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SOA 2012 Health Meeting Interview with Mary Milla

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At the 2012 SOA Health Meeting, Mary Milla shared expert tips on giving effective presentations, with particular focus on the skills and approaches actuaries can take advantage of to improve effective communication. We met with Milla before her presentation to get some thoughts from her on these topics.

Doug Norris: As actuaries, we're very technically minded. What are some of the biggest mistakes that technically minded people make when they present?

Mary Milla: They believe that their audiences simply want the technical data, and they leave it up to the audiences to interpret. They don't take full advantage of their expertise and go beyond simply delivering the data. I'm a sports fan, so I compare it to sports. My technical clients put themselves in the "play-by-play" box. They just do play-by-play, but their audiences want color commentary as well. Don't just do play-by-play and give me the data; be the color-commentator and interpret the data. Tell us what we should do and how we should act upon the data. That elevates you from being just the data person to being a real member of the team that people want to seek out—"We don't want to make decisions until we hear from the actuary, because we have an actuary that we actually understand and can be persuaded by because he does play-by-play and he does color."

DN: In terms of bang for your buck, where are the easiest places to focus if someone wants to improve his or her presentation abilities?

MM: Three ingredients—that's what I teach all of my clients. You have to have a point; you have to show your personality; and you absolutely have to practice. Those are the three things that I'm always focusing on with my clients.

T.J. Gray: As far as practicing, are there some methods you have found are better than others?

MM: Well, the one thing they are not using is that they're just not doing it—they are not practicing. They define practice wrong, and the number one wrong way that I find that people define practice is "I looked at my slides. I looked at my slides on the plane. I reviewed them." I see this on airplanes all the time—I see people opening up their laptops and

sort of nodding through their slides. I try to behave and be really quiet and not say, "Hi, I'm a public speaking coach! Let me help with that." The number one mistake that people make in practice is they don't do it—they mumble to themselves.

In terms of practicing, what I tell folks to do is prioritize their speaking opportunities on their calendar. Practicing isn't just for a major speech in front of hundreds of people. It can be for any meeting, any communications opportunity that you deem is high-stakes for you. I have clients who rehearse one-on-one meetings and clients who rehearse conference calls; if they are going to lead them, they will rehearse small group presentations. Practicing is rehearsing out loud, from start to finish, and it is amazing to see the difference between take one and take five or take six. It's oftentimes a vastly different presentation than when they started.

TG: Have you seen any kind of magic number of how many times someone needs to practice before it becomes really good?

MM: Everyone has their own magic number. I had a client who had a high-stakes presentation to deliver to his most important sales people, and he rehearsed it 21 times. He started rehearsing it seven weeks before he actually had to deliver it. My magic number is about eight, and I define magic number as "you hit a point where you just know that if you keep doing this, you'll get worse." You just have to feel in your gut, "Ok. I've got it, and now I'm going to stop." That's how it is for me. But everyone has their own magic number.

I hear, "you make it look so natural," all the time as well, and I think it's sort of the ultimate compliment and the ultimate insult rolled into one. You do want to look natural, but when people come up to you and say, "Oh, you're such a natural. You just have it. You're just born with it," part of me wants to choke the person who says it because I think, "You have no idea. It took 25 hours or it took 50 hours to get 'natural.'"

That's another misperception that people have about practicing: I get asked a lot, "Well, if I practice, I'll come off as too smooth, too slick and too rehearsed." I haven't met that person yet. Practicing is never

going to hurt you. The really unfair thing about public speaking is that it takes a lot of rehearsal to look unrehearsed. I wish it were different because we would all rather be doing other things with those 25–50 hours, but it does pay off.

TG: What is your opinion on some of the tools that people commonly use to help prepare presentations, like PowerPoint?

MM: PowerPoint is a terrific tool when it is used strategically and correctly. If it's used as a crutch, that is where PowerPoint gets a lot of blame that it just doesn't deserve. It's a really effective tool if you use it properly. For example, I tell all of my clients that the number one mistake people make when preparing presentations is to first open a PowerPoint window and start creating their slides. At that point, what you're doing is writing your whole speech on slides and you're really writing a little book, and not a presentation. What I make my clients do is shut down PowerPoint, go old-school, and take pen to paper. I make them write down, "Here's what my goal is, here's where I want to take the audience, here's what my messages are, here's how I'm going to prove my messages, here's how I'm going to open, here's how I'm going to close." And then I say, "Now, do you even need PowerPoint? Do you even need it?" I have clients who have abandoned PowerPoint for certain types of meetings with great success. So it's a great tool when it's there to support you and advance your message, but when you abuse it, it really takes away from your message.

DN: Is it because people use PowerPoint first that you think they actually end up writing their entire presentation out and then they read it to the audience?

