

RECORD OF SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES 1984 VOL. 10 NO. 1

COMMUNICATION SKILLS—A TEACHING SESSION

*Moderator: LINDA M. DELGADILLO**

DEALING WITH NERVOUSNESS

MRS. LINDA M. DELGADILLO: The first thing I want to talk about today is nervousness and how to deal with it. I want to talk about that first because I'm very nervous right now. But if I tell you how I feel and explain how I will cope with the tension that has built up, it will help me get past that nervousness. In other words, I will channel my nervous energy into something positive by relying on certain techniques to deal with nervousness.

Before I tell you about these techniques, however, it's important to understand a little about what causes nervousness. Our body generates a lot of energy during the day. In our normal, everyday activities we release that energy very routinely and unconsciously by walking, talking, working, shopping etc. But when we find ourselves in a public speaking situation, we are not releasing that energy as freely as we normally might. We are "on hold." We're either on a panel waiting for our turn to talk, or we're waiting at the side of the stage for someone to call us to the podium. We may be on hold for five minutes or twenty minutes, and all we are doing is thinking about how nervous we're becoming. The result is a build-up of energy we are unable to release. Once we understand what's happening to us, we can use certain techniques to burn up that energy. These techniques don't work for everyone, but it is important to experiment to determine what works best for you.

One of the first things to try is developing eye contact with the audience. But when I talk about developing eye contact, I don't mean that you must look at the whole audience. Let me give you an example. Initially, I block out most of the audience from my view. I usually select one or two people who appear friendly to develop some level of eye contact with. What usually happens is that those people will encourage me by either smiling or nodding at me. Then I try the same technique with a few other people, and before I know it my confidence starts building up. When I feel that people are getting involved in my presentation, I let myself visually take in the rest of the audience.

Another technique that I find helpful is using body language or nonverbal communication. Almost 55 percent of everything we communicate is done so nonverbally. Therefore, when incorporated properly, nonverbal communications techniques will help bring life to your speeches. For example, the way you use your voice--the tone; pitch, which is the highness or lowness of your voice; and the rate at which you speak, that is, how fast or slow you talk; all bring a special meaning to a speech.

Gesturing or talking with your hands is another effective technique to help control nervousness and add meaning to your speech. Using gestures helps choreograph a speech and emphasize certain points. It also helps to show relationships between points in a speech. Gestures, however, are not natural to everyone, so if you're not comfortable using them, don't force yourself to do so.

*Mrs. Delgadillo is Director of Communications for the Society of Actuaries.

It is also important in preparing your presentation to not worry about a perfect delivery. Somewhere along the way you will stumble over a few words. In fact, it is inevitable. However, for the most part your audience will not hold it against you, and you should not let it throw you. Just move on smoothly with the speech. Worrying about the perfect delivery usually places extra pressure on the speaker, and the end result is often increased nervousness.

The most important thing to help control nervousness, and the point that should be stressed the most, is preparation. And when I talk about preparation, I don't mean that you must memorize your speech. In fact, that's probably the worst thing you can do. Preparation means that you should feel comfortable with the topic you will be discussing, so much so that your words flow in a conversational fashion. The way to achieve that effect is by practicing your speech out loud. This allows you to listen to yourself and to the rhythm and pattern of your speech. It's also helpful to tape record your comments. Then when you play back the tape, critique yourself. Practicing in front of a mirror is also important because you can watch your facial expressions and your use of other gestures.

The following tips should help you practice your speech properly. First organize the content of your presentation into a detailed, sentence outline. Then take key words from that sentence outline and put them on a 3x5 card. Practice expressing the ideas of your presentation from those key words several times until you feel comfortable with your topic. By doing this, you will have given yourself four or five different ways to express the same idea. In other words, you will have given yourself some verbal flexibility. Then if you stumble over a portion of your remarks, or if you forget something, you will have an alternative way of expressing your thoughts. You will have something to fall back on and that should make you feel secure.

There are several other things to keep in mind when trying to deal with nervousness.

*Remember that your speech is not a performance and you are not a showman onstage. Rather, keep in mind that you are involved in a communications transaction which is a two-way process. You are sending a message and you hope that your audience will receive a message.

*If you are using your 3x5 note cards, check their sequence just before your session begins.

*A few deep breaths before you actually approach the podium clears the air and clears your lungs.

*Sometimes people who speak have a dry or raspy throat usually caused from tension. Take a sip of water just before you approach the microphone.

*Pause momentarily before you speak the first word.

*Avoid eating a big meal before a speech in case you suffer from a queasy stomach.

