Speaking persuasively

Making the most of your presentations

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Getting down to business: Think before you speak

We are all it seems saving ourselves for the Senior Prom. But many of us forget that somewhere along the way we must learn to dance.[1]

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PRESENTATIONS?

We recently worked with lecturing staff at a large university who were given the opportunity to present proposals to enhance the quality of learning and teaching within their institution. These professionals approached this situation as an opportunity to give 'objective' information. With our help, they realised that they must seize this opportunity, sell their proposals, and persuade their seniors. Their approach to the presentation—its preparation and construction—changed completely as they pursued a new, clear intention.

Our term *presentation* covers a wide variety of instances. We mean any opportunity you get to communicate your point of view to listening others. Any such opportunity should be seized, and should be used to enhance your credibility with those listening, within your organisation or without. The opportunity to share your ideas at a meeting is a presentation; prepare for these listeners with the same care that you would for those in a formal situation where you are the single focus of attention. The opportunity to discuss formally in a one-to-one situation is also a presentation. Joint goal-setting interviews, or discipline or exit type interviews when a person is leaving an organisation should seem spontaneous, but they should actually be carefully prepared: read further into the communication rules which govern such interpersonal

situations as we will not concentrate on them in this book. You will find, though, that many of the rules we give in preparation for formal presentations can be used for interpersonal situations. When you present to a larger group, you will usually feel more pressured than in a one-to-one situation, and that is why we will concentrate on the more formal presentation of one to several in this book.

Most speaking situations have persuasive intentions, even if the speaker is not wholly conscious of them. Speakers who believe that they are presenting 'objective' information are unconsciously choosing words and positioning ideas so that they represent their point of view. The famous scientist Thomas Kuhn has argued that even scientists employ 'techniques of persuasion'. He says that the great scientist transforms what other scientists mean by fact and logic and induces conversion.[2] This suggests that even scientific reports that appear 'wholly factual' are really partially subjective and partially persuasive. With this knowledge in your kitbag, you will be more adept at recognising and revealing the persuasive parts of any presentation, and in pursuing your own points of view with clear and conscious intention.

For example, one of the groups of university lecturers mentioned in the opening of this chapter was putting a proposal to reorganise one of their current procedures. Initially, they felt that it should concentrate on information about how the system worked and how it could be changed. After we worked with them on effective persuasive strategies, they examined more closely the real purpose of their presentation and the importance of its persuasive features. They decided to change the structure and emphasis of their material. They now moved to an overtly persuasive approach which showed the disadvantages of the old system and the possible advantages of their suggested new system.

If you accept your persuasive aim, it can sharpen the focus of the choices you make on what to include in and exclude from your presentation. So, in order to persuade effectively, you must have the right attitude to the material. Before we discuss further this right attitude for success, let us consider how attitude affects anxiety in speakers.

ATTITUDES CREATE ANXIETY

Before you begin work on presentations, you need to examine

your attitudes to speaking to an audience, because your attitudes can have a great effect on your speaking anxiety and, therefore, on your performance. Attitudes affect how you see yourself as a communicator and can, therefore, dominate every aspect of your preparation. Almost everyone experiences some anxiety before a presentation, but your attitude to presentations will either generate more, or act as a brake on, unnecessary anxiety. Try to confront your nervousness, control it, turn it into adrenalin, and work it into a more effective and energetic communication.

Some interesting recent research by two American professors, Motley and Molloy, has provided us with some important clues about handling anxiety. The key to confronting and then controlling public speaking anxiety is to examine how you think about a public speaking opportunity. This attitude to the objectives of the speaking opportunity they call 'cognitive orientation'.[3] To understand your orientation, imagine a continuum with *performance orientation* at one end and *communication orientation* at the other: those who have a performance orientation believe that speaking must be a perfect aesthetic experience for listeners; those who have a communication orientation consider it important to share their message with their listeners.

'*Performance-oriented* speakers are often unable to articulate what the critical behaviours for success are, but they invariably assume them to be more "formal", "polished", and "practised" than the skills in their ordinary communication repertoire.'[4] These speakers assume that their listeners are involved primarily in evaluation.

