

The Art of Communication

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In today's busy world, the business professional or graduating college student has a wide array of technological tools to assist with communicating to a large number of audiences to achieve his or her goals. With the advent of the cell phone, Blackberry, iPhone, iPod, Android, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, Linked-In, e-mail, and many other tools, you have multiple options to assist with your communications tasks to get your message out. However, what is the real message you want to send? Who is your target audience that you want to receive your message? What reaction are you expecting to get from your audience? How does your message change if you have different or multiple audiences with whom you must communicate? How will you assess your effectiveness? At the end of the day, your message has to reach human beings on the receiving end of the equation, and they have to understand your message in a clear, thoughtful manner. And, hopefully your target audience will react in the way you expected, because in the business world you are generally looking to achieve positive outcomes which typically require good, solid communications skills.

Therein lies the communications challenge – how do we really communicate with others in the business world to get the outcome desired? For all the technological advances we have achieved in the past twenty years, my experience in the business world and in government over the past thirty-five years shows me that the “art of communication” is still a human-focused endeavor that takes a steady level of practice, patience and thought or strategy about outcomes. In this article, I will give three examples of business-world communications challenges that new students or professionals who enter the business world may encounter. I will offer some suggestions that you may wish to consider.

In the fast-paced business world, some common tasks are: drafting a concept or information paper on a topic of interest or importance to move a product or idea forward; developing and presenting a marketing presentation for a concept, idea or new technology; or conducting a face-to-face meeting with new clients or government officials to further your goals. While these sound like simple tasks, there is also a communications strategy involved to get your points across in order to achieve positive outcomes.

Information or Concept Papers

Let's discuss the concept or information paper first. To illustrate the point, as you join a new company, you may be required to draft a concept or information paper to convey any number of topics. For the sake of discussion, you may be given the task to present a new concept, idea or technology to a business team in another company or the government in order to get funding to develop and market this option, in this case let's call it a new “super-widget-phone.” In this example, the process may require that you submit an information or concept paper approximately five pages in length for review to your intended audience to determine the merit of this new technology you want to market. Your task may require you to learn about the audience, develop a clear and focused quality message about why your new technology, your

super-widget-phone, is so beneficial and how both parties have an opportunity to partner for the future. Lastly, the outcome you desire is a meeting with your intended audience to finish the marketing effort.

As you prepare this paper, your message should be clear and focused with the “bottom line up front” (BLUF) in the discussion. You may also think about discussing the anticipated outcome and how you will exploit success as part of your overall strategy. Often, I have seen authors provide huge amounts of unfocused and never-ending background information that do not summarize the expected value of their new idea which tend to fail. Long-winded information papers often don’t work because they tend to get off track in my view. Effective authors research their audience as much as possible, get to the key points quickly and summarize the benefits at the end of the paper. Thus, clarity and simplicity of “a quality message” are vital to ensuring that your audience will understand the new “super-widget-phone” concept we’ve discussed, and that you get a positive response for a follow-on opportunity or meeting.

Often these concept papers may go to a government organization to suggest a new idea or technology in which they have expressed recent interest. You need to focus on what the message is and answer some basic questions. If your concept paper is for one of the Military Services (Army, Navy, Marines, or Air Force), you need to get to the point both clearly and quickly. The leadership in these organizations tends to be very focused on getting to the point as soon as possible as they will be ready to ask you the “so what” question. However, as mentioned previously, clarity of the message is critical with these types of audiences. These leaders tend to be exceptionally busy and do not tolerate long-winded documents that take too much time in making points. If you get “off the message,” your audience will most likely not read the whole paper so you lose the opportunity to address an important topic and to potentially bring in more business for your company. No matter how good a writer you are, I also suggest you have someone else read your information or concept paper to see if you have a common sense message that will talk to the interested audience. If you do your homework on learning about the audience, develop a well-constructed concept paper, do an objective review, summarize your message, and submit it on time, then you are on your way to “get into the game.”

Presentations

Another example may be the requirement to present a marketing or sales presentation in which you appear in person and deliver a formal pitch or briefing. The task may require you to develop a “focused” presentation (i.e. PowerPoint) to cover a specific topic, product, program, concept or technology. It may also come about as a result of your information or concept paper that “got your foot in the door.” Once again, in my opinion, give a “bottom line up front (BLUF)” approach in this venue. Business or government professionals tend to want to hear the basic message or idea as soon as possible. Generally you will be given a time limit as well for presentations of this type.

