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INSTITUT DE HAUTES
ÉTUDES INTERNATIONALES
ET DU DÉVELOPPEMENT
GRADUATE INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AND
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES



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Tips for presenting your research

This note serves as the basis for the discussion on tips for presenting your research, discussed during the BCC 7th Annual Conference. The points discussed below go through some key considerations when preparing for and delivering a presentation.

A. Plan your communication

Dedicating time and effort to plan your communication is essential; this requires knowing your audience and defining your message. When planning your communication, there are two major aspects to consider. The first and most essential one is to understand your audience. What we communicate and how we communicate it can vary significantly depending on who our audience is. The second is to tailor your message to that audience. Too often, we structure our communication in a chronological or analytical approach that reflects the process we took to conduct the analysis and reach the conclusion. This approach might have served us well. However, it is often inappropriate and ineffective at conveying your findings and conclusions to others. Dedicating time to these two aspects can help you re-think your communication approach and make the difference between reaching and engaging your audience or talking to 'deaf-ears'.

1 UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE

The first step is to analyse and understand your audience. This includes understanding who they are, what they want from you, what you want from them, and what level of detail and technicality they need to be convinced of your message:

- **Who is your audience?** The difficulty with this question is that your audience is seldom homogeneous. It is often composed of different people with different levels of seniority, technical expertise, basic understanding, etc. Your task is to identify and prioritise your audience from most to least important for this message. Note that this prioritization might not reflect their seniority. For example, your key audience might be your direct manager, who you want to influence, although other more senior managers might also read your report.
- **What does your audience want from you?** Time is a limited resource. Your audience, whether they are reading or listening to you, are dedicating their time to that instead of other things. Why are they listening to you? It is important that you tease out very clearly what it is that they hope to hear/learn from you. It might be to know what decisions they might be able to make as a result of what you have to tell them, or about the success of a new idea, etc. Once you have clarity on what they expect from you: make sure you give it to them as early, clearly and succinctly as possible.

Also, be aware that different people in your audience might want different things from you. Some might hope to use your information to their advantage; others might be threatened by it. Be aware

of these tensions when tailoring your communication. Use objective and quantitative evidence to back your message as much as possible.

- **What are you seeking from your audience?** There is a reason you are writing your report, sharing your message or delivering a presentation. Do you recommend a new decision or path? Do you want a group of people to change their points of view? Do you simply want your audience to learn something new? The purpose of your message will alter how and what you convey. In many cases, it is very powerful to clearly state that intention from the very beginning. (This is not always recommended so use your own criteria to decide when it's appropriate. However, note that it is appropriate much more often than one would initially think).
- **What level of background, detail and technicality does your audience need?** As a general rule, omit as many details as possible (don't tell your audience obvious things that they already know) and limit the technicality to the minimum possible, within the limits of your audience. (Note that this might be VERY untechnical for your standards!). For example, you may say: "We have used methodology X / model Y, I can go into details on this approach if required" but don't describe the methodology unless asked to. The difficulty comes when your audience includes both highly knowledgeable and technical people, to not technical at all. You should first and foremost tailor the level of detail and technicality to your priority audience. However, be aware that depending on how controversial your message is, you might need to add some aspects to accommodate to other audiences, who could potentially challenge your conclusions. For example, you might be targeting a senior, non-technical manager and therefore want to stay away from too many technical details. However, you know that staff from a specific department will try to oppose your idea and discredit your findings. Such a situation might require that you add more technical details to reinforce your messages than you would otherwise have needed.

2 DEFINE AND STRUCTURE YOUR MESSAGE

All good communication needs one clear and simple message: your thesis. A thesis is the answer you want to give about a certain topic. A topic is what you write about. For example, "the real estate market in our country." A thesis is the answer you give about that topic: for example, "*the real estate market is about to enter another crisis if nothing changes.*" Narrowing down your communication to one simple message or thesis is probably the hardest task to do. Yet, it is essential. Your audience will probably not pay 100% attention to all you have to say and will only remember a very small portion of it. You need to make sure that they remember your key message, the essence of what you have to say. Think about it as a neon light that you could hang over your presentation. What would it say?

The next step is to define the strategy for how to substantiate your thesis; there are two broad approaches you can choose from. When thinking about how to substantiate your thesis, you need to, once again, take into consideration your audience. What do they care about? What will convince them of your message? Is it quantitative evidence, a personal story, a strong approach and methodology? Likewise, what do they care less about or could even frustrate them? There are two broad approaches to communicating a message: top down and bottom up. The choice of one over the other will depend on the audience as well as on how controversial your message is.

- **A top down approach starts by stating your thesis and then spends the rest of the time substantiating it.** This approach is very effective and engaging if your message is not very controversial and if you have a non-technical or senior audience. It is particularly effective with senior managers, who have little time to spare. They want to know from the beginning what your finding is and what they can/should do with that information. Once they know that, they might want

to know more details, and potentially, but not necessarily, how you reached that finding (what analysis and process you followed).

A top-down approach follows a simple pyramidal structure: it starts with the key message (thesis), then substantiates the thesis with the most important supporting arguments, then substantiates the supporting arguments with evidence and arguments, and finally substantiates the evidence and arguments by explaining the approach or sources taken.

- **A bottom-up approach builds up your argument progressively, until finally sharing your conclusion.** This approach is more common. However, it is only more appropriate than a top down approach if your findings/recommendations are highly controversial and political and you expect a lot of push-back. It might also be better suited to a VERY technical audience who wants to first know your methodology and approach before trusting your conclusions. This approach should be avoided, when possible, when working with senior management or other non-technical staff. The risk of this approach is losing an audience that is impatient to get to the important message and understand why this is relevant to them.

