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Core requirement, Oral Communication Skills

COM210. SPEECH COMMUNICATION (3)

Perhaps the most useful tool in transitioning from living in London to living in Denver has been effective communication. Everyone talks, but the effectiveness of it and how comfortable we feel communicating varies from situation to situation. There have been times where I have had no problem speaking and receiving questions on my accent, but at other times I have found myself remaining quiet as a mouse. Additionally, I've noticed that successful communication is measured not only by one's one competence, but through a variety of factors such as understanding the target audience and ethical considerations. By reflecting on past experiences both in my personal and professional life, I will outline what I have learned, achieved, and overcome in the speech communication process.

EXPERIENCE

Within the past seven years of my work, I have learned a lot about what I am as a person. I have been able to identify both my strengths and weaknesses, and then work on them accordingly to become a better, well-rounded person. Throughout my career in IT, I have noticed that the majority of IT workers have an imbalance of technical skills and people skills. While they may have the technical knowledge to solve

technical problems, they lack the soft skills to present proposals or solutions to management in an effective manner. Though my official job title was a Network Administrator, my job involved many other abilities which included effective communication, regular presentations, and strong communication skills. Through all of this, I compared my most recent presentation to the very first one I gave, and realized how far I had come in honing my communication skills. I also realized that although communication is taken for granted since we all have the ability to communicate, it is indeed requires a strong learning curve like any other discipline to ensure what we communicate has value, substance and effectiveness.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

One of the most fundamental concepts I've grasped through the various presentations I've given is the fact that before any content or speech can be considered, the primary audience for the presentation must be considered. Once the audience can be understood, suitable and effective content can be created to ensure it is tailored to the audience's needs and expectations.

As real world example, we once hired an individual who was proficient in web design and web programming. I had asked him to prepare a presentation to show the rest of the workforce his plans to revamp the company website, and how we could incorporate e-commerce (online selling) on our site. When the meeting came around, I don't believe there was one individual who could understand the individual's proposal. Not only was the content scattered, but the technical jargon used in the presentation was something that I, even as an IT worker, could not make sense of, much less the business-minded upper management. Certainly, he had not analyzed the audience, and

instead created content and spoke in a language that only he could understand, and not the audience. Soon after this event, the worker was dismissed, due to poor communication and the inability to communicate effectively with other employees on the nature of his work. From this experience, I saw the need for effective communication in the workplace, not only to connect with audiences, but also with peers and colleagues to ensure there is a collective consensus in place.

The task was then given to me, where I was in a situation to do the work of the previous worker alongside my current job. With the previous worker's communication breakdown fresh in my memory, I was able to put together an almost immediate presentation within a couple days and present the highly technical content in a manner that was understood by workers who had very little IT knowledge. I threw out any technical acronyms or jargon words, and instead used metaphors which broke down and explained technical concepts into a more digestible language.

Last year, I led a team in a project that involved developing a web design curriculum for a non profit organization in Denver called Micro Business Development (MBD). At the end of the project, a presentation was given to a member of the MBD team, Katie Stell, who was my contact for the project. The content for designing a web site can be very technical, but the audience for this content was ultimately going to be MBD's clients, who were individuals with little to no computer experience but had a desire to create a website for their small startup company. The significant challenge the team and I faced was developing and presenting content in a manner for an audience none of us were accustomed to. We overcame this challenge, and the presentation

lasted for almost two hours, of which I believe to be a great success for all parties involved. This experience remains a staple on my resume.

Throughout my career, I have been faced with a barrier of presenting technical content to non-technical minded people, and have found that it becomes easier with every presentation I give. I have noticed that many IT workers do not enjoy leaving the technical jargon aside for the betterment of their audience, and instead thrive on including as many acronyms or technical words as they can in their presentations. Although my career has also been in IT, I have always approached it from a business perspective, and hence focused on explaining the nature of IT in a more open sense to a broader audience.

