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The Ups and Downs of Doing a Presentation—Part 2

In our last column we begin to describe the ups and downs of doing a presentation. This space does not allow for an in-depth discussion of preparing and delivering an outstanding presentation, but it does allow us to touch on some of the high points necessary to be successful.

There are a variety of different presentation styles that may be used depending on the topic being presented and the participants who are attending. A lighthearted interactive training presentation is very different from delivering a message to the company's board of directors or senior management.

Regardless of the venue, the presentation should take into account the needs and desires of those attending. Senior executives may interrupt the presentation to ask questions or request clarification of a salient point, while new hires will sit docilely trying to take in all of the information being poured into their ears.

Understanding the different needs and desires of those attending will help provide a framework for the development of the presentation. Like a teacher whose students range in intellectual capabilities, the instruction must be done in a way that captures the imagination and experiences of all in attendance.

Selection of the Style of Presentation

When determining the style of presentation, the presenter must take into account the available space, audiovisual equipment, plus the age and experience of those attending. Probably more than anything else, the location of the seminar will dictate the level of interaction, teaching styles, and role plays.

It is always best for the presenter to be familiar with the location of the presentation prior to developing content and instruction strategies. Inevitably, there will be nervousness even for the most seasoned presenter. Knowing the location allows the presenter to feel more comfortable with his surroundings.

From personal experience, we can tell you what you are told to expect is often not even close to what you will find when you get to the facility. The spacious room and large tables have shrunk, and the chairs were likely developed by 13th century torturers. Even if it is for only 20 minutes, get used to your room, lights, and equipment before the presentation begins.

Mental Preparation

Mental preparation is essential to a successful delivery. First and foremost, practice the presentation. If you are comfortable with the material, you will be comfortable with the delivery and people will be comfortable with you. It is not enough to sit and look at your notes while you prepare for the big day. You have to speak out loud and hear the words. Anything less than this, and you will come across as stilted and unsure in your delivery.

If possible you should videotape your presentation and spend the time necessary to review your delivery. Watching yourself give a presentation is never easy, but it provides a perspective simply reviewing your notes does not. As you watch the presentation, pay attention to your mannerisms, speech patterns, and the way you stand. If anything annoys you, it is likely to annoy those attending as well. There is nothing more disconcerting than receiving a critique of your efforts only to discover during the last two hours you said "um" over 96 times.

Before your presentation consider your appearance and clothing. "Look good. Feel good. Talk good." While grammatically incorrect, this mantra links your appearance and feelings to the ultimate delivery of your presentation. Confidence in your appearance makes you feel better and as a result, speak better.

Part of mental preparation is also to check your ego at the door. Remember, you are no worse or better than anyone else who will be attending the meeting. That attitude will help people accept your leadership of the program. People are more likely to accept information and suggestions from those they are comfortable with. Make eye contact with everyone in the room as though you are speaking to them alone at that moment. Taking time to meet even a few people as they enter before the presentation makes it easier since you are then speaking to acquaintances, rather than strangers.

If you are in charge of a presentation, remember what it was like to sit at a conference. Acknowledging the value of everyone's insights goes a long way to developing the open exchange of information between yourself and those attending.

Finally, conveying information is easier if the people are comfortable, so have refreshments and have adequate breaks planned.

Someone Will Say Something Stupid

If one presents enough presentations, invariably someone will say something stupid. Hopefully, that will not be you. Over the years we have heard some incredibly dumb things said during our presentations. Not surprisingly, some of them came from us.

If you do say something less than inspirational, and you recognize it; acknowledge it, correct it, and maybe even make fun of it. If you leave it unaddressed, expect to hear about it later from a variety of sources...and perhaps for years to come.

More difficult to handle is a question or comment from an attendee whose mind has slipped into neutral. As a general rule the presenter should not make fun of anyone in front of the group. To make fun of the question sends a danger signal to the other participants that asking a question may result in ridicule.

Some comments and questions will take the group off task of the teaching points or require a more detailed explanation than time allows. In these cases the presenter may postpone the conversation until the break so that an adequate response can be given. If you do this, remember, you have an obligation to the individual to answer his comment or question.

A presenter is also a facilitator. Asking the right question of the right person, who has the right experience, can add a depth of understanding to the discussion the presenter may not possess himself. A competent instructor can then weave the response into the teaching points to give a richer and more powerful explanation than he may have been able to provide alone.

Something Will Go Wrong

It is inevitable that something *will* go wrong. The only question is *what* it will be. Over the years we have faced many disasters, from power outages to collapsed ceilings to flooding. More commonly you can expect the room will not be set up properly, the temperature will be too hot or too cold, the audiovisual will not work, or the handouts may not arrive.

Playing the "what if" game can help anticipate problems. If the bulb in the projector goes out and you can't play the prepared PowerPoint slides, what might you do? What options are available at the facility and to the presenter if there is trouble? Make sure you get contact numbers of people who will help if problems arise.

Difficult Attendees

The presenter may have mastered the material and the presentation skills, but still has to deal with difficult people. They may be difficult for any number of reasons, but their attitudes and behaviors may affect the overall excellence of the program. Besides imparting the material, the presenter's job is to control the overall learning environment. Having someone talk to another in class can be unbelievably distracting.

Talking during the presentation is generally easily handled once it has been identified by the presenter. A question posed to those talking or continuing the lecture while standing near them can often curb this unnecessary distraction. However, there may be those offenders who need to be taken aside during break and reminded their conversation is a disruption. Sometimes this

conversation is actually driven by their absorption of the material as they attempt to customize it to their current situations. Find out before you come down hard.

Difficult participants pose unique problems depending on the size of the group, the status of the individual, and the experience of the presenter. Consider what possible strategies you might employ to the following difficult attendees.

- Walking in and out
- Repeated "what if" questions
- The "sniper" who takes pot shots at you or your material
- Resistant to role play
- The boss who has it wrong
- The quiet crowd with resistant body language
- Those who have to be there versus wanting to be there
- Intellectually challenged
- Know it alls
- Language barriers

There are any number of different ways to handle these situations, but by planning ahead the expert presenter anticipates potential problems and creates solutions. It is much more difficult to react adequately without a plan versus simply implementing one prepared for the situation.

Doing a presentation is always a bit of an adventure and a learning experience each and every time. We wish you best of luck and hope we have an opportunity to be in your audience one day. ■

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