MM: Exactly. The number one complaint I get, especially from executive audiences, is "Why does it take 90 slides to tell me how many widgets we sold last quarter? You could tell me that story in one slide." When I then ask people in middle-management, "Why does it take you 90 slides to tell a story that could be told in one or two?" they say, "Well, when I'm presenting in the executive board room, it's very intimidating, so I want the executive team to know that I'm smart." Here's what one CEO said to me years ago: "If you're presenting to the CEO



Mary Milla

and the CFO and the CAO and the whole C-level team, you already are smart. To get on our agenda, you have to be smart. No one says 'Hey, let's send the weird, stupid guy down the hall in to present to the executives'. No one does that. We already know you're smart. We get it. So tell us your story in five slides, not 90."

DN: Do you have any tips for tailoring your presentation to a certain audience, for example a disparate group of people?

MM: First of all, absolutely start by analyzing your audience. Do you know when I learned this? I learned this in my very first public speaking class in the fifth grade. It's not rocket science, and people tend to completely overthink it. Absolutely analyze your audience—take off your hat, and put on theirs. Ask yourself, "What does my topic look like to them? If I were in their shoes, what would I ask?"

To your question about disparate audiences—I get this all the time, where I know that I have people who have heard my speech or been in my workshops before, and I get really obsessed with repeating things for them. What they tell me is "don't":

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

“Err on the side of those who haven’t heard it before.”

a refresher is always good, and people who have heard the message before or who are more up to speed than others in the room don’t mind hearing it again. Out of respect for those for whom the information is new, they’re completely fine with you going over it again. My audiences tell me, “Err on the side of those who haven’t heard it before.”

TG: Regarding the audience, do you have any tips for what to do if you feel that your audience is kind of going away, or you’re getting off-track on your presentation? What’s a good way to get back on point?

MM: First, prevent that from ever happening in the first place. That comes with your presentation—really tailoring it to your audience. If you haven’t done that and you find yourself seeing people slumping in their chairs, people checking their BlackBerrys, people passing notes, that sort of thing, I’m a real advocate of just bringing your presentation to a grinding, screeching halt and confessing, “I sense that I’m losing some of you here. Tell me why that is.” Make it interactive instead of just slogging through. The audience will really appreciate that because what you’ve told them is, “I am actually looking at you. I am actually watching you, and I am actually paying attention and responding to what you’re giving me here.” Then, I think you’ll have a much more productive meeting. You have the wiggle room to do that in a small-group presentation, so if you’re presenting to an internal team, maybe up to 10 to 12 people, you can do that and create a good, interactive, productive meeting. If you’re speaking to hundreds of people, you don’t have that option, so that’s why preparation is so key.

DN: On a related note, I’ve had some people in the audience who have a specific angle or sound bite that they want to get across. How do you keep audience members from derailing you if they want you to go in a direction that you don’t want to go?

MM: You have to prepare your key messages ahead of time so that you can use the Q&A as an extension of your presentation. For whatever someone gives you, you have to have your key messages in mind so that you can steer the conversation back to what the main messages were. There are all sorts

of empathetic language you can use to do that: you can say, “I hear what you’re saying” or “I can appreciate that we have a different point of view.” You just answer the question and address the concern. Then say, “But appreciate where I’m coming from ...” and steer the conversation back to your key message.

The other thing that works really well is what your body language does with someone who is trying to take over or derail. You maintain eye contact with them during the question, and then after you give the first sentence of your answer, break eye contact and address your answer to the entire room. That signals to that person that “I’m done with you, and I need to give someone else a chance to have their voice heard.” That works very, very well.

DN: Your website is a tremendous resource for people who are working on presentations. Do you have any other resources that you’d recommend for the readers?

MM: Yes, there is a terrific book called *Why Business People Speak Like Idiots*. It’s a snarky title, but it’s a delightful book with a lot of really practical information. It was written by a couple of Deloitte consultants who got really tired of listening and presenting with jargon and buzz words and PowerPoint templates, and it’s a wonderfully refreshing book about injecting personality back into business communication.

The one that I’m reading now is a book called *Quiet*. It’s by Susan Cain, and it’s about being an introvert in an extroverted world. As an introvert, it’s a wonderful book that I think is great for introverts and extroverts but, speaking as an introvert, you read it and you just say “Oh, I’m normal.” It’s very, very refreshing. The book talks about how introverts really can’t use their introversion as an excuse when it comes to presenting because research shows we have the ability to act like an extrovert when we’re talking about something that we’re passionate about. So basically it’s turning it on for an hour and then you can go back to your couch and curl up in the fetal position. It talks about how speakers, even in their contracts, will set up their time to say, “Look, in order to be my best for this speech, I have to devote all of my energy to this, so I have to schedule down time.” I just think the book is a godsend for introverts. ■