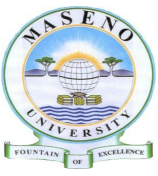


AEN 105: COMMUNICATION SKILLS





**EFFECTIVE LISTENING AND PRESENTING:
ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR A MANAGER**

A Term Paper

By

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Course: Professional Communication



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I. Introduction

Communication is a key management tool needed to get things done. Without proper communication, none of the management functions can be done effectively. Therefore communication is an essential part of all management functions. Peter Drucker, a well known author of Business Management says that an employee's success is directly related to communication.

Your success as an employee---and I am talking of much more here than getting promoted---will depend on your ability to communicate with people and to present your own thoughts and ideas to them so they will both understand what you are driving at and be persuaded.(Drucker, 1977: 262)

Communication plays a vital role in the day to day activities in an organization. Therefore it is a must for an employee to improve communication skills to move up the career ladder. The problem then is on which communication skills we should focus more. It is surprising to hear that most of our time is spent in listening than any of the other communication skills.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of time we devote to the four communication skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Figure 1



Source: A survey conducted in a top blue chip company in India – (Business Communication, Raman M, Singh P, 2006)

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Though we spend most of our time in listening it is important to know whether we listen effectively, as effective listening is an important aid to communication. Bad listeners will make bad communicators.



Being a good listener alone though will not be sufficient to be a good communicator. To experience a win win communication it is important to be a good presenter or a speaker as well since the communication process has two key elements, i.e. sender and receiver. A survey of human resource managers from 133 organizations by Right Management Consultants, the world's largest career transition and organizational consulting firm found out that good communication skills is the leadership trait organizations value most in managers and executives today.

Good executive communication involves more than one's presentation skills. Just as important are a leader's ability to listen, recognize, and engage in dialogue with people at all levels of the organization. Knowing how to communicate in a way that encourages commitment and an understanding of how to be successful is vital to being a good manager. This involves understanding how to personally model the business strategy and culture, and tell powerful stories that help translate that strategy into action for each person. (Gay, 2004). The above quote supports the fact that among communication skills, listening and presentation skills are two key skills that a manager must sharpen.

II. Listening

1. What is meant by Listening?

Frank Tyger as quoted in David D. Acker "All wise men share one trait in common: the ability to listen". We spend most of our time listening. But most people listen with only 25% efficiency. Charles Gragg as quoted in Raman M, Singh P, "It can be said flatly that the mere act of listening to wise statements and advice does little for anyone" meaning that mere listening may not do any good. We hear things rather than listen. Therefore it is important to learn how to listen effectively. First of all we should know the difference between hearing and listening. Keith Davis in his book Human Behavior At Work, states it this way "Hearing is with the ears, but listening is with the mind" (1977: 385). Hearing can be defined as a sense that allows you to perceive sound. (Payne, 2001: 58) This is a more like a physical act which requires only the reception of sound waves where as listening is an active process. Listening might be defined as the art of hearing and understanding what some one is saying. (Raman M, Singh P, 2006) Listening involves concentration, interpretation and understanding of sender's message.

2. The Listening Process

Listening is a discipline that can be learned. In order to learn how to listen, it is important to clearly understand the steps involve in the listening process. As Raman M and Singh P



stated in their book Business Communication, the listening process has five steps. i.e. sensing, interpreting, evaluating, responding and memorizing. Sensing is simply hearing the words. Sensing alone is not adequate to effective listening. We hear a lot of messages in any day. It may be someone shouting to sell something; someone begging, a commercial or an instructor's lecture. But we do not listen to all of these. We select one message from among a multiple of stimuli which is more important at that point of time. This is called selective attention. The second step of the communication process is interpreting. James Payne has defined interpreting as deriving meaning from the words. (2001: 60) At this stage the listener is engaged in the act of decoding the message in a way he or she can understand well. When it comes to the decoding stage the listener may face the barriers of communication. The third step is evaluating. According to James Payne, evaluating is judging what the message is about in context. At this stage the listener assigns meaning to the message based on the personal beliefs that he or she holds, draws inferences, gets an overview of the message and seeks accuracy of information and evidence. This is a stage where a great deal of critical listening takes place. The fourth step is responding. This stage completes the two way communication process. At this stage the listener starts to respond to the message. The listener's feedback, action and reaction will depend on whether he or she has clearly understood the message or not. This stage also reveals the level of the listener's attention on what the sender has sent. The final stage of the listening process is the memory stage. Effective listening will play a major role at this stage. An effective listener can retain to a greater extent what he or she has heard.

