

Member's Quarterly

Summer 2016 Edition

Ask the Expert

The Fine Art of Getting to the Point

Effective verbal communication

Q : How can I be sure to say the right things when I'm under pressure at work? I am a specialist in my field, but often feel I don't get my points across effectively in meetings or other critical situations.

A : First, in the hope that it makes you feel a little better, let me say that you are not alone. There are many subject-matter specialists in the workplace feeling the same pain. Employers used to respect and value expertise because information was hard to come by, and it was therefore the most obvious way to differentiate oneself at work.

Nowadays, with information on any topic so readily available, there are many in the workplace with broad ranges of expertise. We have all had to learn that information no longer differentiates us — it's the ability to communicate that knowledge effectively which is most highly valued.

Here is a three-part plan, in fact the most important tips to help you get to the point, speak clearly and be remembered in every situation where effective communication is critical.

1. Consider the audience (preferably in advance of your meeting)

Think about the person or people you are talking to, in terms of:

- Their background knowledge of what you are discussing. For example, are they technically adept or challenged? There is no point in showing off your deep technical expertise if they aren't going to understand it. You might even intimidate them which could adversely affect your future relationship.
- Their attitude towards you and your contribution. Are they aligned with you, ambivalent or opposed to what you are likely to say?
- Their wishes and their concerns. The more you know about these, the better you will be able to address the specific needs of the person or people you are talking to, and the more they will subsequently view you as someone who understands them.

2. Communicate information that is relevant to the audience

Subject-matter experts often fall into the trap of thinking that everyone else is as passionate about their subject as they are. This can lead them into giving far too much (often irrelevant) detail on a topic simply because they know it. Where they think they are engaging and enthralling their audience, they may find (if anyone cared to tell them) that they are intimidating or simply boring people.

If you have really thought about the audience in the manner outlined in tip 1, you should be able to figure out which points and what depth of information are going to be most useful for them. I suggest keeping it simple. Just pick two or three core pieces of relevant information on a given topic and expand on these points a bit so that your audience gets the key message without being overwhelmed.

It is critical to find those two or three core pieces of information which take into account the audience's level of background knowledge, attitude to the topic, hopes and concerns.



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3. Structure it correctly

Finally, you'll need to structure your comments in a way that is relevant for the particular topic, the audience and the sense you want to give them.

For example, if you are in a project status meeting, you may wish to demonstrate that you are in control of time. In this case, if asked, "How is your part of the project going?" you might structure your answer in terms of past, present, future, or today, next week, next month, or step 1, step 2 and step 3.

There are many structures that can be used, but the point I am making is that you will be most effective in your communication if you can pick the right one for the audience and meeting you are involved in.

These tips should help you. Success requires application. It takes extensive practice and preparation to appear spontaneously effective in high-pressure situations.

For inspiration and to see where an audience-focused mindset can take you, pay a visit to www.ted.com. Here you can watch some of the world's greatest communicators. They are, of course, also experts, but that is not what the millions of viewers find so interesting. We value these people because despite their amazing expertise and passion for their subject-matter, they have found ways to engage us and tell us everything we need to know about their subject-matter (and often life's work) in less than 20 minutes!

I bet that the presenters featured on TED Talks haven't always had those verbal communication skills, but they are living proof that experts can become great communicators!

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