I have seen numerous examples of individuals who deliver marketing or sales presentations on a particular topic or technology, and they commit a number of simple, but, obvious errors in getting their message across as desired. Some common mistakes include failing to understand their audience, avoiding eye contact with the audience, and a lack of rehearsing the material. If you are going to talk to a group that you don’t have much experience with or background information about, then do some homework to learn about them. What makes them tick? If you don’t do any research on your audience, given all the tools available today, you may be in for a rough presentation.

Often times I have seen brilliant engineers give a briefing about a new technology (for the sake of argument about a “super-widget-phone” once again), and they very frequently talk to the slides on the wall or big screen, rarely making eye contact with their audience or paying attention to the original message or the time limit. Simply put, they simultaneously forget the message and the audience, and, as you may expect, they lose the opportunity. Conversely, those individuals who rehearse their presentations, keep eye contact with their audience, and stay engaged, are usually able to guide the presentation towards a two-way discussion, leading to a more positive outcome. Perhaps a metric you might want to consider is if you don’t get any questions or your audience quickly leaves the room after your presentation, then you might say you missed the moment.

Verbal presentations tend to require that you talk to the audience in an engaging fashion to get their attention and maintain their interest. While this may seem obvious, it tends to be a demanding task. Or put another way, I call it a “meeting engagement” where you must philosophically win the first contact with your audience. And, it will typically require that you rehearse your presentation in thoughtful and constructive ways to make sure you have a well thought out message and are prepared to answer questions. You can often get a biography of individuals that you will meet with in order to get an idea of their background and experiences to assist with your rehearsal techniques. This technique may assist you to get an idea of how to get their attention or interest, especially if you have the potential for multiple audiences. Or you may see an article in a professional journal about a problem that they are trying to solve. A little homework goes a long way in learning about your audience so that you can develop a plan to address their interests in presentations of this manner.

Additionally, you should also think about the outcome of a verbal presentation – what do you expect to achieve? In my opinion, your entire presentation should be focused on the outcome. If it is a decision briefing or sales or marketing pitch, you should expect, if you have done your homework, to get an immediate response or questions about the path forward and opportunities for the future. The outcome may be as simple as “how do we get your product now.” Thinking about the outcome will help to develop your briefing so that you cover important points and keep your audience interested in the topic at hand.

Face-To-Face Meetings

Lastly, you may be required to conduct face-to-face meetings with prospective clients or government officials or other audiences on any number of topics. All of the above suggestions for learning your audience, keeping to the point, and engaging with your clients or audiences are critical to success. Very frequently, you only get one chance to make a good first impression in this specific type of venue. So having a plan and perhaps conducting a rehearsal will be extremely important. What is your message? How do you lead off with the opening? What will you do when they begin to ask hard questions and you have not been able to get through your verbal presentation or discussion point? How will you guide the discussion to get back on track? Some business leaders will test you to see if you can take a “little heat in the kitchen” when making an argument in a face-to-face discussion. They want to see if you can stand your ground and continue to stay on course. It is designed to see if you know your material and can avoid getting flustered. If so, they often like that ability to stay focused on the task at hand and want you on their team. Or the face-to-face meeting may be to talk about details of moving forward together and they truly want your input. So, once again, have thoughts in mind about the outcome you desire and the way to get there. The face-to-face

meetings often tend to be the most important, in my opinion, may provide insights about how “genuine” you are and how well you know your product, topic or subject.

Summary

So, the “art of communication” is just as much, in my view, about learning about the who, what, when, where, why, and how of presenting your point in a positive, professional manner as it is about learning your audience. The use of all the new communications technology may help you, but in the final analysis, you have to have a “quality message” that will resonate with your audience. If you can effectively get your point across, in any number of venues, and stay focused “on a quality message or bottom line up front” then you are well on your way to attaining effective outcomes or results. In my view, at the end of the day, if you are an effective communicator, you have a good probability of being successful in the business world, especially in the world of marketing, sales and leadership. While many of the points that I made may seem intuitively obvious to the casual observer, these tasks require planning and practice to achieve success. If you plan to market, sell or lead in the business world, I suggest you sharpen and work hard to maintain your communications skills. Good luck business professional!