2. Keys to Effective Listening

"The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said." (Drucker) If you listen effectively only you will be able to get the exact message delivered by the sender. Any one who has willingness and commitment can learn how to listen effectively. Effective listening is a skill which needs to be improved by practicing on an on going basis. David D. Acker in his book Skill in Communication stated 12 keys to effective listening.

(a) Prepare to listen. Stop talking! The listener should prepare him or her self for listening and avoid talking while listening. When you are talking you can't concentrate on listening. So it is a must, to establish the correct mental attitude to listening. Stop talking and concentrate on what the other person is saying.

(b) Recognize your own biases. Though people hear a lot of things they take only that which relates to their personal frame of reference. To be an effective listener, you should realize what your biases are and need to make adjustments for them.

(c) Resist distractions. All of us can think much faster than we hear. "The difference between thinking and hearing might be as much as 400 words a minute." (Hybels, Weaver, 1986: 60) We have to be careful not to distract ourselves as we can easily lose track of what is being said. It is important to arrange the environment in a way that it minimizes all possible distractions and thereby encouraging a listener to concentrate on the speech.



(d) Keep an open mind. A good listener can participate in the communication with an open mind. He or she doesn't feel threatened or insulted and willingly hears the messages that contradict his or her beliefs, attitudes, ideas or personal values. An active listener tries to identify and rationalize what is being said.

(e) Find an area of interest. "There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject; there are only uninteresting people". (G.K. Chesterton as quoted in David D. Acker, 1994: 59) Active listener always tries to find ways to relate the message to themselves and/or their work environment.

(f) Acknowledge the speaker. It is always important for effective listening to let the speaker understand that you are actively listening. Facial expressions i.e. smile, eye contact with the speaker, nodding your head, all convey to the speaker that he has your attention.

(g) Show some empathy. Look at the conversation from speaker's point of view. Delay the judgments and emotions until you have fully understood the intent and the content that of the message being communicated.

(h) Hold your fire, be patient. Do not interrupt the speaker until he or she finishes what they intend to say. Make sure that you are clear about what is being said.

(i) Listen critically and delay judgment. Effective listeners do not make a judgment before hand. They listen critically and ask questions for clarification.

(j) Judge content, not delivery. All the listeners may not grasp the message at an equal rate. It is always not the fault of the speaker. The level of understanding of a listener depends on his or her own experience. The listener is also responsible to increase his or her understanding level by raising questions, or asking the speaker to be more specific. A good listener always focuses on the content and not the delivery or person.

(k) Exercise your mind but don't let it wander. Good listeners love to hear a variety of presentations which can be a challenge to their mental capacity. When your mind wanders, make eye contact with the speaker, focus on the message and check for understanding, ask questions for clarifications.

(l) Capitalize on thought speed. Our thinking speed is four times faster than the speaker's speaking speed. The listener can easily get 'switched off' from what is being said. Therefore it is important for an active listener to capitalize his or her thought speed to think on what is being said and understanding it.



III. Presentation Skills

1. Introduction

Presentations are an essential tool for effective management in any organization. It is a part of manager's role to present information or offer explanations to others. Jennifer Rotondo and Mike Rotondo in their book of "Presentation skills for Managers" have defined presentation as a visual and oral event intended to communicate, for the purpose of providing information, helping to understand. (2001: 2) A survey of middle and upper managers found that the ability to communicate ideas and plans effectively in front of an audience was ranked the number one critical skill for managers who wanted to progress in their careers. (Mind Skills for Managers, Samuel A. Malone, 1997: 155) Therefore, it is very important for a manager to develop effective presentation skills to express his or her ideas in a way that the others can understand.

2. The Four Ps of Effective Presentation

Good presentation skills are not innate. Presentation skills can be developed by learning, practicing and constantly evaluating the feedback. Samuel A. Malone in his book of Mind Skills for Managers has stated that Planning, Preparation, Presentation and Postmortem are the four essentials of good presentation skills.

(a) Planning. Key element of planning a presentation is to answer the basic questions of what, why, when, how, where and who. Establishing a purpose or an objective is the first most important step in planning a presentation. The four main objectives of any communication are; to inform, to persuade, to request for an action or to build a relationship. Objective of the presentation will influence the design, structure and approach of the presentation. When planning the presentation, presenter should make sure that the audience will listen, understand and be influenced by what he or she says.

