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How Do You Communicate Success?

by Glenda Maki



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Think about an office you may have worked in or currently work in. Chances are the owner, president, CEO, etc., isn't hunched over a computer in his or her office. Instead, leaders spend the majority of their time meeting people, making connections or selling the company's products or services. What do these people have that the average worker may not? They have excellent communication skills.

As with any field, there are two parts to a successful career—doing the actual work and then communicating the results. As an actuary, you may be doing a lot of analytical work, however, eventually that analytical work will need to be shared. Decisions will need to be made on what to say, how much to say and what not to say.

Becoming a Multi-Dimensional Actuary

If you're an excellent communicator, you will rise in the company faster than someone who isn't. Take a look at people like Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey or Jack Welch. Like them or not, they all have business skills and the ability to communicate well to others. As Laurie Schloff, communication coach at The Speech Improvement Company, located in Boston, Mass., says, there are two sides to communication. "There's the business side of

communicating—what you know about your field—and then there's the human side."

Schloff specializes in the "human side" of communication, emphasizing that there is a difference between having knowledge and being able to talk about that knowledge in a way that people can understand. To illustrate this, in a recent presentation to actuaries, she asked attendees to explain "nested stochastic analysis," with the goal of explaining it so an outsider would understand it. The person who explained it the most clearly received a prize.

The Communication 'Pie Chart'

Schloff visualizes communication as a pie chart. One-third of the pie is the actual content (i.e., the words you choose and how you organize your talk).

One-third of it is what you call your oral image, or how you sound. This includes your talking speed, volume, sound of your voice and how interesting you are to listen to (a big issue for people in technical fields).

The final one-third of the pie chart is your visual image, or how you look. Your look includes:

- Facial expression
- How you use your hands

Lauries' Top 5 Communication Tips

1. Think mind over mouth. Think of your goal and how you want to express it before you open your mouth.
2. Check your appearance. Is your nonverbal image expressing confidence and comfort?
3. Listen to your voice. Are you controlling speed, volume and the ability to hold the audience's interest?
4. Be pleasant and approachable. No matter how focused you are on the task always take the time to be personable.
5. Analyze how you did. Search for ways to keep improving.

- How you stand
- Where you look when you're talking to a group
- Your clothing—it's important to dress for the job you want, not the one you have.

Visual image also includes your visual aids—what your charts and diagrams look like.

She advises investing in some good communication courses "... and some great clothing. Let your visual image reflect confidence."

Practicing your Communication Skills

Now that you know you need to beef up your communication skills, how do you do it? Schloff offers a couple of simple exercises that you can practice on a regular basis. One is to try to explain certain concepts and ideas to people who aren't in your field. A good way to do this is to define the idea in 15 words or less, then follow the definition with an example.

Another way to practice is by leaving voice mail messages. In general, people prefer a voice mail message that is 15 seconds or under. Schloff calls this the "mind over mouth" technique. Ask yourself: "What's the main point I want to make? Write down a few notes. It may sound overdone, however it is important—especially if you're job hunting.

Communicating with Non-Actuaries

Another thing you can do when communicating with non-actuaries is to ask them how much they already know about your topic. You've probably seen a teacher or a public speaker use this technique.

Schloff offers an example. "You can ask your audience: 'Are red pens something you're familiar with, or would you like me to start with some of the basics about red pens?'" At that point, your audience will give you an idea of where they're at. Once you've gauged the audience's level of understanding, state the term or the concept, give a definition and an example.

Direct Communication

Depending on whom you're presenting to, the speaker can be either direct or indirect in his or her presentation. Schloff advises that direct communication works best when people already buy into your expertise.

For example, if you're the hired actuary, and an audience is looking for your opinion, there's no need to be indirect, you can come right out with your conclusion. In this case, you would first give

the conclusion and then support the conclusion with three backup points.

Indirect Communication

If you're looking to persuade an audience, or if they're not familiar with the material you are presenting, indirect communication will work more effectively. When using indirect communication, you present your points or evidence first, then deliver the conclusion.

As with any field, there are two parts to a successful career—doing the actual work and then communicating the results.

Wrap-Up

If you get the opportunity, take advantage of classes or workshops that build communication skills. You can also join your local Toastmasters club, <http://www.toastmasters.org/>, which allows people to practice their public speaking skills. And if you're short on time, at least practice the exercises presented in this article. Make sure your hard work really pays off by becoming one of the next great communicators! 🗣️

Special thanks go to Laurie Schloff for her contributions to this article. You can reach Laurie at 1-800-LETS-RAP in the United States at 617-739-3330 or at laurie@speechimprovement.com.

Laurie Schloff is a senior coaching partner at The Speech Improvement Company and conducts "Analysis and Presentation of Strategic Financial Information" workshops for the SOA. She trains and coaches in presentation skills, leadership training, fear of speaking, conference coaching and facilitation skills. She is also the author of two popular books: Smart Speaking and He and She Talk. Laurie is a frequent guest expert on radio and TV. She has been a guest on Oprah and The Today Show and is also a contributor to Cosmopolitan, Woman's Day and Ladies Home Journal.