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COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Communication Fundamentals

Communication is a complex two-way process, involving the encoding, translation and decoding of messages. Effective communication requires the communicator to translate their messages in a way that is specifically designed for their intended audience.

Creating and delivering an effective presentation requires a basic understanding of the communication process. Most business presentations require the clear and unambiguous communication of a message in a way that can be clearly understood by the recipient.

It is human nature to assume that when we communicate we are doing so effectively, and that if anything goes wrong consequently the responsibility for that must rest with the recipient.

Analyze and Practice

As you can see, communication is a complex two-way process this is why it so often breaks down and is ineffective. With the complexity apparent even in a simple communication, like the one illustrated, it should be apparent that there is a need for clarity and simplicity – as this will minimize the chance of misunderstandings.

Communication is a skill and like any skill it requires practice. It is improvement through practice that differentiates a skill from other forms of knowledge. Understanding the theory of communication and effective presentation will not in itself make you a brilliant communicator or presenter but should make you aware of how to maximize the impact of your presentations.

The most important thing to remember is that the message that you intend to communicate is likely to be misunderstood. Therefore, in addition to carefully preparing and presenting your message, stay alert for any signs that your audience are mis-interpreting it. It is up to you, the presenter, to continually check that your message has been received, understood, correctly interpreted and filed in the receivers mind.

We will now examine each of the six steps of the communication model in slightly more detail - with a view to introducing some guidelines that should help to promote more effective two-way communication.

- Step1 - Ensure that your audience are tuned in and paying full attention to what you are about to say. Once you have the attention of the audience the communication of the message can begin.
- Step2 - Each recipient listens to the message.
- Step3 - Each recipient will have some feeling about the message and will interpret its meaning. This is often done in the light of individual attitudes and prejudices or alternatively with reference to previous experience or associations. Your problem is that the audience may not feel and interpret in the way that you intended. The result may range from a simple failure for the message to hit home, through to a serious misunderstanding.
- Step4 - Each recipient may respond to the original message.
- Step5 - You have now become the receiver, and should listen carefully to the message.
- Step6 - You will feel and interpret something about this message.

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This may range from satisfaction that the communication is proceeding as you intended, to bewilderment at how your original message was misinterpreted.

Designing a Presentation

Think of a presentation in terms of a journey; designed to take an audience to a pre-planned destination. Use this analogy to identify the key points of your message, prioritize them and allocate each one an appropriate time slot.

There is a simple structure into which nearly all presentations should fit. This comprises three clearly identifiable parts - an introduction, followed by a main body and finally a conclusion.

This is often expressed as:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them,
2. Tell them,
3. Tell them what you've told them.

A good guide for the breakdown of a presentation is the 10/80/10 rule - whereby the introduction and conclusion are each allotted 10% of the presentation time, with the main body comprising 80%. For example, a 30 minute presentation would have a 3 minute introduction and conclusion and main body lasting 24 minutes. This formula can be applied to any length of presentation - as it reflects a good breakdown from the audience's perspective.

In researching and collating the material that you need and devising your key points you will have been concentrating on the main content of your presentation. This is fine, as the most effective and efficient way to prepare your presentation is to construct it in the following order;

Main Body, Introduction, then the Conclusion.

It is usually best to plan your presentation to have a question and answer session at the end. This will enable you to deliver your message and then end strongly with a clear and concise conclusion, before entering the relatively unpredictable area of tackling questions from the floor.

Identifying Key Points

In structuring your presentation you may find it useful to divide your journey into a series of stages. You are then faced with the challenge of deciding how many stages there should be and what should constitute a stage.

It was also recommended that you should look at your aim statement and try to develop between three and five key points that you would like to drive home. This represents as much information as most people are able to take away from a presentation.

These key point messages can be considered as the intended destination for each stage of your journey. In other words key points are synonymous with stages in the same way that the aim statement is synonymous with the destination. If you are working in a familiar subject domain the key points may well be apparent; but what if the subject isn't familiar and the key points are not self-evident?

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When you are preparing a presentation in an unfamiliar domain the most effective way to identify the key points is to ask other people. The people you should ask should be from a similar group as your intended audience. If they are predominantly directives, as is likely in the scenario of a sales manager making a case for equipping her field sales force with laptop computers then she should ask relatively senior people within the organization.

If she asked a colleague in the training department their comments would probably be heavily biased towards the training implications, whereas technical staff would be preoccupied with the specification and interfacing of IT systems. Neither group is likely to ask the sort of questions that are likely to be of most interest to senior management.

By asking a representative group you should ensure that the key points are properly targeted and that the audience remains focused. You should ask them a question framed around your aim statement. 'What would you need to know which would' . . . followed by your aim statement. In the current example What would you need to know which would demonstrate the competitive advantage of equipping the field sales force with laptop computers? Ask as many people, from a representative group as you can, and record their comments as potential key points.

The biggest advantage of this approach is its speed. It is quite common for people to spend hours sifting through information, collating it and then editing down into digestible chunks - whilst still struggling to devise a suitable presentation structure for it. Asking other people is a fast and effective way of devising potential key points and has the added advantage that the key points will be non-egocentric that is they will reflect what your audience wants to hear and not just what you want to tell them.

Key Points – A Worked Example

This illustrates the sort of responses that you might expect when asking the question 'What would you need to know which would . . . demonstrate the competitive advantage of equipping the field sales force with laptop computers ?'

"How will giving them laptops improve their sales volumes?"

"How much will all this cost and how long is the return on investment? In other words a detailed cost benefit analysis."

"Would we be able to cut the sales force as a result of their increased productivity?"

"How long will it take to procure this equipment and software, and then how long will it take to carry out the training required?"

"What are the main business benefits, apart from cost-related issues? - You know, will the organization appear to be more professional, that kind of thing."

Planning the Sequence

Starting with the main body, your first task is to decide on what your key points will be and order them in a way that will address the needs of your audience. Once again you should be prioritizing what it is that the audience want from the presentation. The key points should be presented in the order that reflects their importance to the audience - with the most important first. If you do not do this you will find it difficult to hold their attention.

It may prove useful to write each key point on a piece of card and shuffle them in a variety of different presentation sequences and consider the effect of each on your audience. Ask yourself, or others, which will have the most impact?

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Your next task is to divide the presentation up so that the correct amount of time is allocated to each of your key points. This will ensure that the overall time allotted to the main body of your presentation does not overrun. For example if the main body is planned to last 10 minutes and there are three key points, as in this presentation, then you might divide it into two minute and one six minute segments. Alternatively you might create three equal segments. Once again let the requirements of the audience determine this division.

This tutorial is an excerpt from the GetAhead in Business Presentations course.

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