PLATFORM SKILLS

Platform Techniques and Body Language

Overview

Introduction	This section discusses how effective presentation and platform techniques support and enhance overall instructional effectiveness. It also presents techniques and ideas for improving platform and presentation skills.

Important Research Findings

Research findings about the importance of effective platform techniques and research energetic body language are clear and unambiguous:

- PRESENTER effectiveness increases significantly when the verbal message is supported by movement and animated body language;

- *Retention* of ideas presented verbally improves substantially when body language and platform techniques are used to "showcase" and emphasize important content; and

- Less than 20% of a message is communicated verbally—the rest is communicated to participants by "body language" (voice, gestures, movement, posture, and facial expression).

Therefore, if you want your message to have greater impact, be more energized, and remembered by participants, develop good platform techniques and non-verbal communication skills.

Main Topics

Specific platform techniques are:

- Eye contact;

- Gestures and body movement;

- Vocal;

- Focusing; and

- Use of audio-visual aids

- Handling the Challenging Audience

Eye Contact

Eye Contact—the "Do's"

Who to look at—and when—often seems a perplexing problem. Here are some guidelines for making direct and confident eye contact with individuals:

- Look an individual in the eyes for about 3 seconds (or for the duration of the thought you are speaking about) and imagine you are speaking directly to that person—complete your thought and then focus on another individual in a different part of the room and repeat the process; and

- "One thought spoken to one person" enables you to individualize mentally—it is less threatening than thinking about the group as a whole.

Eye Contact—the "Don'ts"

Just as good eye contact enables you to "connect" with your audience, poor habits will have just the opposite effect. Try to avoid:

- Scanning the room nervously, trying to make eye contact with every person in the room;

- Staring above the tops of the audience's heads;

- Talking to the screen rather than your audience; and

- Turning your back on the audience.

Gestures and Body Movement

Hand and Arm Gestures

One of the most difficult platform skills to acquire is knowing what to do with your hands, and using hand and arm movements effectively. You will be able to develop your own style and comfort level by practicing these techniques:

- "Lock" your hands to your lower arms in a soft karate-like "chop" movement—this prevents you from flopping your hand up and down;

- Try out a variety of gestures and movements;

- Observe the effect, and decide what you like, what looks good, and what you feel comfortable with; and

- Incorporate these movements into your platform skills repertoire, and practice in front of a mirror and with a video recorder.

Body Movement— the "Do's"

During a presentation you will generally be standing in front of your audience. Here are some pointers on how to position your body, and how to move in front of a group:

- Think of your feet as being "anchored" to the floor—this enables you to feel balanced, and will prevent you from rocking or pacing;

- Use your arms and hands in the above-the-waist gestures you have practiced, and let your hands fall easily to your sides when you are not using them;

- When you walk from place to place in front of the group, make sure the movement is purposeful and supports your verbal message;

- Move from the speaker's table or podium back to the screen to point to something— this gives you a reason for moving;

- Once you have indicated the relevant material on the screen and discussed it, resume your speaker's position;

- When an audience member responds to a question, asks a question, or makes a comment, move slightly towards that person—this signals attentiveness on your part; and

- Maintain erect and confident posture.

Gestures and Body Movement, Continued

Body Movement— the "Don'ts"

Nervous mannerisms are visually distracting and prevent participants from focusing their full attention on the substantive content you are communicating. Avoid the following:

- Rocking;

- Pacing back and forth;

- Moving around without a purpose;

- Locking your hands in back of you;

- Plunging both hands in your pockets;

- Holding or wiggling an object (a marker, a pointer, etc.) in your hands; and

- Jiggling coins or keys in your pocket.

It is also worth noting that many of these movements are unconscious. Most instructors are totally unaware that they are doing them. That is why being videotaped from time to time is invaluable—it's the only way you get to see yourself as others see you.

Vocal Techniques

Importance of Good Vocal Presentation

In conjunction with the non-verbal aspects of communication, a good speaking voice is essential for effective presentations. If your voice projects confidence and energy, the group will be more attentive and retain more of your message.

Vocal Techniques— the "Do's"

Here are suggestions for effective verbal techniques:

- Enunciate your words clearly;

- Vary your pace and volume;

- *Raise* or *lower* your voice (it's your call!) to emphasize key point;

- *Speed up* or *slow down* (again, it's your call) your pace for greater emphasis;

- Use the "pregnant pause" to stimulate anticipation and interest before presenting a key point;

- Insert a mental *period* at the end of a complete thought, have a moment of *silence*, and mentally count to two before beginning an new point; and

- Practice with a tape recorder

Remember—audience attention is maintained at a high level when you *vary* your vocal style—sometimes louder, sometimes softer, sometimes a pause, sometimes slower, and sometimes a quicker pace

Vocal Techniques— the "Dont's"

Avoid these verbal mannerisms:

- Speaking in a monotone;

- Speaking too softly; and

- Saying "ugh," "okay?" "well, um," etc.—these are generally verbal fillers that are used instead of silence.

Get in the habit of making a statement that finishes a complete thought. PAUSE (silence). Continue with your next statement.

Focusing Techniques

Focusing   Focusing is the presenter's way of intentionally controlling the *direction* of class attention. This control is accomplished by:

- Verbal statements;

- Gestures and body movement; and

- Some combination of the two.

