

A Good Speech Is Worth a Thousand (Written) Words

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Abstract—Management often thrusts the role of speaker on people untrained in that art. Although they know that printed words are effective for communicating information and data, they seldom realize that spoken words may have little to do with the effectiveness of a presentation. More important to believability are the visual and vocal characteristics projected by the speaker. Several suggestions are given for becoming a more effective speaker.

TO obtain desired results and actions, information processing professionals must be able to communicate. Speaking effectively and delivering plausible presentations can make the difference and is a good place to start.

In any management situation, it's critically important to touch the emotions and the senses. Listeners will not react and won't be moved if they are given nothing but literal information. Unfortunately, managers often ignore the basics. They don't realize how their own nerves help cause those "blahs."

While technology has catapulted organizations into an information maelstrom, the human capability of communicating has moved at a snail's pace. For each technological advance that distances one person from another, there is a corresponding increase in the need for human contact.

The most important skill any manager can have is the ability to verbalize and motivate people—to put ideas into action. Yet fewer than one percent of the business people in America have done anything to improve their skills.

Thomas A. Murphy, former chairman of General Motors Corp., once said, "Few of us are trained in public speaking; it isn't how we got where we are. But when you reach the general-management level, you are thrust into that role."

There is nothing complicated about speaking. It comes naturally to everyone, but too many business people approach it the wrong way.

NOT A WRITTEN REPORT

If there is one critical concept that the majority of business people have not realized, and one essential for verbal effectiveness, it is that a presentation is not a written report.

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The printed word is the most effective tool for getting across data and information. People can read four times faster than they can speak. Business traditions are based on the rational, logical approach of the sequential printed word; so is the educational system. But a live, verbal presentation is much more than a linear progression of words delivered through the mouth.

When a person is speaking, many other things are going on. Studies have proven that when nonverbal messages are inconsistent with words—even contradictory—people believe the nonverbal over the words. The speaker is the medium of the message; and to a very large extent, the speaker is the message. If a speaker grasps a lectern, gazes up at the chandelier, displays signs of nervousness, and begins a speech with "My associates, my good friends, . . .," no one in the audience will believe he or she is their friend. Actions speak louder than words.

RICH BRAIN, POOR BRAIN

One way to understand speaking is to recognize that it is largely a right brain function. So are seeing and listening to a speaker.



"... And that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

Much has been written in the last four years about right **brain/left** brain processing. What is important for the business executive to understand is that everybody thinks in both modes, but by knowing what is to be accomplished, the speaker can achieve **more** success by using the strongest mode for the goal at hand.

The right brain handles intuition, emotion, and holistic methods of the thinking and decision-making processes. This is where such inputs as sound, color, movement, and patterns register.

The left brain (usually located in the left side of the cerebral hemisphere) processes information analytically, logically, and linearly. Reasoning and scientific data are stored and categorized by the left brain. The written word—reports, budgets, analyses, arguments, and even written **speeches**—is processed through the left brain.

Recent studies have indicated that top executives are largely guided by right brain activities—they score high on intuition and prefer oral reports to written reports because they can "get a feel" for the person presenting. "Seeing the whole picture" is a right brain function, and the best managers operate from that perspective.

Speaking is not a ping-pong game of words. People communicate mind-to-mind in person, not word-by-word. It's not just the words, but **how** those words are said. More than that, it's how the person looks, sounds, and everything he or she does. They all **register**—either positively or negatively. So it's important to know what counts the most for the message to be accepted.

THE THREE V'S

There are only three elements to any spoken communication:

- **Verbal**—the words or content—what is said
- **Vocal**—the voice expression, resonance, tempo, and inflections
- **Visual**—all that is seen by others: How the speaker looks, eye contact, posture, gestures, and facial expressions.

Dr. Albert Mehrabian of UCLA startled the traditional world of communication (in both education and business) with the discoveries published several years ago in his book ***Silent Messages***. One of the foremost communication researchers in the country, Mehrabian measured the impact and **believability** of the spoken message according to these three elements.