(b) Preparation. "Fail to prepare is to prepare to fail" (Pemberton, 1982). As explained by this old quote preparation is the key to success. Therefore it is a must to be prepared well to deliver a good presentation. After defining the objective of the presentation, presenter should research the audience, identify what information need to be presented and plan the structure of the presentation and finally should review the environmental arrangements. Researching the audience is very important to get an idea of the background, status and the experiences of the audience. Good understanding of the audience will help presenter to decide on what and how it should be presented. For example if the majority of the audience includes non technical people then presenter should be careful, when using the technical jargons and need to see the effective ways to present technical matters. Defining the content is the next most important step in preparing a successful presentation.



“Focus on your audience, not yourself - tell them what they need to know, not all you know!”

Presenter should decide what information the listener will need if the objective of the presentation is to be achieved. It is important to organize the thoughts in not more than seven main headings to make the presentation brief and interesting.

Structure of the presentation is also equally important for a successful presentation. Clear and logical presentation of information will help to increase the understandability. Good structure of a presentation would tell the audience what you are going to tell them, then telling them and ending the presentation by telling them what you have told them.

Though the presenter gets a minimum chance to review the arrangement it is worth to do so when the presenter gets a chance. Reviewing arrangement includes making seating arrangements, test the equipment and identify the best place to stand which gives the audience a clear view of screen. When arranging the seating it is important to arrange it in a way which minimizes distraction.

(c) Presentation. As stated by the quote of “It’s not what you say as much as how you say it” (Malone, 1997:161), it is not the content but the way you present is most important.

Recent studies show that the speaker’s appearance and delivery are much more important than the content. This tells the importance of body language for a successful presentation. How the presenter can use body language or non verbal communication to boost the presentation?

i. Eye contact: This helps to maintain the flow of the communication and to build the speaker’s credibility throughout the presentation.

ii. Facial Expressions: Smiling is a powerful action that presenter can use to show his friendliness, warmth and liking towards the audience. It helps to keep the audience at ease and encourage them to listen.

iii. Gestures and posture: Great speakers use the hand gesture to emphasize the main points. Move around the room and move the rest of your body while you are presenting. This helps to get the attention of the audience and to keep them interested.

iv. Proximity: Keeping a comfortable distance from the audience facilitates to better interaction of each other. This helps you to make better eye contact and increase the opportunity for others to speak.

v. Use your voice effectively: “Your voice is the musical instrument you use to put your message across and keep your audience interested”.(Malone,1997:163) Presenter should use tone, pace, pitch, pause and volume to modulate the impact of the message when and where necessary. If the speaker doesn’t manage his voice well it makes the presentation boring and dull.



vi. Make it colorful: Use of visual aids where necessary and appropriate illustration, anecdotes, examples and humor make the presentation a live.

(d) Postmortem. Evaluation of the feedback is a must to develop good presentation skills. This helps the presenter to learn from the mistake he or she has done and correct those. By observing the audience, presenter can get an idea on whether he or she is holding the concentration and the interest of the audience. Body language of the audience will tell well whether the presenter has the audience with him or not. Presenter should analyze the presentation on what worked and what didn't and why.

IV. Summary and Conclusions

In our career path we are offered many opportunities to listen as well as to make presentations. But surprisingly only a few have used these opportunities effectively. Peter F. Drucker stated that “Managing requires special efforts not only to establish common directions, but to eliminate misdirection. Mutual understanding can never be attained by ‘communications down’, solely by talking. It results too from ‘communications up’. It requires both the supervisor’s willingness to listen and a tool designed to make employees heard” This quote highlights the importance of effective listening and presentation skills. Listening is an act that can be improved by proper training on an on going basis. Effective listening is required to improve skills in understanding what we hear and observe as well as what we do not hear. It is understood that better oral communication process is always backed by effective listening. Therefore it is worth to put an effort to improve one’s effective listening skills.

Effective presentation is a result of better planning and preparation. Continuous practicing helps you make an effective presentation. There is no unique way of making presentations. It is depend on the personality and the different abilities of the presenter. Ultimately what matters is whether the presentation is effective enough to get its objectives accomplished. Developing your own style will enhance your presentation.

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