Examples of Verbal Focusing   Here are some examples of verbal focusing:

- *Look* at the diagram;

- *Listen* closely to this;

- Here's a point that's *critical*;

- *Watch* what happens next;

- *Follow* the flowchart carefully;

- *Observe* the difference in these two procedures;

- *Imagine* what an empowered team would be able to do; and

- *If you remember nothing else form today's discussion, remember this!*

In essence, you're using *words* to focus your audience's attention and bring them to a state of vigilance. You're also using verbal stimuli to influence audience members to draw on their visual and creative senses.

Example of Non-verbal Focusing   Non-verbal focusing includes these moves:

- Using a pointer to indicate something;

- Turning your body toward something or someone;

- Nodding your head;

- Using arm or hand gestures;

- Using facial expressions; and

- Using *exaggerated* facial expressions or body language.

Focusing Techniques, Continued

Examples of Combination Verbal and Non-verbal Focusing	Here are several ways you can combine the two: • Presenter points to the diagram and says, "Look at this feature"; and • Presenter uses visual pointer on the overhead projector while saying, "Follow this flowchart carefully."

Audiovisual Aids

General Rules for Visual Aids—the "Do's"

Whether you use computer-generated PowerPoint visuals, 35mm slides, a flipchart, or overhead transparencies made on a copier, remember that the objective of visual aids is to connect with your group's *visual sense*. Here are some rules you should follow which will maximize the effectiveness of any chart or visual you display:

- First and foremost, your audience should be able to *see it and read it*—no exceptions;

- Visuals should be simple in both detail and word usage;

- No more than 8 lines of text per visual should be used;

- The visual should present *highlights* only, requiring interpretation by the instructor;

- The chart should have large, clear, bold, uncrowded letters and lines;

- Color should be used to highlight important facts or features;

- Each visual should represent *one idea only*, and have a title;

- Use *visual representations* instead of words, wherever possible;

- Talk to your audience—not to the visual or the screen; and

- Use relatively *few* visuals—6 to 8 charts per every 15 minutes is a reasonable "rule of thumb."

The "Don'ts"

Just as there are "rules of the game" *for* effective use of visuals, there are also *things to avoid*:

- Don't use visuals that the audience cannot read; *never* say to your audience, "I know you can't see this but...";

- Avoid using too many visuals—a good working guideline is, "Less is more;"

- Don't turn your back to the audience and read the material displayed on the screen—have hard copy of visuals positioned in front of you so that you can face forward as you review the content;

- Don't read your charts word-for-word;

- Don't leave the overhead projector on when you are not displaying material—the bright light is distracting; and

- Never use a visual you have not rehearsed with beforehand.

Audiovisual Aids, Continued

Murphy's Law **of Visual Aids**

You are all familiar with the "whatever can happen will happen" wisdom of *Murphy's Law*. Never is this more true than when using visual aids. Here are some ideas that may help you avoid disaster.

- Anticipate worst case scenario—always have back-up capability, especially when using more complex technologies—a flipchart is your most reliable tool in case all else fails (including the electricity);

- Know the location of the nearest copier store;

- When using an overhead projector, LCD panel, or proxima, have an extra light bulb readily available;

- Never delegate to a colleague, co-instructor, or subordinate the task of bring the visual aids—this is setting yourself up for a major foul-up;

- Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse—never use a visual aid before you have practiced with it *several* times; and

- When teaching a class at an unfamiliar location, try to visit the classroom *beforehand* to get the feel of the room, become familiar with lighting conditions, locate electrical outlets, and make sure the audiovisual equipment you've requested is hooked up and working;

- *Never assume anything where visual aids are concerned.*

A Final Word— Be Paranoid!

In the case of visual aids, being paranoid is a reasonable mental condition! As the saying goes, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

Handling the Challenging Audience

General Tips for Handling the Tough Audience

The challenging audience can come in two types:

- Innocent

- Harmful

Both types of individuals are challenging and both can disrupt a meeting and decrease productivity. The following guidelines help you manage "disrupters" and keep the session focused and on track.

"Innocent Personality Type"	**Guidelines**
Overtalker	• Avoid contact • Use direct questions to solicit responses from others • Consider joking with the individual to have them understand their behavior
Clam	• Use eye contact • Try to draw them out • Use relay questions
Side Conversationalist	• Stop talking • Make eye contact • Ask them to share their conversation
Grumbler	• Let the other audience members deal with them • Encourage another member of the group to comment on their remarks
Opinion Seeker	• Refer questions back to the group and then back to the opinion seeker • Ask them to specifically contribute

Handling the Challenging Audience, Continued

"Innocent Personality Type"	Guidelines
Know it All	• Use them to actually promote discussion • Tactfully interrupt and ask others to comment • Politely ask them to stop talking and give someone else a chance.
Point Maker	• Asks direct questions • Attempt to show them that their point has already been made.

Harmful

They are usually the exception rather than the rule. If hostile or particularly disruptive behavior does occur, you are obligated to respond swiftly and effectively. Ignoring the behavior or making light of it often reinforces the negative behavior and emboldens the disruptive individual to escalate his or her actions. Here are some ideas:

- Use the individual's anger to your advantage, acknowledging their concerns and offer to address some of them.

- Take a quick break and let the individual know you would like to speak with them.

- Suggest taking the issue "off-line."

- Explain the impact the negative behavior is having on other audience members

- Be explicit in spelling out your expectations in terms of courtesy and respect