KING FAHD UNIVERSITY OF PETROLEUM & MINERALS

PERSONAL SKILLS PROGRAM

ORAL PRESENTATIONS & REPORTS
6 Common Errors to Avoid

3

INTRODUCTION

An oral report can be a very effective technique for communicating important information. However, that information must be "packaged" into manageable amounts, and communicated concisely and professionally from start to finish.

Too often, however, communication errors by presenters, speakers and meeting leaders, for example, inhibit the proper flow of this vital information. These errors listed below can be easily corrected with planning, preparation and practice. First, though, let's look at these 6 Common Errors.

1 LACK OF OBJECTIVE AND ORGANIZATION

The first requirement of a professional communicator is to know the objective or goal for communicating. You must answer the questions (a) "why am I giving this presentation, and (b)" as a result of my message, what do I want my audience to do?" Without this defined goal, your points will NOT be organized properly according to the attitude of your audience, and surely your audience will not get your message quickly and clearly.

METHODS: Briefly, if the audience's attitude is hostile (unfriendly) to your message, then the Inductive or Indirect Method of Organization (moving from general to specific points and reasons, followed by the conclusion or recommendation) is the most effective. Should the audience's attitude be welcoming (friendly) then the Deductive or Direct Method of Organization. [See number 2 below for more on Audience Analysis.]

To make sure you are on the right track in your planning and preparation of material, always follow these steps:

a) gather the information (only that which you need to fulfill your purpose); b) organize it according to a set pattern of logic (by topics, time, and procedures, for example); c) **choose the proper style** of speaking according to your audience (formal/technical/informal); and d) be clear (by being concise, to the point, relevant, appropriate and useful).

2) NOT ANALYZING THE AUDIENCE

After knowing your objective, you must analyze your audience. Ask yourself:

> What do I know about my audience?
> What do they know about my topic?

Will they accept or reject my recommendations and/or conclusions? In other words, analyze the "filters" of your audience, including their

psychological, emotional, cultural, educational, and societal profiles. Plus, as much as possible, try to learn about their backgrounds, likes and dislikes. You can analyze your audience as individuals even in more detail by thinking about their average age, level of experience, knowledge of the business or project you are involved in, titles and ranks in the organization, and their likes/dislikes.

But what if you do not know the people individually? The answer is to analyze the audience as a group (for example, an audience of accountants or people interested in environmental awareness). Their generalized norms, beliefs and focal points are known and can be used to focus your own message in your oral presentation and report, tailored to their expectations.

That is why your audience's level of knowledge about your topic will dictate what you include or exclude. While you are preparing your message, make sure to define highly technical terms or jargon if their level of knowledge is low, for example. At the same time, do not bore them with explanations that they already know if their level of knowledge is high.

If you have a hostile or friendly audience, then use the appropriate logical method of information organization, as explained above in number 1.

3 FAILURE TO CONTROL TIME

Time is extremely important, for you and your audience. If you are given a specific time period, then stick to it.

Here is a tip to avoid possible embarrassment: make your notes and prepare yourself for a presentation a) on the time; b) shorter than the time (by 1/2, for example); and c) longer than the time (double, for example). Why?

ANSWER: Sometimes, your supervisor or other person may tell you "listen, we ran overtime on our discussion, so could you make your report a little shorter?" Or, you may be asked "someone cancelled, so could you make your report a little longer?"

Having the time changed at the last minute does not happen often, so in general, actual practicing is a highly effective way to control the time. If you planned and prepared your presentation or oral report properly, according to the time limit given, then go ahead and practice using your computer, projector and all materials – just like the real thing. Practice, time yourself, and adjust the length of your messages accordingly.

To clearly recognize the importance of this point, remind yourself about the last time you attended a presentation which was supposed to be 15 minutes and it lasted 30 instead. How did you react? What did you think about the presenter? The opposite timing problem, being too brief, is just as damaging to a presenter

because he did not offer enough information and so created credibility and image problems for himself.

4 POOR ORAL DELIVERY

If you have not given sufficient attention to the preceding points of planning , preparing, analyzing, organizing and practicing, then you will find that your self-confidence is low. As a result, your voice will be unclear and weak, and the speed too fast. These are the results of not being well-prepared and not practicing enough.

For example, if you have not prepared well enough, you will notice that you are using too many filler words (saying those distracting um, ahh, ya know, or ya'nee, shismo) between ideas and points. Equally distracting is OK after every sentence.