*Another important thing to remember when someone has asked you to speak is that you've already been paid a compliment. It means that someone

believes you know more about your subject than anyone else in your audience. That alone should give you a real burst of self-confidence.

*Most speeches are too long the first time they are practiced. When you practice aloud, edit your speech as you go along. If you've practiced diligently, your speech should be tighter, more succinct, and shorter.

George Washington's inaugural address was only 135 words long. William Harrison's inaugural address was 9000 words long, and it took two hours to deliver during a rain and wind storm. He died a month later from pneumonia. The point is that the longest speeches are not always the best speeches.

*Most people in your audience don't perceive you being as nervous as you are.

*Most nervousness generally subsides within the first 30 to 60 seconds of your opening remarks.

*When preparing for your speech, think of yourself as an athlete. You know what the plays are. You know what you're going to say. It's all in your well-practiced plan. Your nervousness is a fact, but it's no more a fact than the content of your presentation and the fact that you are at ease with your topic.

QUESTION: Would the same thing apply for nonprepared presentations? I am thinking of a situation in which you're invited to a Board of Directors meeting and you are asked questions without knowing you might be called on to speak?

MRS. DELGADILLO: One rule that I always observe regarding such situations is this: Do not go to a meeting without being prepared to talk. Most of the time you probably received a copy of the agenda in advance. You should review it and select those areas where you might be called on to comment or contribute, even though you are not formally scheduled to speak. It's helpful to have a few notes made about the job or project you're working on, just in case.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

Analyzing your audience is an important aspect of speech preparation or report writing. To do a good job, you should know what your audience needs from you in the way of information. It's important to remember that today people are bombarded with information in their lives. Messages are sent from advertising, radio, TV, magazines, and newspapers in overwhelming amounts. In fact the main concern recently discussed by the top two dozen futurists in the world is how to control and disseminate information.

What does that mean for audience analysis? It means that if you do not structure your messages, the things that you want to get across to your audience, so that they mean something, the audience will not accept or receive that message. Because it is impossible to absorb all the communications messages which are sent each day, we use our selection process to help us receive and absorb only those messages which mean something to us. Therefore when writing a report or a speech, you must determine what your audience's needs are. Find out what's important to it and then structure your contents accordingly.

When you begin your analysis, it's important to first categorize your audience. Generally there are three types of audiences: 1) the audience which has common interests and experiences with you; 2) the audience which has interests and experiences completely different than yours; 3) the audience which is so large that it is difficult to discover any common experiences or attitudes. Once you have an idea of the type of audience you want to communicate with, there are certain questions to ask which will help you define that audience more clearly. When you've answered these questions, you will have the direction needed to write your report or speech.

The first question to ask is what do you want your audience to do when it receives your message? What type of attitude do you want to create and what type of action do you want your audience to take? A second question would be, who is your audience? You should consider demographic factors, such as sex, age, educational level, socioeconomic background, professional background, etc. Also determine what your audience knows about your subject. Try to find out if it has any level of understanding of the subject. Depending on the answer to that question, next ask if using jargon in your speech or report is appropriate. Will your audience understand it? If you think that people in your audience may not know what a term means, you should automatically define it. Or if you use a term and you sense that you are not getting the right response, you can ask your audience if the term is understood. The key is to use jargon carefully because if you use it with the wrong audience, your communications message will not be clearly received.

Another basic question in your audience analysis is determining whether to use statistics. Obviously if you are speaking to a group that is mathematically oriented, using statistics may be appropriate. Remember, however, that people are generally uncomfortable with numbers because numbers don't mean much to them. You must breathe life into numbers by relating them to people. For example, if you are discussing mortality trends, talk about people living and people dying and what that really means. Don't just talk about the trends.

Part of your audience analysis also includes determining if your audience has any prejudgments or prejudices towards the subject you are speaking or writing about. This information is especially important if you are discussing something new or controversial. Knowledge of the audience's bias will not only affect how you construct your presentation, but will also help you anticipate questions and challenges after your presentation.

The last basic question to ask in audience analysis is why is your audience here? Is the audience captive, meaning the members had no choice in attending your speech? That may happen if you're invited to speak at a high school or college career day. Or is your audience voluntary? In other words, did people choose to attend your speech freely? If so, it means that they will have certain expectations about what you will be discussing. Depending on why your audience is attending will affect the structure of your presentation.

OUTLINING

Once you have completed the audience analysis and you have an idea of how to approach your topic, the next step is to organize the information. One of the best methods to aid in topic organization is outlining. An outline serves as a road map for your speech. It helps you proceed from Point A to Point C by showing a relationship between the key ideas of your speech. An outline also helps you see if there is a transition and logical sequence between those

ideas. For editing purposes, an outline allows you the flexibility to focus on individual sections of your speech or your report. It is much easier to dissect and edit a section than it is to reorganize or rewrite the entire report.