OVERCOMING FEAR OF PUBLIC SPEAKING

If I am completely honest with myself, I can describe the very first presentation I gave as utterly horrendous. My focus was on all the places it did not need to be. I paid too much attention to how I looked to other people, and listening to my own voice filled me with so much fear that I lost track of what I was saying, constantly having to pause with awkward “Ummm’s” as I regained my thoughts. I had a greater sense of fear amongst smaller crowds than I did larger, because I could see each member’s individual expression in the smaller crowds, which made these presentations feel like a terrifying burden.

However, I was slowly able to eliminate each of these problems with the more presentations I did. The first to vanish was the “Ummm’s” and the “you know’s” which after once having recorded a presentation I gave, made me realize how it made my presentation flow in an abrupt manner. It also gave my presentation an overall weaker

impact, by making it sound as though I did not know much about the content that was being presented at the time. I then shifted focus away from how my voice sounded, because every time I did this, my throat would dry up and my voice would become unclear. Instead, I opted to simply talk in as much casual manner as I could, but avoid sleaziness or an unprofessional tone at the same time. Once I shifted focus away from worrying how my voice sounded, and was given a lot of praise by audience members on how confident I was presenting material.

Another fear I overcame was that of dealing with audience members and their facial expressions. I found that I read too much into them, and then would begin questioning the quality of my presentation while I was still presenting, thus filling me with fear and having a feeling of just wanting it to be over as soon as possible. I decided that all I really needed to focus on when giving a presentation and as far as audience faces were concerned were the eyes. If I looked in audience members eyes instead of their faces to determine their interest level, I was fine. This of course took some getting used to, especially with the longer presentations for which the back of my mind would remind me people may be getting tired and bored. However, it was nowhere near the gigantic barrier it was when I first had to give presentations in my career.

As I slowly analyzed my fear, I was able to peel it away from me as I worked on one issue at a time, slowly progressing to being able to present to an audience of strangers with little fear, and talk and move in a way that was very natural for me. There are still a couple times where I may have a little more fear than usual, but I have found that it is not tied to what my original fear was tied to. Instead, it is usually linked to a rush preparation for a presentation or not having enough time to proof read my

presentation before I give it, both of which I feel is natural in all forms of formal communication.

TYPES OF DELIVERY, OUTLINING FOR SPEECH DELIVERY

While trying to hone my presentation and speaking skills, I have tried a variety of methods before finding one that worked well. Currently, I research the content enough to have confidence in it and know it from memory, and for my speeches I list only the key points for each slide. The key points, even though they are perhaps one to three words each, are enough to trigger my memory to simply begin discussing the topic at hand. I have found it to work extremely well, and my eyes are able to focus more on audience eye contact than reading lengthy paragraphs from note cards, which always has resulted in a unprofessional and inconsistent presentation. It is almost extemporaneous, because the preparation is not far fetched or time consuming. However, the most effective means for me is to have preparation be a small amount, as I otherwise tend to over prepare and this causes much second-guessing and pre-built fear prior to giving the presentation.

While I have tried the memorized and manuscript speech types, I have found them to be very ineffective. The memorized speech types do not work well for me because although I may remember my speech, I have found myself constantly rushing through it at a rapid pace in fear of forgetting or losing my trail of thought. Manuscript speeches have also not been effective for me because I have found I spend too much time looking at the script in front of me as opposed to what I feel is more key, the eyes of the audience members. Therefore, outside of my bullet pointing strategy, I only write at most a quote or phrase that I wish to include in my speech as opposed to each and

every word. I do not necessarily believe my method is better than the others, but rather it is the method that has proven to work best for me, and I think the other methods are also just as effective methods for certain people.

In regards to outlining my presentation and speeches, I have learned a lot. Firstly, I have learned that simpler is better, and stages in a speech such as What, Why, and Where contribute positively to the flow than stages with many stages. I have also found that when presenting a topic regarding a problem and solution, it is best that the solution be outlined toward the end, even if it is to be the most talked about topic of a speech. I once tried giving the solution first in my speech, and then its attributing factors that I felt would justify it. I felt that the audience members, having become almost immediately aware of my solution to the problem, were very disinterested in the rest of the presentation. It is akin to a “save the best until last” mode of thought, because I’ve learned that people will generally keep listening provided there is still information of interest to them.