Communication-oriented speakers, on the other hand, assume that their listeners are 'focused with curiosity upon the speaker's message, and that success is measured by the extent to which the listener understands the message and its point of view. Thus minor "mistakes" are as tolerable as in everyday communication'.[5]

It is Motley and Molloy's belief that public speaking anxiety will be lessened if highly anxious speakers change their attitude or orientation to the speaking opportunity (see Figure 1.1 p. 4).

After further studies to test this idea—that subjects with high public speaking anxiety would benefit from a treatment program to change their orientation—Motley and Molloy established a training program in 1994 which successfully changed the orientation of the participants. These participants experienced a considerable reduction in public speaking anxiety. What they have

Figure 1.1 Cognitive orientation

done is to give us hard evidence that you *can* overcome your anxiety.

This research supports our belief that all of the work that you do to improve your presentation, and any of the evaluation you do of yourself as a speaker, must be done in the preparation stage: once you move into the presentation stage, you must treat the situation as one of *communication*. Your concentration must be on getting your message to your listeners. All else is irrelevant because you are deeply involved in a conversation. Your goal is to place your ideas before interested listeners in a presentation unhindered by interruptions. As a presentation is just an extended conversation, those listeners will want to feel you are speaking *to* them, not speaking *at* them.

In speaking to your listeners, you need to establish a warm rapport with them. The best persuaders seem to be speaking to each member of the audience individually. They show a verve and enthusiasm for their topic, for life in fact, which carries the listener along with it. This sense of excitement comes through in their vocabulary and their mental attitude, but it also is demonstrated to the audience by their physical actions. The term *immediacy* is used to express that charismatic physical expressiveness which causes an audience to feel the strength of the individual presence of the speaker and warm to it. You need not only to work on your mental attitude and your excitement about speaking, but also on your physical approach to it.

This is a second way to work on overcoming your anxiety and another way to gain an easy feeling: work on physiologically preparing yourself. Relaxation exercises will help you relax physically, and thus relax mentally. This approach, like the Motley and Molloy approach, has proven success. In Chapter 4, we have

Figure 1.2 Performance orientation **Communication orientation**

Cartoon: Fiona Mitchell

included a full relaxation exercise which you can use as preparation. If you wish to be a polished speaker, it is worth working on all areas of your presentation at preparation time: you will derive the physical and mental confidence you need to become a powerful persuasive speaker in your preparation phase. It is the work behind the scenes, with your trusty kitbag at your side, that will lead to 'mind over fear'[6] and your chances of becoming a powerful persuader. Because of this, we believe that Chapter 4 on how to prepare is one of the most important in this book.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY COMMUNICATION?

This book is about practice, but good practice is supported by reflection, and reflection, of course, becomes theory. Early communication theorists set up a model of communication which spoke of the source of the message, the transmission of the message, and the receiver of the message. On reflection, this model assumes that communication is a linear process: a message is sent and received, and communication is achieved. We all know intuitively that this is not how communication works. This is a too-simple perception of what is a more complex process. Come with us now as we examine some of our reflections on the communication process.

MIND OVER MYTHS

There are a number of myths associated with communication: that it is easy, that a message that is sent will always be clearly received, and a simple cause-and-effect process will ensue. Engineers even designed a model based on machines to explain this complex human process. In this model, words simply represent rather than shape ideas. The scientific approach to our conceptual understanding of ourselves has dominated recent times, and this has influenced the study of communication. If we try to think of the process of communication as a puzzle with multiple parts, which can be put together in multiple ways to give different meanings, we would perhaps be coming closer to what we experience. Some of the major parts of the puzzle, missing in a scientific approach, are our emotional responses, which often rely on our previous experiences.

This leads us to one of the other important myths that has flourished because of the domination of scientific thought, and that is the *myth of objectivity.* This notion of objectivity arises out of a view of the world which takes as its starting point that information or facts are value neutral. As a consequence, it is simply a matter of transmitting value-neutral information to achieve good communication. With the rise of science, humanity has become obsessed with 'factual' knowledge. However, recent communication theorists, and scientists from many disciplines, question whether it is ever possible to achieve objectivity at all. Remember that, when Newton's ideas were overthrown by those of Einstein, even the faith in 'scientific' facts was shaken. *We* certainly are very sceptical about the possibility of being objective.