His important findings: verbal—only 7 percent; vocal—38 percent; and visual—a whopping 55 percent. These figures contradict what has been taught in the schools and has carried over into business communication.

BECOMING EFFECTIVE

Very few managers are operating at their optimum level of communicative ability. Most managers block their message, get bogged down in the detail of words or facts, and forget that they are both the delivery system and the message itself. Even those managers who are outstanding **decision-makers**, administrative whizzes, and financial geniuses often fall short when they stand up to speak.

Following is some personal advice on how to go about becoming a more effective speaker, to deliver ideas with impact.

DON'T READ A TALK

Hiding behind the security of a written script may make **you** feel better, but not your audience. More important, it's not very effective.

When you are speaking from notes or extemporaneously, personally making your point, the audience can see that it comes from you. A written speech might be analytically correct, but most people will assume the words aren't yours. Voice takes on a reading-aloud incantation—often a monotone—and your eyes are chained to the page too long.

Don't Think They're Going To Get It Just Because You Said It!

Most managers erroneously think that because they give five major points in a presentation, their audience will remember them all. Not so!

You'll actually be lucky (or skilled and effective) if they remember your point of view, your key statement, and perhaps one or two supporting points. The truth is, they'll remember a good story or an anecdote. They'll remember a vivid **little** detail—such as the color of the socks you said you wore on your first job interview. Abstract facts and data will go in one ear and out the other.

Since nobody can go back and reread your statements, you have to make sure the audience gets your main points. Don't try to overload them. Remember **KISS'M**: Keep It Simple, Stupid—and Memorable.

Be The Host. Not The Roast

When you're at the lectern, you're in charge of your audience's well-being. You are momentarily the host—not the main course they want to devour—so don't let your nervousness show.

If you have butterflies (all speakers do) don't assume everyone knows it. As a matter of fact, they don't. If you think your voice is quavering or your knees are shaking, chances are nobody else notices or cares. Simply release your knee lock and let your natural energy carry you through animated gestures and movement.

Look at your listeners the same way you would in your office, with "extended eye communication." This goes beyond the traditional notion of eye contact: Look at one person for four to five seconds, then move on to someone else at random, covering **all** corners of the group. By looking at people with extended eye communication, you show you're interested in communicating personally with them. They feel it, and you feel it.

Get Feedback

Speak as often as you can and use both **audiotape** and videotape to find out what others art: hearing and seeing. Forget about asking friends and associates how you did. Most will say "Wonderful!" and mean it—they're too close to you and your goals to appraise objectively.

And don't tear yourself down in audio or video replay. Most speech teachers are counterproductive in telling people what **not** to do rather than pointing out their strengths as well as their weaknesses. Use the tools available. We are in an electronic age and there is no better learning tool than video, when used constructively by professionals.

Discovering bad habits in yourself does no good unless you know what to do about them, what specific steps to take for your style of speaking. You are your own best teacher.

Use Visuals, Be Visual

Since 85 percent of what we know has come through our

eyes, it's obvious that we learn more from what we see than from what we hear or touch; people remember images far longer than facts. They **will** remember the image of you, too— animated or flat, energized or rigid, enthusiastic or dull.

As visual aids, overheads (transparencies) are probably the most versatile presentation tool, with 35-mm slides and flip charts also used for the right situations.

Keep simplicity in mind: One thought per page, three lines per page (or slide), bold graphics and color. Visual aids should highlight key points, not tell the whole story. Never put yourself in the dark or half-hidden behind equipment. You are the host. Think of your visual aids as a good waiter— there to assist you, not replace you.

Self-confidence!

These are just a few essential guidelines for speaking effectively.

Tips, techniques, and ideas are great. Anyone can find a million more in books, but if you don't use them, they're about as valuable as a mail-order course on tap dancing if you don't get up to dance.

What counts is experience and self-confidence. Speak at every opportunity, get the kind of expert feedback that's immediately useful for your environment, and keep extending yourself.