Chris Scheeren is someone who knows a thing or two about confidence.

For the last 20 years, he’s been helping people unleash their presentation skills, speak with confidence and command attention.

He’s trained over half a million participants across the globe, including Fortune 500 companies like Microsoft, Walmart, and the U.S. Army.

And today, he’s sharing the secrets behind what it truly takes to give the best presentation of your life.

Chris, what a pleasure to have you here.

**Chris Scheeren** [00:00:29] Thank you Max, I’ve been looking forward to it, we’re going to have a good time today—looking forward to it.

**Max Irzhak** [00:00:34] I’d like to explore some common situations that derail our presentations and how to get back on track when they occur.

So, before the presentation even begins we start sweating, we can feel our hearts racing, sometimes people get nervous to the point where they feel like they actually can’t breathe.

How do you deal with that when your body goes into panic mode right before you step out there?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:00:59] Man, you just made me nervous. I just became acutely aware we’re recording. I need to dry my hands off. So before the presentation starts, before we even deal with any of the physicality, one of the things I like to really stress with our participants is we’re not going to memorize presentations. Because when we’re memorizing verbatim, we reveal it with our eyes. Every time we have to transition, we look up to the right, and we sound like a fourth grader trying to do the preamble to the Constitution in Social Studies.

But, I do want to know my first 30 seconds to a minute just stone-cold yank me out of bed at two in the morning and boom. You’re getting the first 30 seconds of this presentation, I've done it a million times. So think about any kind of sport, right. Like I grew up playing basketball. You come out of the tunnel for the jumpoff, your heart is hammering, you’re nervous, you’re amped up, right? Before the handball match starts—you’re a little nervous. Am i going to win? Am i going to play well? Here’s what I want to do today. You get about 30 seconds into that game or that performance, what do you do? You just play. Right? We just play. You don’t think about being on the court in the second quarter. Now maybe the last 30 seconds, the score is tied. So same thing with the presentation… if we can get through that first 30 to 60 seconds with some confidence, after that, man, we’re just talking.

Another thing that really helps in that intro? Do something different and better. Get a laugh, get a chuckle, get an emotion, get your audience to react somehow some way—and that’s another long course for another day—but it’s like Gladiator right “win the crowd, win your freedom”. So you get that connection in the first thirty sixty seconds… Now we’re all friends. Now we’re just friends who are talking—and who’s nervous chatting with their friends. So that helps.

From a physiological standpoint. Yeah, deep breath. I had to make a clarification to my materials. Always said “take a deep breath right before you launch”, and now in parentheses it says “preferably off mic” as we had that go poorly. “Oooof I’m really nervous”—okay, that’s not a great intro.

So deep breath, off mic. Don’t start until you’re ready. I'll get people where it's their turn to present, so they’re walking to the front of the room, and like you said palms sweaty, heart hammering, little breathy. And as they’re walking to the front of the room, no moment to collect, to drop anchor—just start talking before they’ve even turned and faced the audience. So what happens here? Object in motion tends to stay in motion. You deliver your first sentence moving, you’re not going to stop moving until the nerves settle which could be minutes, right? So now you’re a pinball, you’re distracting. So to calm those nerves, deep deep breath, when i get to the front of the room im going to drop anchor, lock both feet in, chin up (when we’re nervous our chin drops 15 to 20 degrees, tightens my throat, makes me breathy—and it physically looks like we’re not confident). Fake it til you make it. If we look confident, you know shoulders up, head up, big smile, eyes bright, and boom! Nail that first 30 seconds with projections, and if you do that, it’s going to go fine. It really is. You’ll get through the nerves, but it’s just getting the first 30 seconds out.

**Max Irzhak** [00:04:27] Situation number two. Everything is going well and then you stumble in your speech—you mess up a word, forget a line, and your confidence level tanks.

How do you reassemble yourself to get back on track?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:04:42] Yeah, i think that’s all mindset again, right? We don’t have to be perfect. In fact, it’s a good thing to be imperfect. I’ve even read of famous speakers from like the eighties that built in one stumble into their presentation on purpose to become more natural and relatable. Fortunately for me, I come across those moments organically so it’s much easier, I don't have to script the fumbles. But it really is mindset in that if you are trying to be perfect and you lack confidence, and you’re afraid of your audience and the people you’re in there with—yeah a mistake is going to speed up the heart rate, it’s going to turn up the clock, it’s going to be in your head while you’re thinking of the next thing. You ever done that? Where you’re thinking about something else and you try to answer a question… you can’t do it. So it really is just laugh at yourself a little—we don’t want to trash ourselves, we respect the line. But again, some of my favorite moments at a presentation are the mistakes, right? The joke that doesn’t land. So great, have some fun, make fun of yourself you know. It’s okay, and people are rooting for you—unless they’re just bizarre sadists. Nobody wants you to fail. Ever been to a comedy club where the comedian bombs? It’s the worst feeling in the world—you just want to crawl under the table. People want you to succeed; nobody expects perfection. Laugh, have some fun, your audience will laugh with you, they’ll smile back. And just let it rip. It’s not life or death.