I have also learned that ignoring outlining a speech is like reading a book in a random order of chapters. Failure to outline results in nothing else but pure rambling, and so by outlining even very briefly at times, I find it has given great structure to my speeches which simply could not be achieved otherwise. The result is a more confidence speech that flows as though it was being read from a prewritten document.

GAINING & RETAINING AUDIENCE ATTENTION

Probably the least challenge for me in growing my speech communication skills is the ability to gain and retain audience attention. I have always been concerned of the audience interest level when giving presentations and speeches at work, and so it is an

area I have worked on throughout my career. The biggest obstacle in this regard was that when I first got a job and had to give presentations, I was only sixteen, and it was very difficult to be taken seriously by audience members who were in some cases four times my age. Now that I am much older, this is no longer a problem. I have learned that the best tools I have for gaining audience attention is humor and interactivity.

Although it hasn't always been possible given time constraints, I have regularly developed small leaflets or quizzes for audience members which I then pass out during the introductory period of my presentations. With something in their hands, I find audience members are most likely to listen and pay more attention. Quizzes have been proven to be great, since I will have questions that could only be answered if the audience member was paying attention to my speech. There is usually a small prize awarded for the winner, such as a gift certificate.

In the same regard however, I have found that these techniques only work well at times, and are not an effective means for every presentation. They can sometimes be distracting, and audience members will ask questions based on getting the answer to a quiz question, as opposed to a legitimate question for which they seek further clarification. It is for these reasons that I find humor to be a very successful tool in gaining and keeping audience attention. I have learned that generally, especially on some of the technical topics I present, audience members do not merely want to be educated, but entertained too. I therefore try to be myself as much as I can and incorporate genuine humor in my presentations as opposed to preplanned one liners that I feel can also ruin the effectiveness or impact of a presentation. Genuine humor

promotes self confidence, and I feel audience members are more willing to listen to someone who comes across as confident than one who does not.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS IN PERSUASIVE SPEECHES: CREDIBILITY, LOGIC & EMOTION

Although it has been a while since I read Aristotle, I wholeheartedly agree that credibility, logic and emotion are key in giving successful speeches. Firstly, as I mentioned earlier, I was sixteen when I was giving my first presentation and speeches. I had zero credibility because of my age and appearance, despite working extremely hard on the presentation content. However, by maturing in age, I believe this has increased my credibility. Furthermore, I have never given any presentation in anything less than business casual, which I believe also promotes credibility. I think there is a general consensus that if someone looks the part, they are more likely to know their part too. Having also earned several industry certifications, I feel that this has given me great credibility than work experience alone could have because it is something I can state immediately in speeches to gain the faith of the audience members.

Logic has also proven to be a key element, as I have learned the hard way. Early on in my career, I found that I would be talking about a specific point or issue, but then by losing my trail of thought, I was not able to complete it. Hence, it came across as though it was made up by myself with no concrete proof. While giving a presentation, I had no idea this was ever occurring, as I would simply move on to another point and shift my focus on that. I eventually learned that making logical arguments (that is to say, complete sentences as opposed to leaving them half floating) were very important when it came to presentations and speeches, and in doing so I would not lose the audience's

confidence in me since they were able to follow my arguments through. Additionally, when discussing controversial topics or topics that were perhaps not in line with the majority of the audiences, I found it useful to include sources of research to prevent my arguments sounding one sided or inaccurate.

In regards to emotion, I don't believe I exuberate a great deal of emotion when giving presentations. Generally, I feel very passionate about the content, and it shows in my voice and gestures throughout my talking, but there is never an entire range of emotions that I cycle through when giving presentations, other than happiness and excitement. On the other hand, I do believe emotion to be just as important when giving speeches in the sense of suppressing emotion. I don't think an effective speech can be given if one is tired, distracted or disinterested and the audience knows about it. However, an effective speech can be given if one feels this way but the audience does not. There have been a couple times where I have literally flown into London and drove to the office to discuss matters. Although I am extremely uncomfortable and jetlagged, I do not let it show to the audience because I feel it will give them a great deal of discomfort having to listen to someone who looks and sounds as though he does not want to be there himself.

