

Three Vital questions About Presentation Skills

By Larry Tracy

Tracy Presentation Skills

As social animals, we spend most of our time in oral communication with our fellow social animals. Although the written document is a more efficient means of communicating data, it is not as effective as the spoken word in writing our ideas on the brains of others.

We are accustomed to receiving information directly from human beings. That is why we watch an anchor person read the news to us from a TelePrompTer. If receiving information was our primary goal, a more efficient means of learning the data would be to have the camera directed at the TelePrompTer so we could read the text ourselves. But would we?

Because of this predisposition to communicate with each other face-to-face, the ability to make a coherent, convincing presentation is a vital ability for every person who has the ambition to succeed. Let's address three questions which are central for anyone who wishes to become a more powerful and persuasive presenter.

Are speaking skills important?

Many mid-level managers have seen their careers go down the tubes because of their inability to communicate in high-pressure situations. Lee Iacocca, in his years at Ford and Chrysler, was a strong advocate of intensive training in speaking skills for his engineers. Keep in mind that it was his ability to communicate, not his engineering talent, that ultimately persuaded Congress to make the loan to bail out Chrysler. Reflecting on the importance of being able to speak well, Iacocca wrote in his autobiography:

I've known a lot of engineers with terrific ideas who had trouble explaining them to others. It's always a shame when a guy with great talent can't tell the board or a committee what's in his head.

Iacocca was not the first to make this observation. He was repeating, in effect, the words of Pericles. Over 2,500 years ago, that great Greek statesman and orator said

A person who can think, but cannot express what he thinks, places himself at the level of the person who cannot think.

Those two statements, separated by so many centuries, just about say it all about the need to develop excellent presentation skills. How many brilliant people have you seen become tongue-tied when asked to make a "say a few words?"

How many times have you experienced the frustration of being unable to unlock the knowledge you had on a subject because you couldn't find the words, or were petrified at the prospect of speaking before a group? The result: You failed to persuade.

Why is speaking to groups so feared?

In October 1973, the Sunday Times of London asked 3,000 Americans what was their greatest fear. The results? 41% said "speaking in front of a group," while 19% said "dying."

Jerry Seinfeld used this survey in the opening of one of his programs by wondering if this meant that most people would rather be in a coffin than deliver the eulogy. Surveys in subsequent years have consistently placed public speaking at the top of lists of things people would rather not do.

From my experience in training business executives and government officials, I have come to the conclusion that the overarching reason many people are petrified at the prospect of speaking before a group is fear of the unknown, fear of being evaluated, fear of being embarrassed.

Because of speaker anxiety, many talented and competent people avoid speaking in public and thereby choose to remain on the sidelines. Others do make presentations because they have no choice, but hide behind the fatalistic myth that speakers are born, not made. They make no effort to improve their speaking ability.

Ironically, they make the investment of time and energy to learn the complexities of computer science, engineering, the law or some other complex discipline, but remain convinced that being a good speaker is an innate talent, not one that can be acquired. How wrong they are, what a tragedy for them, what a waste of human capital for their companies!

What is the most important characteristic for presenters?

Let me tell you first what it is not. It is not mastering PowerPoint, nor is it the ability to turn a clever phrase, nor a mellifluous voice and riveting eye contact.

The most important characteristic you must possess to be an effective speaker is credibility. The speaker who is judged credible by audience members receives the most important element in communication - trust.

Aristotle, father of public speaking training, used the Greek word *ethos* to describe this characteristic. He maintained that an audience that knows little of the subject being discussed would be inclined to accept the point being advocated if the speaker had *ethos*. In my judgment, credibility flows from the fusing of three elements:

First, the speaker's expertise. The audience wants to benefit by the speaker's knowledge, and therefore needs to know that the speaker has something worthwhile to say that will answer the eternal question of all audiences: "What's in it for me?"

Second, the speaker's believability. We want the speaker to give us the truth, not spin, not propaganda. If an audience perceives that the speaker is not being truthful, that speaker might just as well save his or her breath. An old saying sums up the need to be truthful: You can't believe liars, even when they are telling the truth.

Third, the speaker's likeability. Audiences, and clients, tend to accept information from people they like, reject it from people they dislike. This is actually a fault of all of us who listen to presentations. The speaker may be an expert, may be telling the truth, but because we don't like the speaker, we tune out. In doing so, we unfortunately cut ourselves off from valuable information because of our subjective reaction.

A lesson from Aristotle for managers is that if you have people working for you who are experts and truthful, but who cause the room temperature to drop by ten degrees when they enter a room, make sure they work on inter personal skills before a board of directors or clients.

Let me end this article with what may be a surprise for many of you. No presenter can say that he or she possesses credibility. Credibility is bestowed by audience members based on how they perceive our expertise, believability, and likeability.

With credibility, there is no limit to your ability to move people to your position. Without credibility, you have little chance at persuading.