If you notice your audience losing interest, you may try to compensate by speaking more quickly. This choice will only make things worse, especially for those of you speaking English as a second language because you may end up running words together, placing emphasis on the wrong syllable or forgetting what you want to say.

Even worse, the results of weak preparation and practice may cause you to fall into the very weak situation of reading every word on your slide, word by word, and boring the entire audience; or, you may do the opposite and rush through your slides without even commenting or explaining the points on them [see number 5 below].

So, as you can see, there is a direct relationship between how much you practice and preview, and your level of success.

5 TOO MUCH OR TOO LITTLE INFORMATION

Since each minute is precious, it is important to remind yourself to organize everything you will say and do. For example, when you show a slide or any visual, do not read every word, one by one.This is TOO MUCH information. Your audience can read the words much faster than you can say them. Your job, then, as the presenter is to

* Focus on one point (2 or 3 briefly) from a list of many

* Summarize information from several lengthy details

* Highlight a trend or development to show its importance

* Expand on the information shown and why it is important

* Show the advantages or disadvantages

Let the visual aid do just that -- AID you, and support what you are saying. The visuals are NOT meant to substitute for or to replace you. The audience is there to hear what you have to say about the

slides. For example, you will be more effective talking about the WHY, HOW, and WHAT about a table of figures or a line chart extended over 5 years instead of just merely reading date and number, date and number -- which is plainly there for all to see.

On the other hand, remember to allow the audience enough time

to see and understand the visual. If you do not, then this is **TOO LITTLE** information. Avoid the speeding "bullet train" method of showing the visuals, one after another, without explaining clearly or adequately

6 POORLY PLANNED OR UNDER-PRACTICED CLOSING

This error is mostly seen when the speaker just ends with his last point and feebly says "Well, that's it. Any questions?" [Note: unavoidably, extremely weak body language accompanies these words with hands out, palms up and shoulders shrugged up in a confused position.] The listeners have been abruptly cut off from the presentation or report information without any indication or signal that the ending was about to come.

To avoid this problem, remember that just as a robust opening for your presentation is a must, so too should your closing be strong and well performed. In this way, your listeners will be left with a positive impression about you and your information, and you can leave them with the final statement about your topic that you want them to remember. The most effective and powerful way to end is to use a Professional Closing which is made up of the following formula:

KEY or SIGNAL WORD + FORMULA ENDING = Professional Closing.

Key or Signal words indicate to your listeners that you are coming to the conclusion of your presentation or report. A short list of examples – which you can easily add to are:

finally . . .
in conclusion . . .
for my last point . . .
to end our discussion today . . .
at the end . . .

The second part of a Professional Closing is the Formula Ending, which helps presenters to skillfully and professionally communicate their conclusions to listeners.

1) End with a positive and emotionally appealing statement.
"This new system is the answer to our problem, but it will take our best efforts. When we work together as a team, I know we will make this project a big success".

2) Briefly summarize the major point or the main objective of your presentation.

"As you can see, the new system is more effective, safer and saves money. It is clear from my presentation that our only choice is to begin using this system tomorrow . . . or even better, today!"

3) Refer back to the beginning.

"To repeat what I said at the beginning of this presentation, you can do better with this new system, and you have seen the evidence of its effectiveness and usefulness today."

4) Refer to the positive (+) using If/then.

"If you implement this new system I have discussed, then you will enjoy all the benefits I have shown."

5) Refer to the negative (-) using If/then.

"If you do not implement this new system I have discussed, then you will lose a great opportunity to enjoy all the benefits I have shown."

6) Refer first to the positive (+), then the negative (-).

"If you implement the new system I have discussed, then there will be many benefits. But if you do not, then you will lose a great opportunity to save time and money."

7) Refer first to the negative (-), then the positive (+).

If you do not implement this new system then you will lose a great opportunity to save time and money, but if you do implement it, then you will gain these many benefits.

To sum up this section, (notice the key word "to sum up"), these kinds of endings will support your effectiveness and gain the audience's attention. When you have finished your professional closing, say "Thank you."

Wait for a moment at the front of the room (do not run off to the side or back to your chair or out of the door) and face the audience. Then, say, "I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have."

CONCLUSION

As you have seen, these six errors are frequently made, even by the best businessmen. Overall, though, these errors can easily be corrected by knowing your purpose, analyzing your audience and organizing your thoughts BEFORE you stand in front of people and open your mouth to speak.