SPECIAL OCCASSIONS

The only special occasion I can remember giving a speech was on my wedding day, in front of all the guests when saying my vows to my wife. It was a very different situation than a workplace speech, and I can recall that at first I felt like a complete amateur speaking in front of people. I did not believe anyone was interested in hearing my vows but my wife, and so I became filled with awkwardness and worries that the

audience may be getting bored. However, this was quickly mitigated by the fact of what it meant to me. It meant a great deal to me to say what I said in the most sincere way possible, and I overcame the initial awkwardness because I cared about the content enough to do so. As the ceremony came to a close and the audience members exited the chapel to the dining hall downstairs, I received much praise and thumbs up from those in attendance.

I do not feel that the typical rules of speeches can apply on special occasions, because the focus is different. While in a workplace presentation I may be trying to educate the audience or sell an idea, on special occasions the primary concern is the subject at hand. At a wedding, the focus is on the bride and groom, and at a toast the focus is on pleasing a couple or individual, not the audience. Because of this, I have learned they must be approached in an entirely different manner, but with the same basic principles of credibility, logic and emotion to ensure an effective speech.

VOCAL DELIVERY & PHYSICAL DELIVERY

Some of the best classes I took at Regis were taught by my favorite professor Kim Herfurt. They were a set of four classes which after every class, each student had to prepare and present their presentation to the rest of the class. The entire class, including the professor, would evaluate our presentation skills and give us constructive feedback at the end. I learned a great wealth of presentation skills in a very short amount of time, and a key area was vocal delivery and physical delivery. By having all the students present one after the other, I was able to observe a wide variety of deliveries from each student. Foremost, I learned not to mumble and pause abruptly. Instead, I developed the confidence to talk in my normal voice but articulate words

enough that they were presented in a professional, yet casual manner. I also learned correct posture and positioning while giving my presentation, as I believe we all at one time or another stood in front of the projection screen, blocking our slides from being read by accident. I also learned to not be so focused on time, because doing so only made my voice speed up so much that it was difficult for even me to follow.

Furthermore, I learned that movement was not at all a bad thing when giving presentations, it was only a bad thing when done consistently. I learned to incorporate movements in a way that I could articulate and emphasize certain points in my presentation that I wanted the audience to know was important, and then ease back into other topics that were more general information. By doing these activities in these set of four classes, I learned more about presentation and effective speech delivery than I believe I may have in the prior five years of giving speech presentations.

NON VERBAL COMMUNICATION

I have learned that non verbal areas of communication are just as important as verbal areas when giving speech presentations. There is a reason I dress up for presentations, putting extra effort than normal to ensure my appearance is clean cut. I ensure I have freshly shaved the morning of the day of giving a presentation, and have had a recent haircut. I believe physical appearance counts for a lot in terms of the audience giving a speaker credibility, which I learned by trying to be as grown up as possible at 16 when giving my first presentation. Additionally, I have focused on areas that irritate me about other people's communication and tried diligently to avoid incorporating these same traits, such as an extreme use of the hands for gestures, looking anywhere but forward when speaking, constant fidgeting etc... Although the

voice may be heard by many, the audience is looking (and hence, by human nature, judging) a speaker as he continues to present, and so by ensuring I have these areas taken care of, I can proceed with verbal communication in an undistracted manner.

VISUAL AIDS

For the majority of presentations I have given, visual aids have been used to assist presentations. They have typically been in the form of Microsoft PowerPoint slides prepared beforehand, and changed according to the topic I am discussing. However, I have also used other visual aids such as handouts and leaflets to aid a speech presentation.

While at first I was able to hide fear by staring at the projector screen behind me and talk, this didn't last long as I learned the importance of looking audience members in the eye. I have found visual aids to be a tremendously useful tool in breaking down some topics where words are simply not enough. They have also been useful as interactive sessions with an audience when trying to poll them for their concerns or opinions on a particular subject, much like how a teacher does to students in a class. At the same time however, I have found that visual aids can sometimes deter from the point trying to be made from a speech, and focus can be shifted away from a speaker to the graphics on a slide or the fancy slide transitions. I can recall a time where a fellow student used presentation enhancing software to add glitz to his presentation. One of the glitzy items was an analog clock in the bottom of the projection screen, of which I caught myself gazing at constantly and not listening to what was being said. It is for these reasons that I do not make the glitziest of visual aids, as they only deter from

where the focus should be. The point I think to remember when using visual aids is to make topics clearer rather than creative.