**Max Irzhak** [00:06:25] One thing you told me when we first met is that it all comes down to reframing the mindset.

You said “it’s not that you *have* to present, it’s that you “get to” present”.

Can you tell us how making that *little* mental shift can completely change how people approach a presentation?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:06:42] Man, that’s a really good way to phrase it “completely change your presentation effectiveness”. It absolutely starts with the mindset. One of the silly rules I'll have in one of my more intimate sessions where we’re doing coaching training, usually 12 or 15 people in a classroom is you are not allowed to say anything negative about your presentation skills before you start to present. It is a natural human defense mechanism, right? “Well i haven’t really prepared as much as i’d like to, but let’s see how it goes.” So what we’re trying to do here is soften the room, lower the bar of expectations. But what we’re actually doing is putting ourselves in a negative mindset, and we’re pre-training the audience to not value what we have to say. It’s just the wrong mindset. So we’ll even start off a lot of sessions with yeah you don’t have to present, you get to. Every single time you get to open your mouth it is an opportunity, right? It’s an opportunity to amplify our credibility, it’s an opportunity to inspire, it’s an opportunity to drive results we’re looking for. And selfishly, it is an opportunity to shine.

When I have people in professions that are like “Well, I don't present much.” Awesome, so be really good at it. Be the financial analyst that people can’t wait to hear. You’re going to stand out, you’re going to be a superstar. And just all these doors and opportunities that open when we present ourselves effectively—it's truly amazing the possibilities that open. So yeah, how exciting is that? How often do we get that opportunity to put our best foot forward and go get what we want, right? So yes, it is 100% mental, i’ve never met a good presenter who says “i’ll see what happens here”... it just doesn't work that way.

**Max Irzhak** [00:08:38] One of the things that you said right before this that really grabbed my attention was “we use these defense mechanisms to lower the bar to soften the room”. One of the quickest ways to lose credibility, that unfortunately a lot of people do, is starting sentences with “I think”. It’s so deadly, and it’s such a… it’s almost like we teach people to not use “um” and we really focus on that in school, but “I think” is so persistent.

**Chris Scheeren** [00:09:07] It’s a way of hedging, it’s a way of trying to soften and not come across too strong, or to deflect potential judgement or disagreement. So one of the things that we’ll do in more of my executive presence classes—if it’s presentation skills and basics, we’re going to talk a lot more fundamentals and content creation. Just like we’re not going to teach someone to fly a rocketship before the first day of flight school. We’ve got to build up to where we’re going. And with our executive presence, we talk a lot about the power of language, avoiding cliche language, economy of speech—can we make the point quickly and interestingly. And a lot of those—i call them crutch words—it’s our lean back, it’s the crutch we lean on “so next we’re going to talk about; what i’d like to speak about next is…” No, you’re speaking, i know what you're going to speak about next because you just did it. And so we work on pulling all of the fluff and filler and blugh out of the presentation and so that’s a really really good point. “I think, and I've kind of been thinking”... it’s just weak equivocating language, and it takes away from your confidence which limits your authority and your presence.

**Max Irzhak** [00:10:27] One of the concepts you teach is Executive Presence. I love that word. It carries massive weight behind it.

Can you tell us what Executive Presence *is* and how you use it to grab attention and command a room?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:10:41] Sure, it’s not literal in that you have to be an executive, but it is this notion that presentation skills are great, and if you master the fundamentals you’ll never embarrass yourself in front of a room, good for you. Executive presence is this command and authority of a room that is just this constant purveying confidence, knowledge, authority, warmth and engagement, sometimes. It is this notion that look when you speak, for better or worse, people are listening. And for many people that is daunting, it’s why we get afraid—because we start putting the pressure that comes with it. But it is this omnipresent ability to command, and not in a dominating or domineering or overbearing way, but to command the room that you are in and to create the environment you want.

I’ll hear often “you know, i did those things but it was a tough audience, it’s a tough crowd, they just weren’t interested, they just didn’t want to be here… they have Zoom fatigue”—whatever it is… and my polite refrain is generally if you have more than one or two tough audiences” there is likely a constant in this equation we need to analyze. Like, it ain’t the audience… there’s a constant in the equation—and a lot of that is our presence. And that’s really how you create the environment you want. Do I want participative and fun? Do I want serious? Do I want a desired outcome? And executive presence is that idea that we’re beginning with the end in mind. Every presentation I start, I know where we need to land and now I'm going to find a fun entertaining way to get you there.

**Max Irzhak** [00:12:24] I’ve noticed that a lot of people during presentations, especially when they’re nervous, they tend to speak very quickly. They try to get off of that stage as soon as they can.

How do you use space as part of that equation to actually command that room and demand that respect in a better way?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:12:47] Yeah, so a couple of things there. With the speeding up, that is a really natural, normal, reflex. We are nervous and a second on stage is a lot longer than it feels like. You ever lost your train of thought in front of a group? It feels like eternity. I’ll show the tape back to some of my presenters and I'm like that was ¾ of a second. It was nothing. But they felt the fluster “oh im sorry”. Then they apologize, they bring attention to it, magnify it. So speaking a little more quickly is good. Research shows that a little quarter beat pickup of tempo gives us a little bit more authority, it makes us a little more credible, easier to listen to. And it tends to pick up the projection and excitement in our voice.

