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Persuasive Communication

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Past-Chairperson

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As actuaries, we have valuable and unique technical expertise of benefit to the financial institutions and the customers that we serve. However, we often contribute somewhat less than our full potential. When this occurs, it is usually due to our inability to influence others through effective communication, rather than a shortcoming in our technical analyses.

So, how can we improve our ability to communicate persuasively? We can apply some basic techniques used in the science of preparing persuasive presentations—both written and oral. I use the word "science" to indicate that, contrary to popular belief, persuasive communication is not an art form, but rather a skill which can be learned. There are some tangible and logical procedures that we can follow to improve. A few examples are given below, followed by a recommended reading.

Engaging introduction

Many presentations begin with the conclusion, followed by the supporting reasoning. This is appropriate for update types of presentations, like reporting financial results. However, this is not appropriate when the goal is to persuade a new course of action. The audience may "tune out" if they do not agree with the conclusion at the outset, which is often the case.

It is better to begin by level-setting the audience, identifying the challenge and then leading the audience through to the main point of the presentation through a question and answer format. Such an introduction has four basic parts:

Situation – The introduction should begin with a simple, non-controversial statement that explains to the audience the starting point of the story. For example, see the first sentence of this article.

Complication – The complication is the wrinkle in the story—something that has changed or frustrated the situation. For example, see the second sentence of this article.

Question – The complication should raise a question in the mind of the audience. In this article, the question is spelled out in the first sentence of the second paragraph. This is a common and effective technique, although the question is often merely implied.

Answer – The upshot of the introduction is bringing the audience to the answer, which should be the main point of the presentation. In this article, the main point is stated in the second sentence of the second paragraph.

Another benefit to this type of introduction is that it is in the form of a story. People of all ages like stories. Stories are interesting and they also make it easier for the audience to follow the logic. A recent article in the Harvard Business Review described the importance of storytelling in persuasive business communications, particularly in presentations to stock analysts.

This approach to introductions is commonly employed in professional business communications that involve persuasive presentations. Now that you understand the structure, see if you can identify its application in the newspaper or industry publication article you read that involves the presentation of a new idea. This technique is also evident in most commercial advertisements, although it is much abbreviated.

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"Persuasive communication is not an art form, but rather is a skill which can be learned."

Don't Manage Your Time; Maximize Your Time • from page 9

1. Did it right away.

2. Scheduled it for a specific time slot on a weekday.

3. Delegated it to someone else (In which case, he spoke with the individual to identify if they had the time to do it. If they did not, then they discussed what could be taken off of their plate.).

4. Decided that it was not worth doing.

He reduced the number of Saturdays he worked by more than 60 percent and, by his own admission, became much more effective.

Define Your Boundaries and Stick To Them

By far, the greatest time-waster that I know of is when individuals allow other people to interrupt their schedule. This is particularly true of subordinates allowing their supervisors to pull them away from what they have decided is the most effective use of their time. Top performers simply do not allow this to happen. They have the courage to say to others including their boss that they are currently working on something else. They will say, "At the moment I'm working on this project. However, let's look at our calendars and set up a time to discuss your idea. If I can see how it will drive better results, then I will be glad to discuss it and will build my schedule around it." Top performers realize that everyone's performance is ultimately measured by their results. Consequently, they don't allow anything, including their boss's short-term needs, to interfere with their successful implementation of a schedule designed to drive better results.

Top performers realize that one of the keys to success is maximizing the use of their time toward achieving meaningful results. ❑

Top performers realize that everyone's performance is ultimately measured by their results.

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Appropriate level of detail

Many of our presentations provide comprehensive amounts of detail. However, when more detail than necessary is included in the presentation, the result is a less effective message. Presentations should be structured in an organized, hierarchical fashion, so that the level of detail can quickly be tailored for the appropriate audience or time frame.

Singular purpose

Presentations often include information that does not directly support the main point. While this tangential information may be irresistibly interesting, it distracts from a clean, logical persuasive argument. Such information should be eliminated from the presentation, or re-phrased, if possible, into a supporting argument for the main point. If it is not possible to identify only one over-arching point, then the material should be separated into more than one presentation.

Recommended reading

One of the best resources on this topic is a book authored by Barbara Minto, called *The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving.* Barbara Minto developed this approach when she was a partner at McKinsey & Company. The book covers the techniques referenced above, and much more. ❑