Additionally, I have ensured that only brief information is given on visual aids, as giving too much can make it seem as though I am using the slides behind me as big note cards that I simply read from. Constantly facing my back towards the crowds with them being unable to hear me clearly as I face away from them has certainly proven to be ineffective communication, and hence I continue to keep the visuals as simple as possible requiring little attention from both me and the audience.

USING HUMOR EFFECTIVELY

Humor is something I use regularly in presentations, but by no means in a planned manner. The humor used may be as subtle as a cartoon at the end of a presentation, or humorous stories. However, they all seem to one way or another link back to the topic at hand. I have listened to a couple presentations where either the humor was either too much where it wasn't a presentation at all but a comedy show, or that the humor was so bland and unrelated it felt as though the speaker was covering up his own lack of expertise in the field.

Unfortunately, I have come across a couple times where an attempt at humor has been met with sore eyes. In one presentation, the topic at hand was business continuity, and how businesses could resume operations as quickly as possible following an unforeseen disaster such as an earthquake or tornado. I had a cartoon made on one side with a cartoon manager and a quote that read "oh crap!" to symbolize the problems a business would face if they didn't have correct procedures in place. This was an in class presentation, and while the majority of the class members found it

rather hilarious, my professor did not appreciate the use of language. I appreciated his view, apologized and moved on as quickly as possible to avoid a negative view on the rest of the presentation. Looking back, I do think the language was unprofessional and that the humor perhaps went too far. Something like “oh bummer!” would have been just as effective and less offensive. It only happened that once, but it was enough for me to ensure I don’t make the same mistake again.

I have learned that professional humor is perhaps the best humor to use in presentations, and that humor should always either contribute or relate back to the original content. Telling unrelated jokes can make one look like they should be doing stand up comedy as opposed to giving a serious presentation about important topics.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT AUDIENCE MEMBERS

Since the majority of my speeches have been given to professional workers and peers, I have rarely come across difficult audience members. However, I can recall a time where I was presenting a proposal that did not require the use of a service offered by a company upper management wanted to work with. The trouble was that the head of this company was a member of the audience because my father, the director of the company, wanted him to see our alternatives before committing to this company’s services. Throughout my presentation, I was constantly stopped by this individual to answer questions that either did not relate to the subject at hand or could have been answered by the member simply listening a little longer. I do remember becoming extremely flustered because I was in front of coworkers, and felt what was occurring was extremely unprofessional. I handled it by simply stating all questions would be answered at the end of the presentation, and told the individual to see me afterwards if

he had any further questions. Indeed, he did not visit with me afterward, as his prime purpose was to disrupt my presentation and embarrass me in front of my coworkers.

I learned that emotion is key in handling these kinds of situations, and where I may have shown my frustration, it should have been suppressed for the betterment of the presentation and speech. Talking under pressure was difficult, as was having to avoid the individual who conveniently sat at the very front. However, I have learned that acting unprofessionally and losing my cool only hinders my own performance, and controlling emotions and language tone is key in dealing with these types of individuals.

CONCLUSION

Looking back, I have been given an excellent opportunity from a young age to learn and evolve in the IT field through my father's business. I was also able to expand and do freelance IT work for several small companies in the United Kingdom to gain knowledge and confidence about the variety of networking concepts and implementations out there and work with them first hand. Not only that, but by working for a small business I was required to put on a variety of hats to regularly give presentations on various topics pertaining to IT which sharpened my presentation and communication skills.

I believe this combination to have assisted in making me well rounded person, with the ability to see situations in a technical context, but present them in a manner which can be understood by a larger audience whose everyday work is not necessarily in IT. Once I graduate this fall, I will be looking for jobs that utilize these two areas in a perfect blend of IT skills and soft skills, such as sales engineering and consulting. I

cannot wait to receive my work authorization and continue to grow, learn, and overcome obstacles throughout my career.