The well-organized outline will help you structure your speech or report so that three distinct parts are recognizable: opening, body, and conclusion. Each section serves an important purpose in the overall development of your topic.

A good opening, for example, will not only gain the audience's attention but will also explain the main idea of your speech or your report. It will establish the mood and tone and give the audience a reason for reading your report or listening to your speech. The following techniques, when used in the opening, can help achieve this effect:

- *Make an immediate reference to the present situation.

- *Relate the historical background of your topic.

- *Cite a startling statistic.

- *Use an example by citing a specific case in point.

- *Use an illustration or tell a story about something.

- *Use personal experience.

- *Express your own opinion about something.

- *Quote a documented opinion of an expert.

Using one or a combination of these techniques should help you develop a creative opening.

The body of your speech or report should support the main idea stated in your opening and reflect your audience analysis by using several techniques and methods of development. Again you can use one or a combination of these to develop your topic:

- *Cite your own or someone else's experience.

- *Use an analogy to create a comparison or relationship between two dissimilar things.

- *Use an example to cite a specific case in point.

- *Use statistics--that is, talk about a set or a group of examples.

- *Use facts to verify a statement about something.

- *Use opinions.

Supporting these types of evidence are various methods of development which will also help organize and develop your topic. Please note that developing the body of a report or speech can become complex. Here again it's important to emphasize how using an outline can make the task much simpler.

Sequence

Describe a series of actions that must be performed in a logical sequence.

Example: To write instructions.

Chronological

Arrange events in an orderly time sequence, beginning at the start and proceeding step by step in sequential order to the end.

Example: To explain a process in which time relationships are important

Order of ImportanceDecreasing Order of Importance

Arrange ideas in a descending order of importance. Begin with the most important fact, then proceed to the next most important, etc.

Example: To write business reports.

Increasing Order of Importance

Arrange ideas beginning with the least important point and building to the most important point at the end.

Example: To use in persuasion, debates, testimony.

Comparison

Compare subjects by pointing out their similarities and differences.

Example: To use in presenting new concepts. Especially effective in comparing the subject being explained with another subject the audience may be familiar with.

General to Specific

State a general premise and then provide the facts that support the premise or build to a specific conclusion.

Example: To write management reports.

Specific to General

State a specific circumstance and then build to a general conclusion or premise. Carefully build a case and do not present a conclusion until the end.

Example: Begin with a specific incident, such as a highway accident. Generalize about how the accident's details were common enough to other accidents, so much so that recommendations can be made to reduce the chance of such accidents occurring in the future.

Spatial Method

Develop a subject from the bottom to top, near to far, inside to outside, right to left, etc. Should not be used unless it is natural to the subject.

Example: To develop a report geographically, such as describing examination trends for candidates from the East Coast to the West Coast.

Analysis

Separate a whole into its component parts. This method of development distinguishes and separates things, situations, experiences or concepts and identifies the different parts.

Example: To use for a report on a company's major departments, such as manufacturing, marketing, purchasing, accounting, etc., and then focus on each department to explain its various functions.

Problem/Solution

Identify a problem and then describe a solution or variety of solutions.

Example: To analyze a process or system. Identify the problem areas, discuss the various solutions to consider, and then make recommendations.

Finally, each report or speech should have a conclusion in which the main ideas are summarized. Conclusions are especially important in speeches because people's concentration fluctuates during a presentation. Because of that, they may miss an important part of a speech. A good conclusion, however, will resummairize those important points. Audiences frequently need that type of assistance.

Conclusions are also essential in written reports, but even more important, especially in lengthy reports, are executive summaries. An executive summary is just what it sounds like. It summarizes the salient features for the executives or other management people who may not have time to read the entire report. Executive summaries are usually found at the beginning of a business report.

VISUAL AIDS

Have you ever noticed how a note slipped across your desk while you're talking on the phone can easily distract you from the conversation? So much so, in fact, that you may not recall what the other person said during that brief moment. That's because sight dominates all our other senses. In fact, 85% of everything we learn in life comes through our eyes.

How important is it, then, to use visual aids with your speeches? And will your speech be better because you're using visual aids?

Your speech will be better if your visual aids will increase the audience's interest; make the points of your speech more clear; simplify any technical data you may be using; and add variety and a change of pace to your speech.

The type of visual aid to use will depend on the setting you are in and the audience's size. Answering the following questions will guide you in selecting the appropriate visuals.

