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Giving presentations

Practical example

Within Dinner Ltd there is an annual meeting in December concerning past achievements and future developments. Managing Director Freddy Fortune usually gives a presentation on these subjects. He writes his annual speech in cooperation with Gerald Glass. Although he is a good manager, Freddy has some difficulties in speaking in front of a large audience. He is always glad when he has fulfilled this part of his job. Now he has to prepare his speech. What exactly should his information be about? What should the staff know at the end of his presentation? Does he want to influence their attitudes in doing their work? Could he make use of the evaluations of the clientele about the service? What are the most important figures to be presented? Then, he should also consider the different educational levels of the personnel. When giving information on financial aspects, he should realize that many of them have only basic economic knowledge. It seems rather simple this annual presentation, but now that it has actually come to it, first some questions must be answered before he can really make a start.

Introduction

In this chapter we will consecutively discuss the steps which a speaker has to make before during and after the presentation of a certain subject. Broadly outlined, the whole process of presentation can be divided into three phases:

- the preparation phase
- the presentation itself
- dealing with audience reaction.

During the preparation phase, the situation in which the presentation has to be held is analysed. The presenter considers a number of questions, looks for information and prepares his material. The presentation itself consists of three stages: the introduction, the core and the closing. One could say there is a 'head-body-tail division'. In the last phase the reactions of the audience must be responded to. In responding to the reactions, it is of primary importance that the person who asks questions or the one who has comments discerns that they are understood. The presenter must respond to the reactions as clearly as possible. At the end of this chapter the various presentation skills are summarized in an overview.

Preparation

In the practical example of Dinner Ltd we have already briefly touched upon a few questions that every presenter must consider in advance. First, they should ask themselves what they wish to achieve with the presentation. In short, what is the goal of it? Second, they should determine how they can achieve this goal. This is especially related to the structure of the presentation. Third, they should try to assemble sufficient information about the audience. Finally, they should gather information about limiting conditions. The investigation by Menzel and Carrell (1994) involving students showed that there was a positive relation between total preparation time and speech-quality.

Goal

People can strive for different goals during a presentation. For example, the presenter wishes to convey information or desires that the audience knows more about the subject after the presentation than they did before. One can thus think of lectures, congresses or classes about a particular topic. It is also possible that the presenter wishes his audience to adopt a different attitude regarding the subject. One can thus consider a meeting in which the presenter wishes to support a certain controversial decision. In this case the aim is to convince the audience. In the third case, presenters can set the goal of influencing the behaviour of their audience. They want their audience to do something. Often these goals overlap. If presenters know how to convince an audience, they will develop a different attitude and usually adjust their behaviour.

Freddy Fortune wants to convince the staff about the importance of friendliness to customers. He has too often heard complaints about this aspect, which is so important for their business.

Structure

During the preparation phase the presenter collects the information about the topic, prepares it and considers how to use it during the various phases of the presentation. The structure of a presentation consists of an introduction (head), a core (body) and a closing (tail). With the help of this division into three parts, the presenter brings order to the information. During the introduction, attention is captured and the audience gets an overview of the presentation. During the core phase the topic is handled, and during the closing phase the information is once again offered in a compact way, and a final impression remains.

During the *introduction*, which takes up approximately 10 per cent of the time, the presenter should raise the interest of the audience. If attention is not first obtained, most of the presenter's efforts will be made in vain. The attention can be raised by, for example, first laying before the audience a small puzzle or rhetorical question. Some presenters are extremely ingenious in thinking up a short story, which can be told in a few sentences, or finding a proverb, saying or motto that relates to the content of the speech. Titles of popular books, television programmes or films are often sources of inspiration. Of course, it should apply here that the opening sentences are related to the

rest of the presentation. Because it is difficult for the audience to understand what the subject of the presentation will be, it is useful to give a clear overview during the introduction of the order in which the subject will be handled and the time that is required. The audience then knows what to expect and when they can ask their questions.