One of the most accessible examples of the impossibility of being objective in communication can be seen in the efforts of the media each day in reporting the news. One of Australia's media magnates recently went on the record claiming that his papers were completely objective in their reporting of certain incidents. He evidently still believes in the possibility of objectivity and in the righteousness of achieving it. If we examine the idea closely from a communication perspective, we realise that every word chosen and sentence written would have been written differently by another journalist. All words have emotional force and, therefore, each journalist generates an individual mood which accompanies the ideas. It is even more obvious that objectivity is

elusive when we turn to the television news media and compare the 'objective' reporting of news from one channel to another. A program which provides excellent examples of this is 'Media Watch' on the ABC. This program is presented by the media critic Stuart Littlemore, and it examines stories which have been presented in the Australian media in the week previous to its going to air. It especially examines the way the different outlets have presented particular stories, and it reflects on the meanings and ethics of these presentations. By this means, it reveals the varying ways in which a news story can be constructed. By selecting some information, and omitting other pieces, it is clear that different versions of the 'truth' can be told.

Pictures do not lie? Even this truism is now questioned. Our attention was particularly drawn to the precariousness of reality by the now famous trial in 1992 in which Los Angeles police officers were accused of brutally beating the black American Rodney King. A home videotape of the beating of King by the police was broadcast on television sets around the world. The jurors in this trial in Los Angeles could be convinced, by an eloquent barrister who justified the verdict they desired, that there was a reason not to believe their eyes. This enabled them to give a verdict of not guilty to the police who savagely beat King. The home video pictures of a savage beating were not enough when the defence attorney used words to build his own pictures of King and the possibly ethical motivations of his 'honourable' defendants. With a knowledge of the media, we begin to see how our own eyes and ears can indeed deceive us. After all, camera angle, lighting and editing can all change meanings and cause the message to be structured differently for the viewer.

Through word and image, particular cultures have constructed particular ways of understanding which seem less acceptable to other cultures. In the West, we were shocked when Saddam Hussein spoke of 'glory in defeat' at the end of the Gulf War, but we are capable of accepting a similar glory in defeat when we speak of Dunkirk or Gallipoli. We build powerful, cultural meaning on word and image, on oral and visual language, and we cocoon ourselves within those powerful, cultural meanings. It is our inability to search outside the dominant messages of our culture, even within a democracy, that the American academics Herman and Chomsky refer to in their book *Manufacturing consent.*[7]

It is important to understand that we construct reality from

words and images. This does not mean that concrete reality does not exist, but that our understanding of it comes to us through word and image. We are born into a certain construction of reality—our own culture—which is then reproduced in our consciousness every day of our lives, in every word and in every image. There are, however, dominant groups that shape our consciousness: the words and images of our culture, our class, our education, our family and our peers shape our perceptions of 'reality'. These groups create the value and attitude systems by which we understand our lives, by which we respond to the words and images of others. The power of persuasive words and images should never be underestimated: they are central to the building of culture in large and small organisations; they are central to the building of culture in politics and in homes; and they are quintessential to the building of languages of leadership.

We hope to have convinced you that the concept of objectivity is not a useful one for the successful persuader. Communication is, after all, a dynamic and value-rich process. Therefore, we believe that it is best to exploit this characteristic of communication, and to take the approach that practically all situations are persuasive ones. With this attitude, it is only a matter of then deciding on the best means of persuading others as successfully, and ethically, as possible.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ETHICS

Persuasion is a very powerful tool. It is a fundamental human right which should be exercised to achieve your purpose. If you believe in the justice of your message, you have every right to present persuasively to your listeners, using every method available to you.

True, the ethics which govern your choices are important and you should consider them carefully. However, you do not have to pretend to objectivity in order to be ethical. Many presenters overlook the ethics of their choices and rely on the skills they possess to delude their listeners. Advertisers may often make choices which would not satisfy our ethical considerations. We would not accept the choice, on a television advertisement, of a girl in a bikini draped over the bonnet of a motor vehicle which is being sold to the public, as an ethical choice. It may appeal to some male viewers who could be the most likely buyers of

the vehicle, but it is an overtly sexist choice which no longer appeals to many viewers, whether male or female. In business, executives often have to make choices about the omission or inclusion of information they will present to their employees. It can be difficult to balance exigency with ethics. However, by acknowledging the values that drive your message, you can contribute to your own ethical practice of persuasion.