*What is the size of the room you will be speaking in?

*What is the size of the audience?

*How will the audience be seated?

*Will you speak from a high stage or on the same level as the audience?

If you have five or ten people in a small business meeting, you can use a flip chart or chalkboard. If you are addressing a larger group, you probably should use transparencies. If you are in a session where you have 50 or more people attending, slides may be more effective. No matter what type of visual aid you use, make sure your audience can see it from the sides and back of the room.

If you've decided to use slides or transparencies, try to have them professionally designed. Homemade visuals, especially transparencies produced from a typewriter, are difficult to see and are usually of poor quality. If you work for a large company, try to use the graphic arts department to prepare the visuals. If you work for a smaller company or consulting firm, where you do not have direct access to an art department, you might have to hire an outside graphics artist to assist you. The additional expense is usually small, and the final product is worth the price.

There are a few other things to remember when using visual aids. If you are using slides, remember to "pack your own parachute." That simply means to

rely on yourself to assemble the slide carousel and drop your slides into place. Also check the focus and slide sequence before the audience gathers for your presentation.

If you are using transparencies with an overhead projector, make sure that the projector is focused and the bulb is working. Also make sure that your projector is equipped with a spare bulb in case the original burns out.

The following list includes some additional suggestions on how to use visual aids.

- *Make your visuals big, bold, simple and in color.
- *Darker colors show up more richly and clearly than lighter colors. Use colors like red, black, blue and green. White is usually a good contrasting color.
- *Stay away from colors like orange, brown and other lighter shades. These are difficult to see, especially from a distance.
- *Look through newspapers and magazines to study how their graphics are designed to illustrate trends, statistics and comparisons.
- *Use large, heavy lines for drawings
- *Test your visual aids in the room where you'll be speaking.
- *Give everyone time to see and understand your visual.
- *Use a pointer when showing technical or financial charts, graphs and diagrams. Use an electric pointer with slides
- *Use large printed letters for chalkboards, flip charts and posters.
- *Rehearse your presentation with the visuals you plan to use.
- *All visuals, except for photographs and slides, should be numbered so that the audience can easily follow specific points.
- *Remember to face the audience when describing a visual. It's easy to talk toward the visual and turn your back on the audience.
- *Slides are the most versatile visuals. Charts, graphs, tables, lists, illustrations and photographs can be nicely incorporated into slides.
 - Graphs and charts should be simple.
 - Begin with the first item and add one additional item per slide for lists that will be elaborated upon.
 - Add variety to your slides using drawings, fabric as background, photographs and color.
 - Be careful about having the lights turned out too long during a slide presentation. It can turn your audience off as well.

QUESTION: Are handouts considered visual aids?

MRS. DELGADILLO: Yes, they are. I don't usually recommend handing out material until after a presentation because I think it distracts the audience.

QUESTION: Is it better to hand out material before your speech and have the audience flip through the pages along with what you're talking about?

MRS. DELGADILLO: It depends on how technical your material is. If you feel that the audience needs a handout to understand your presentation, then you should do that.

QUESTION: Why are the kind of visual aids you use dependent on whether the stage is higher or at the same level as your audience?

MRS. DELGADILLO: If you are high up on a stage, you may want the screen raised

higher and behind you so that everyone can see the visuals. If you are speaking on the same level as your audience, you're probably in a much smaller room, where a screen does not have to be raised to be seen.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Let's talk for a few minutes now on a question and answer session. The first rule of thumb is that your speech is never over until the last question is asked and you sit down. This means that in your speech preparation you should assume that you will be asked questions. It is often helpful, for example, to know more about your subject than you will be able to present in a formal discussion. In other words, if you have 20 minutes to talk, prepare enough additional material to fill 40 minutes. Keep that last 20 minutes of material on the back burner. You may be asked a question you can answer based on that other information. The effect of preparing in this manner is to give yourself flexibility to discuss your topic.

In addition, if from your audience analysis you determined that the audience may have a prejudgment or prejudice towards your topic, you should be prepared for the possibility of hostile or challenging questions being asked, particularly if you're discussing something controversial. Part of your speech preparation should include anticipating what those might be and how to answer them.

The following additional suggestions can help guide you through a question and answer session.

*No question is too basic. Even if you think a question is basic, remember that people do not concentrate throughout an entire speech. You already discussed what is being asked, but it is possible that the questioner did not hear it. You should simply answer the question.

