Techie Power! And How It Can Get In The Way

Teaching your colleagues or coworkers can be weird. Much of this weirdness occurs when you go from being the nerdy one among a group of friends, to suddenly being someone with authority and expertise.

When giving a presentation, many people in the audience get flashbacks to school and start treating you very differently. They expect you to have all the answers. People who previously switched off entirely when you explained how awesome Linux is suddenly begin hanging onto your every word. They might even start taking notes.

Do not let this new power go to your head! It can get in the way of actually conveying useful information. It can also mess with your own instincts about how to best get a point across.

The problem gets worse because of how technological knowledge is usually understood in society. People expect anyone with techie skills to be a "genius"—someone who is much smarter than everyone else, but so clever that they are totally incomprehensible.

That means people often have two opposite ideas of what a digital trainer will be like. They think that because you "understand computers" you will be able to give them extremely detailed, complete advice. They will also expect that advice to be so complicated that they will not be able to follow it.

The end result can be an audience that listens to your every word, but assumes that they will fail if they try to understand or follow any of it.

Here are some tips on how to adapt your usual way of explaining technical concepts to this new authoritative role that you have.

If You're An Introverted Techie

If you consider yourself shy or introverted, you might already have some unconscious habits when giving people advice on digital security. You might condense advice into an email or a memo, or some other way where people are free to take it or leave it without

being rude. You might offer it with lots of "ifs and buts," as suggestions for what to do instead of direct instructions.

That makes sense! In that situation, you're not in charge, and there's a risk that if you start giving people unwanted advice to their face or telling them what to do they'll push back or just ignore you. It's also a good way to avoid the curse of being an incomprehensible "techie expert."

When you're in the role of a teacher, however, your listeners suddenly have a much stronger preference for clear or direct instructions. Even if nothing has changed, you are now expected to have strong opinions on everything. And people will want to hear those opinions from you, rather than from a handout.

This expectation might make you uncomfortable, but remember: it's still the same information and you're the same you! While teaching requires adapting to how your audience learns, it's also about adapting your audience's expectations to your own teaching style.

Some tips:

- If you prefer time to think and reply in writing, you can always authoritatively point people to written material. Practice saying "That's a great question, and here's where you can read more about what to do" or "Let me think about that and send you an explanation after the event."
- Digital security is rarely about absolute statements, but people do crave them in trainings. Your instinct to give lots of "ifs and buts" is correct, but can be overwhelming in a direct teaching situation. Instead, feed people's need for direct instruction by picking out a few general rules and repeating them a lot. Repeating is good.
- If you don't know something, or if there isn't a clear black/white answer, say so. If it's something you can find out later and follow up with them about, offer to do so. If they're asking a black and white question that is unanswerable (like "what app will make me secure from everything?"), gently reframe the question and explain why it isn't answerable as is.
- Consider using more eye-contact than usual. When speaking to an audience or teaching someone one-on-one, your instincts for where to look might be a little off. When talking to a crowd, remember to occasionally look at individual members (but don't keep staring at the same person). When talking one-on-

one, look at the person as well as the device. This isn't a big thing, but it can help you both feel confident.

If You're More of an Extrovert

Lots of techies are shy, some are not. Instead, some are used to winning over people by providing detailed arguments, marshalling facts, and deploying evidence until their stunned audience gives up under the weight of their supreme reasoning. You might do this if you're accustomed to trying to persuade others who have more social authority than you, or if you feel you are often ignored because people don't understand or want to understand the technical issues you're describing.

The good news is: as a teacher, you don't have to fight to be heard. Everyone can hear you, even the people at the back of the room. You're also set up to be the authority. People (mostly) will want you to tell them what to do.

The bad news: with all your new power, your normal habits are complete overkill. Unless you're teaching digital security to a group of Marines in boot camp, you should turn down the confrontation a little.

- People are often intimidated by technology, even technology they're familiar with. And that means that when you start talking to them about technology from a position of power or authority, they can get get intimidated by *you*. That means it's easy to end up being a "[fear mongerer](#)". As someone who has tried to get their voice heard in other settings, you might have used the "If we don't encrypt all the things, we're all going to die!" line or something similar. Raising the alarm like that can get you attention. In a training, you already have people's attention, so you can ramp down on the scary stories.

- People need some explanations, but not many. Because you have all the power in a teaching context, people are more likely to just believe what you say without evidence. That's a dangerous amount of power, so use it wisely! Use less background information so you don't overwhelm your audience unnecessarily. Think instead about arming them with knowledge to make decisions themselves when their unique context means your direct statements might be wrong or inappropriate.

- Don't overreact to questions. People asking questions in trainings usually aren't looking to undermine you or deny what you're saying, even if they might

sound like they are. Answer the questions in a straightforward way, and avoid the temptation to improvise an answer when you don't know. Also, encourage questions by asking questions: you can break up a presentation with questions to the audience, which helps [prevent trainings from being monologues](#).

- Digital security is rarely about absolute statements, but people do crave them in trainings. Your instinct might be to give strong direct statements, but remember: it's very hard for anyone to know and understand every situation in advance. It's better to teach an audience how to be flexible and make their own decisions. Feed people's need for direct instruction by picking out a few general rules, and repeating them a lot. Repeating is good.

There's one other flaw that both introvert and extrovert technologists fall victim to. We love our own hand-crafted solutions and our personal choices in hardware or software, and we defend them more when they are rare or controversial. You may have concluded that FreeBSD or GPG or a Lenovo laptop is the best solution for your needs, and have an army of explanations as to why more people should use it. But think twice before you take advantage of your digital security audience to guide them to the One True Way. What your listeners want—and you committed to give them—is as simple a guide to improving their security as you can provide. Changing up their entire technology stack to do that is almost certainly too big an ask. We should be humble about the distance between what we use and what others need. Put yourself in their place and think about their needs.

If you're feeling the pressure, don't worry about living up to impossible expectations. Adults treat teachers with respect not because they expect you to be a genius, but because they want you (and the training) to succeed, and they want to give you the room to achieve that. That means they will forgive you more, not less, if you mess up.

All this weird attention and power is temporary. Even though their behavior might change during the training, your friends and colleagues still know it's you underneath. Afterwards, they will go back to treating you normally (though they may ask you even more questions about encryption and how to hack banks).