However, there is a balance. So the best speakers do a couple of things. Verbally, they find their opposite and they use it. Like for me, I know that I've got to take a breath. It's going to be fast, it’s going to be maybe a few wild tangents that i’m trying so hard to reel in. So when i'm going to be effective, the tempo starts picking up, we’re going, we’re going we’re going, so if i want to make a point… i pause… bring the tempo down just a little bit and everybody just kind of leans in. So we do the same thing in a room with our physical presence. So i’ll do activities with some of our participants when we’re training them. We’ll put some markers of spots on the floor, and they’ve got to use those spots. But when they’re on one: boom! We are locked in like it’s a powerful magnet from your toe to that spot, so when I'm in that spot I'm going to be there. But i'm not going to be there for hours on end. Motion creates emotion; even in a small space, using that physicality, if nothing else, it adjusts my participants eye levels. There’s a string from their eyes to my eyes. So when I am moving in a room, they are physically pivoting to watch me, to connect with me. Where when we stand in one spot, we get the television effect right? Like i’m just watching tv. And if you’re anything like most people watching tv, what are you doing? You’re eating, you’re reading on your phone, right? It’s just part of it. And so the physical proximity matters. We want to limit extraneous movement because that’s a distaractor and takes away from the message—now i’m just watching you fidget or pace. But we don't want to be anchored in one spot, and frankly that’s probably the most challenging activity that i’ll do with people in our one or two-day classes because it’s unnatural for them… but it is an absolute differentiator between dude who presents okay, girl who did her persenation decently, and person who *commands* the room. It’s your presence, your executive presence. We use the space with comfort and confidence.

**Max Irzhak** [00:15:45] How can people get better at presenting themselves at interviews? What’s some practical advice for telling our own stories?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:15:53] I would say a little presentation goes a long way. We’ll do some stuff with executive presence where we talk about impromptu speaking, and I think interviews fall into that category. And one of the core principles is *you know* 90% of the questions you’re going to be asked—you just do. You know what they’re going to ask, you know what they’re going to want to know about you, in any setting—whether it’s an interview or meeting. So I would have some prepared talking points, I might even have some quick anecdotes—people learn better through stories and anecdotes than they do through bullet point lists. It’s great that you told me you increased sales by 20% at your last job… i’d love to hear a 30 second clip on how you did it, if i'm the interviewer. So being able to put some stories behind it that illustrate those points rather than telling me. Make sense? Everyone says “i'm a hard worker”... okay great, give me an example, right, talk to me. And then also just remembering that an interview is a two-way street and depending on where you are in the audience today, everyone who is listening, you know we’re all in different spots in life. There are times when, look, money and a job are vital—they’re vitally important. We gotta get that job, I get it. I get that we’re blessed to be where we are now, but an interview is still a two-way street. There are infinite ways, legal ways, to make money on this planet—infinite, there’s so many ways to make money. So when I'm interviewing, if i was interviewing, i would be looking at is this where i want to invest my very very very valuable resource of my time, and frankly my life. Is this employer or person worth it? Is this where I want to be? And I think it’s important to look at it from both sides of the table. Not just *can* I get a job, will they like me? But, do i like *them*? Is this where I want to be? And if we have that dynamic in the conversation, one, you’re going to interview much better because you’ll seem more confident. And two, you’re going to land in the spot you want to be in. It’s a position of power to look at it that your time is valuable as much as their compensation is.

**Max Irzhak** [00:18:14] Chris, a huge thank you for sharing your insights, and helping us all get a little better at walking through that door with confidence.

It’s been wonderful getting to know.

**Chris Scheeren** [00:18:24] Thank you, I've had a blast. It’s great meeting you too, and look forward to doing it again. Good luck everybody. Go out there and make it happen.

**Max Irzhak** [00:18:32] And one last question. How can people learn more about you?

**Chris Scheeren** [00:18:36] Sure, well for our speaking and training website… if you go to e-v-i, it’s Empowering Voices Inc, so evitraining.com. We do presentation skills, executive presence, business acumen workshops for companies large and small, as well as colleges—we teach at Belmont, UCLA, doing some stuff for Yale coming up soon.

And then if you’re interested in just our journey, we share a whole lot more than blueberry recipes—we give it all to you there, the good and the bad—the journey. So if you follow Blue Barn Berry Farm on Facebook. And if we can help you raise some funds for an organization…. A million dollars to give away is a lot, so i need your help. So BlueBarnBerryFarm.com hit me up, I'm the one who’s checking that feed and would love to put together a fundraiser for your school, or club, or organization, so let us know how we can help.

**Max Irzhak** [00:19:31] We’ll definitely do our part too to help spread the word. I think it’s an amazing cause. I love it.

**Chris Scheeren** [00:19:36] Thank you.