*Maintain your composure. This is particularly important if you are discussing something controversial. Someone is sure to disagree with you. Or sometimes there are hecklers in your audience, even in the nicest of circumstances. What usually happens is that the audience will support you and embarrass the heckler. Whatever the situation, however, don't lose your temper.

*Try not to patronize your audience. You really don't want to say "I could explain it but it's so technical you might not understand." That type of response usually insults people and that's not the effect you want.

*Complex information may lead to complex questions. If you are discussing complex information, someone may ask a complex question. To answer, it is helpful to take notes while the question is being asked. But if you sense that the audience is not interested in or will not necessarily benefit from the answer to such a question, answer as briefly as possible. Then invite the questioner to talk with you after the session, when you can answer the question more completely.

*Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." If you are asked a question you honestly can't answer, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." The audience will sense it if you try to improvise an answer. You can indicate that you will try to find an answer and contact the questioner at a later date. And then by all means do just that! It's easy to overlook this when your session is completed.

*It's important to use microphones. If you are talking in a room furnished with aisle microphones, encourage your audience to use them so that everyone will benefit from the discussion which may occur. Microphones should also be used by both the speaker and the questioner if the session is tape recorded. Questions asked from the floor rather than from the microphone will not be audible on the tape. Try to remember, though, that because people may be shy about asking questions in an unfamiliar audience, some individuals will be more comfortable conversing from their seats. If that happens, you should repeat the question for the audience's benefit before you respond.

*Try not to let one person ask all the questions in a session. Remind the individual that "perhaps someone else would like to ask a question."

*Renegotiate difficult questions. If someone asks you a difficult or hostile question, try to renegotiate it by restating it in your own words. Take the sting out of it a bit so you can answer the question in a softer fashion.

One other important way a question and answer session can be used is in assessing how well your speech was received. You can get some idea of that based on the questions asked. Did your audience seem to understand the information you tried to share with it? What kinds of questions were asked? Were they elementary, and if they were, is that because you did not explain the material clearly? If your audience did not ask any questions, perhaps it is also telling you something. You may have covered your material so well that no one needed any further information. Or your audience may have been so bored that it would not want to ask any questions. Whatever the case, the question and answer period can be used to analyze how well you did, if you targeted your audience analysis properly, where you need to improve and what you should do differently in future presentations.

TIPS FOR BETTER LISTENING

Communications is defined as a two-way transaction in which one person sends a message and another person receives the message. The definition implies that both the sender and receiver are sharing the responsibility in that communications transaction. For example, I am sending you a message in my capacity here today as a guest speaker. In order for you to receive my message, you must listen to what I am saying. You must concentrate on the total meaning, and that includes the feeling a person expresses, the tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions. Total meaning is often hidden in the nonverbal cues.

Having an accepting attitude towards the speaker also improves listening. For example, if we don't like someone's appearance, we usually won't like what they will say either. However, we don't give speakers a fair chance when we judge on attitude alone. Finally, an important part of good listening involves "closing the loop" by taking some action based on the information we received. Closing the loop can be a response as simple as nodding after and exchange of information, but it demonstrates that the listener has absorbed the information.

QUESTION: Two common presentations most of us make are informational presentations and evaluation reports. One way to ensure that you have your audience's attention is to ask questions throughout the presentation. This helps you

determine if people understand a particular concept before you discuss additional material. But what else can you do to make sure that people have received the message you were sending?

MRS. DELGADILLO: You cannot be sure that everyone will receive your message. Communication is a two-way process and, as we discussed before, people do have a responsibility to listen. But many times they do not. There are some things you can do, however, to help them pay attention. For example, try to create a frame of reference based on their knowledge or experiences. You can use examples and comparison to achieve this effect, or you can cite your personal experience or your company's experience.

COMMENT: A thought occurred to me while you were discussing outlining the body of your topic. Perhaps you could organize the points in order of importance. Every time I've written a report I've discussed the topic in a decreasing order of importance, starting with what I think is most important. Perhaps that's a good technique if you expect your audience to agree with you. But perhaps if you expect a defensive reaction you should give the audience something meaningless to disagree with you on; that might allow the audience the chance to get that first defensive reaction out of the way before you come to the important part of your discussion. I have not tried this so I don't know if it would work.

MRS. DELGADILLO: The technique you're suggesting works well if you're trying to persuade someone to a particular point of view. In such a situation, you usually begin with a less important point and gradually build to the most important.

QUESTION: I'd like to know your thoughts on inserting humor into a speech.

MRS. DELGADILLO: I think humor is fine, but it's a very personal thing. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. I generally encourage using humor but only light touches of it based on one's personal experience. The effect you are creating is poking fun at yourself, and that's usually a safe type of humor to use.