Equally, the more you understand the techniques of persuasion, the more you will be able to decipher, carefully and critically, the persuasive messages you receive. You will be more prepared to recognise the messages you consider unethical and why this may be so. You will, after all, be more powerful as a speaker if you not only believe in the justice of your message, but also make an effort to understand how your listeners will react.

CO-ACTIVE PERSUASION

We take a co-active approach to communication.[8] We emphasise the power of readers to reconstruct the message from their own point of view. As the Australian journalist and writer Hugh Mackay says, 'It's not what our message does to the listener, but what the listener does with our message that determines our success as communicators'.[9] This is why it is so important, if you are to be an effective speaker—a persuasive, co-active speaker—that you understand exactly what your listeners' points of view are. You must understand where your listeners are in their thinking if you want them to move through those thoughts to reach a shared point of view. Professor Gerald Edelman, the Nobel prize-winning American scientist who writes about the brain, says, 'Unlike computers we understand ourselves and our world in individual, creative, dynamic and unpredictable ways. We create our outer and inner worlds in a context of unceasing novelty and change.'[10] Your persuasion should exploit the dynamic and creative capacities of your listeners.

You may have wondered why we used the word *reader* at the beginning of the last paragraph. Recent communication theory has emphasised the idea of a 'reader' rather than a 'receiver' of messages: readers receive the message and actively interpret it within their own frame of reference; they 'read' the messages they receive and actually reconstruct their own meanings. The word

reader suggests activity, whereas *receiver* indicates passivity. Be sure to recognise the power of the reader, and realise, therefore, that listener analysis is an important step before you begin to prepare to communicate. This is why it is also important to observe your listeners carefully while you are speaking, and constantly to check understanding in an interpersonal interaction.

The words and images we use to represent our experiences generally determine whether we think about an experience as good or bad. We even perceive ourselves in relation to what others say about us or to us, or by the ways they appear to respond to us. For example, if enough people tell you that you look ill, you will probably be feeling so by the end of the day. Think of the power of a belief system which can cause you to die by simply telling you to do so. This amazing example of the power of perception comes from the Aboriginal culture where members will die if 'the bone is pointed at them'. This punishment causes death merely because the perfectly healthy recipient believes that this ritual is fatal.

So, can you ever say that the way *you* view a situation is definitely the way the situation really is?

We are sure that you are truthfully answering no to this question. It is important to realise that we play an active role in interpreting the world that surrounds us. The advice of songwriter and philosopher Leonard Cohen is very apt on the best way to approach your listeners: 'To discover the truth in anything that is alien, first dispense with the indispensable in your own vision.'

In this book, we emphasise the idea of co-active persuasion and the power of the 'reader'. This is, in fact, one of our interpretations of the way we understand the world, and it agrees with those communication specialists who suggest that individuals play an active part in 'constructing reality' from and through the communication process. If you are a powerful enough persuader, you may be able to convince others that your view is the way the situation is, and there are many notable examples from our history of the potential of great communicators to create and recreate how whole nations define themselves and their experiences. Your speaking goals may be less ambitious, but your need to succeed may nonetheless be very important to you.

OPEN UP YOUR KITBAG

Now that we have given you some 'knowns' for the journey, look in your kitbag; throw out anxiety, throw out objectivity, put ethics in a safe place so that you can always find it, and make space for the many resources you are about to pack, which you will need in your career as an opinion leader to your peers. As we have said, this book is about co-active persuasion: so your next thought should be, and our next chapter is, about listeners.

TIPS

- All opportunities to communicate your ideas to listening others should be carefully prepared.
- Most presentations have persuasive elements. Recognise and pursue these.
- You can overcome anxiety by physical and mental preparation.
- Do not allow the myth of objectivity to interfere with your persuasive intent.
- Consider the ethical implications of your position before you start to prepare.
- Persuasion is a co-active process. Be prepared for what your listeners will do with your message.