The *middle section* consists of the core of the presentation and takes up about 80 per cent of the available time. The middle section is constructed according to the goal of the presentation. For example, if presenters wish to clarify a problem, they can list its causes and consequences and discuss them one by one. Should they wish to give a historical overview, then they could do this in chronological order. If presenters have to defend a standpoint, they can first list all the arguments that lead up to it, or they can first explain the standpoint and then mention the arguments that support it. Should presenters wish to ask for audience cooperation, they should first give an explanation of the necessity of the activities and then handle the process of affairs in a logical order.

During the preparation presenters structure their presentation and sometimes make a complete written version of it. However, reading out a written version often leads to audience boredom. To prevent this risk it is useful to note key words in the margin of the text that briefly summarize it. Giving the presentation using these key words allows presenters more opportunity to use common language. It looks as if they are speaking spontaneously, which is often more interesting for the audience. Should they suddenly lose the thread of the presentation, then they can always return to the written out text. It is self-evident that with this method presenters have to arrange their papers carefully to avoid nervous shuffling.

For the *closing* of the presentation, presenters need the last 10 per cent of the time. In this phase they should return to the question posed in the introduction. It is important that presenters come to solid conclusions, with a short repetition of the arguments already given. With the very last sentence the presenter can profit from the knowledge that people are equally alert, and remember a lot of information, at the end of the speech as they are at the beginning. Thus, the closing sentences can leave an ineradicable impression.

The audience

It is important that presenters realize in advance what the level of education of their audience is and have some knowledge of their colloquial language. Then they will be able to adapt their presentation to the (intellectual) level of the audience. People's abilities to abstract and generalize are dependent on their level of education and culture. The higher the level of education of the members of the audience, the easier presenters can make use of theoretical concepts. However, in most cases they would really have to make an effort to illustrate their presentation with *concrete examples*. Furthermore, presenters have to try to make an estimation of the prior knowledge of the audience in advance. If they are being confronted with the subject for the first time, then presenters will have to start by giving certain basic information. Finally, it can be useful for presenters if they are aware of the attitude that the audience adopts regarding the presentation of the subject and regarding the organization which they represent.

Limiting conditions

Before presenters start their preparation of the presentation, they should be aware of possible limiting conditions. By limiting conditions we mean the time remaining before the presentation must be given: the place where the presentation will take place, the possible aids necessary and the expected size of audience. Presenters have to ask themselves in advance what they can realize within these conditions. What work can they complete before the *date* of the presentation? It is recommended to estimate the time required for the preparation: collecting information about the target group, looking over accommodation, ordering and writing out materials, possibly making a PowerPoint presentation or overhead transparencies, watching slides, a video or film. All this often takes more time than one might imagine.

The *time* available for the presentation itself determines the amount of information that can be conveyed. A visit to the *location* where the presentation will be held in advance (if possible) gives presenters the opportunity to organize the optimal formation (chairs, tables, etc.) for the audience. Presenters must determine in advance what aids they need in order to achieve the goal of the presentation. Often a presentation becomes livelier through the use of PowerPoint, an overhead projector or audiovisual equipment. When presenting (yearly) figures such visual aids are vital. To demonstrate a conversation model in a skills training programme a videotape is useful. However, the success of a presentation is not only dependent on the use of aids; sometimes too much use is made of them. The *expected size of the audience* also influences the presenters' possibilities. Depending on the group size presenters will prepare a method of presentation. For example, they can only talk to a large group from a lectern and with the help of a sound system. With a small group they could possibly sit around a table. In a large group the opportunities to ask questions during the presentation are more limited than in a small group.

Giving the presentation

For many people it is difficult to process information that is only conveyed verbally. They are often quickly distracted, cannot concentrate for long periods at a time and remember selectively. In order to keep the attention and to make it easier for the audience to follow the thread, the presenter can make use of *expressive skills* (Mandel, 1987), *structure* and *text-supporting aids*.

Expressive skills

With the help of their expressive skills presenters can make use of their body and voice to support their words. Expressive skills can be divided into body language and use of the voice. Body language consists of the following skills: eye contact, facial expression, movement and posture (Argyle, 1988). Use of the voice consists of: speed of speech, timing, volume, rhythm of the sentences and articulation. We now give a brief description of these skills.

Body language

Using *eye contact* presenters get in touch with their audience and keep their attention. When they are alert to the responses of the audience, they can also try to accommodate their presentation.

With their *facial expression* presenters support and strengthen the emotions that fit their words. This may enhance the interest of the audience. *Gestures* also underline the meaning of the words, and hold the listeners' attention.

The *posture* of presenters expresses their state of mind. Posture can not only express enthusiasm, interest in the audience and self-confidence, but also disinterest, weariness, irritation or tension.

A natural use of these skills may have a positive influence on the effect of the presentation. An exaggerated or forced use of these skills will hamper the attention and is sometimes even ridiculous. To acquire and exercise these skills, presenters can simply practise at home in front of the mirror, or ask family or friends to comment on the effect of their body language.

Use of voice

A good *speed of speech* is one that is not so fast as to give a hurried impression or a nervous feeling, and not so slow as to decrease the attention or make the audience sleepy. With *timing* we mean the taking of breath and speech pauses at the correct moments. That moment can be a rest point for the speaker and the audience. A moment of silence can also be used to raise the attention for the sentence that is subsequently spoken.

Presenters have to adapt their *volume* to the acoustics, the room and the noise level. Besides this, *variation in the volume* more easily brings across the meaning that the speaker wishes the words to express.

The *intonation* is the melodic aspect of the speech. A good intonation supports the meaning of the words and holds the interest of the audience. A monotonous intonation is boring and causes frustration. A good *articulation* increases the comprehensibility and clarity as well as making it easier for the audience to keep their attention on the speech. Articulation means saying precisely and clearly all the syllables and sounds of a word.

In applying these skills presenters have to be aware that they can positively or negatively influence the successful conveyance of their presentation. An exaggerated use of these skills has the same effect on the audience, as does the exaggerated use of expressive body language, namely irritation, laughing or little attention to the content.

Maintaining the structure

The structure of the presentation can best be clearly indicated at the beginning in one of the first slides of the PowerPoint presentation, on a flipchart or transparency sheet. During their presentation presenters can refer to this structure. The advantage is that presenter and audience know where they are on the road to the end of the presentation.

Freddy Fortune gives the following structure to his annual speech:

- 1 Achievements in the last year.
- 2 Facts and figures.
- 3 Customer evaluations.
- 4 Future developments: The importance of customer friendliness.
- 5 Reactions.

For each point he has made subdivisions.

Another way to maintain audience concentration is by use of *linking sentences*. Every time a point has been fully discussed, presenters can ensure the audience keeps up by the use of a sentence with which they round off the previous point and introduce the next.

Freddy Fortune closes point 3, for example, with the sentences: 'Thus we see that our clients are not always fully satisfied with the different services. Some never come back for that reason. That is why I will now proceed to point 4: What do I mean with customer friendliness?'

Interim summaries can also be used to keep the presentation well organized and to hold the attention of the audience.

Text-supporting-visual-aids

The use of a clear structure makes it easier for the audience to follow the presentation. Graphics and tables may also support the text. They can clarify the spoken text in the blink of an eye, but they should never be used in place of the text. Here too the audience must be taken by the hand, as it were, and led through the 'pictures' with the help of the presenter's words. As an example we remember the sick leave tables discussed in Chapter 13, which immediately clarified Freddy Fortune's words.

The use of whiteboard, PowerPoint, flipcharts and overhead projectors each has advantages and disadvantages. A major advantage of the use of a board is that the thought process of the presenter appears step by step on the board and the audience becomes involved in this. The audience sees the image growing. A disadvantage is that the text is often written quickly and thus sometimes carelessly. The advantage of a PowerPoint presentation is that it makes a professional impression. This modern technique also offers a lot of opportunities for a vivid presentation. The disadvantage is that rather often technical equipment stops working or doesn't work at all just at the beginning of the presentation. This can cause a lot of nerves in the presenter. There are two practical suggestions here. The first is to test the equipment before you give the presentation. The second is to have overhead transparencies just in case the technique fails. An advantage of the flipchart and overhead projector is that during the preparation the text can be written down on them. A disadvantage is that little or nothing can be added during the presentation. An advantage of the overhead projector over the flipchart is that typed text, especially large type, is clearly legible if you have used a large font.

Another possibility is to animate the spoken text with slides, videotapes or films. Often when using slides a great deal must be explained, whereas in contrast videotapes and films speak for themselves.

The major advantage of the use of these aids is that they are already available during the preparation phase and need only to be inserted at the right moment. In addition, they often give a lot of information in a short time, which remains better in the audience memory through the use of a combination of words and pictures. A description of the technical use of the different aids is beyond the scope of this text. If plugs need to be placed in sockets, one had better read the manual of the specific appliance rather than this book. We also omit here the practical use and many problems—that can present themselves. The only comment we wish to make is that it is very irritating for the audience if the appliance does not work, or the user fiddles clumsily with the appliance. Also regarding this point, a solid preparation where the different aids have already been tested increases the chance of a successful presentation.

Dealing with reactions

When speakers have finished their presentation they may expect questions and comments. There are various ways in which they can stimulate the asking of questions and the making of comments and giving of criticism. The first way is by giving the audience the opportunity to ask questions if the presentation is not clear. The second way is by asking the audience to wait with their questions and comments until the presentation has been rounded off.

The advantage of the first way is that lack of clarity can be immediately solved. The audience thus remains very much involved in the story. But there are also a number of disadvantages related to this method. The audience often asks for further explanation that would have come up in the continuation of the speech anyway. Some listeners miss a little piece of information that will be repeated in a summary that still has to come. Members of the audience often think associatively. If they are informed of a situation they think of something similar and want to go into this. Different members again want to ride their hobbyhorses, and try to get attention on this via a question. Allowing questions to arise spontaneously can make the presentation very messy. The presenter loses the thread each time and the majority of the listeners are distracted from the direction of the speech. A solution for this is to ask the audience to react at once if there is a lack of clarity, but to hold their questions on the subject matter and comments for the discussion after the presentation. If one of the audience still makes comments on the subject matter during the speech, presenters can use the skill of 'situation clarification' (see p. 28). They could say, for example: 'I notice that you are posing a point to be discussed on the subject matter. Although I can imagine that it is interesting for you to get into this now, I would like to propose that you hold that point a moment—until I have finished my presentation. Do you agree with me?'

After their presentation presenters can expect various sorts of reactions. There are different kinds of questions. An interested listener may ask for some extra information; another might ask for the presenter's opinion; and there are questions from listeners who seem set on the goal of not letting a single opportunity pass without contributing their

opinion. Sometimes questions are very clumsily and disjointedly expressed. Some people in the audience are determined to show their presence. In short, questions arise from totally different motives. But criticism may also come: criticism from listeners who do not agree with the content of the speech; who have a completely different vision of the question; who find the presenter has overlooked significant factors. In short, criticisms come from people who are not in agreement with the presenter, often for a multitude of reasons.

Presenters face the difficult task of satisfying all these people and improving the image of their organization through their way of reacting, or at the very least not negatively influencing it. Generally, there are two ways of reacting to questions. The first is-by going into the question at once as clearly as possible, giving additional information on what is meant and observing if the person is satisfied with the answer. The second way is to briefly summarize the question. This method is especially useful if the question was not well understood or if the person first made an elaborate and complicated speech. Using this method the presenter gives the person the opportunity to ask the question differently or to adjust its formulation. Moreover, the summary gives presenters the opportunity to prepare their thoughts and time to formulate an answer.

When reacting to criticism, presenters can best confirm that other opinions are possible and emphasize the points they agree with. However, when they don't agree with the criticism, they may firmly say so. Here it is important that the person from the audience does not feel rejected and in order to save face strongly asserts his authority. A yes-no debate is usually not very fruitful and rapidly annoys the remaining listeners. The main point is that presenters deal with questions and criticisms respectfully.

Figure 16.1 illustrates how to give a successful presentation.