A bottom-up approach often follows the following structure: Situation, Complication, Analysis, and Conclusion/Recommendation.

- **Situation:** It starts by providing the situation, or background to the problem, often by describing something non-controversial about the subject. It should lead the audience into the identification of the Complication.
- **Complication:** The next step explains what has changed to make it interesting. This can be a problem, a threat, or an opportunity. The complication should eventually force a question: What do we do about it?
- **Analysis:** The analysis takes us through the question, what options there are, and what analysis is needed. It then takes us through the relevant analysis.
- **Conclusion or recommendation:** Finally, we reach a conclusion justified by the analysis.

B. Deliver your presentation

Oral communication involves three elements of communication: verbal, vocal, and visual. Verbal is defined by the words spoken; vocal by the voice, the tone, the volume, the speed, etc.; visual by what the other party sees: body posture, hand gestures, eye contact, facial expressions, etc. A large portion of the message that one conveys, is conveyed through the vocal and visual channels. A study conducted by Professor Mehrabian, researched the influence of vocal, visual and verbal communication when the person gave inconsistent messages of feelings and attitudes (the words did not match the voice or facial expression).¹ In Mehrabian's study, people believed more the non-verbal expressions (visual and voice) than the words they heard. This study lead to a formula that in situations where there is incongruence between words and expression of feelings, the audience's total liking equalled: 7% Verbal Liking + 38% Vocal Liking + 55% Facial Liking. Although this study and its resulting formula were specific to communication that conveys feelings and emotions, the study provides a good insight to the importance of non-verbal communication.

¹ Source: <https://www.businessballs.com/communication-skills/mehrabians-communication-theory-verbal-non-verbal-body-language/>

Below we share some guidelines on each element. Although some are more applicable to a scenario where you are “presenting to an audience”, they are still relevant to situations where you may be “sitting down and negotiating across a table”. We have pointed out which guidelines apply mostly to one scenario or another.

1. VERBAL - WHAT YOU SAY

- **Prepare your message thoroughly.** First, you need to be clear on what it is you are going to tell your audience/ the other party. Then, establish a clear and simple structure for how you will tell it. This can be top-down or bottom up, or another structure that suits you better. But keep it simple. People are not very good listeners, and will only remember a small portion of what you say. So make sure your key message is very clear and simple.
- **Inform your audience of what they will hear; particularly if presenting an idea/analysis etc.** Irrespective of the structure, begin by telling your audience what you are going to say and why this is relevant to them. This will ensure that you catch their interest from the beginning. Then inform them of the structure you are going to follow, and follow it. In written communication, the reader can plan ahead by looking at the structure, scanning through the document, reading the titles etc. In oral communication, this is not possible. You can bridge that gap by informing them of the structure. That way your audience knows what to expect and can follow you more easily. This approach works well for any situation in which you think you may need to talk for more than 3-5 minutes.
- **When talking, keep it short, simple, and interesting.** Avoid the temptation to use complex sentence-structures. You will only make it harder for your audience/the other party to follow you. Keep it short. Everybody likes concision! Avoid “filler” words, such as umm, ahh, “like”.

If you are presenting, you can use visual aids (e.g., power point) that you can comment on, but don't read it to them. Ask questions and anticipate questions and objections. By engaging the audience you will make it more interesting. The audience will feel that you are taking their opinions and reactions into consideration.

- **Rehearse, but don't memorize it.** Avoid reading your message to your audience or the other party, they could have read it themselves. Practice as much as you can: in front of a mirror, with a colleague etc. However, don't memorize it word by word. If you memorize it, you will sound less genuine and less personal. Rehearse so that you are familiar with the structure of what you want to say, but then make sure you talk to your audience/the other party.

2. VOICE – HOW YOU SAY IT

- **Your tone should reflect confidence and emphasize your key messages.** Don't be tentative; rather use a tone of voice that indicates conviction in what you say. Vary your tone, put emphasis on the most important words and syllables. Make it easier for your audience/the other party to identify the key words they have to pay attention to.
- **Your volume should reflect that confidence and emphasis.** When in doubt, be louder. It is better that your audience/other party hears you too much than that they struggle to hear you. Avoid swallowing words at the end of sentences; this can project lack of confidence and knowledge of your topic. Volume is a great way to emphasise certain words or messages.
- **The speed at which you talk should convey your confidence and emphasis.** When nervous, many people tend to talk too fast. This can reflect lack of confidence and can make it harder for your audience/the other party to follow you. The ideal speed is about 100-125 words per minute, or two

words per second.² That rhythm can be difficult to track though. Instead, when in doubt, slower is better. In fact, pauses can be an excellent tool to bring in emphasis and drama to your message.

3. VISUAL – WHAT OTHERS SEE WHEN YOU SAY IT

- **Your body language should be open, composed and convey the right level of energy.** Use open body language. This literally means opening your hands, arms and shoulders. The physical motion of opening up will open up your psychological state, and make you feel more at ease, confident and comfortable. To provide an aura of confidence, make sure you have good posture and, if you are standing, plant your feet. Finally, have the appropriate level of energy. The energy level will depend on the circumstances, too much energy might make you look nervous or anxious, while too little might make your audience/the other party disengage. In general, be relaxed and composed, but share your enthusiasm for your message.
- **Use eye contact.** Keep eye-contact with people in the audience/room. Talk to each of them for a few seconds. If there are several people in the room, don't focus on just a one or two, this can feel too intense for the target and leave the rest of the room feeling left out. It is worth noting that you may need to adapt the level of eye contact based on cultural differences. In some cultures, too much direct eye contact can be seen as aggressive or hostile; while in others, a lack of eye contact can be seen as lack of self-confidence. Your face should remain sincere and aligned to the message you are conveying. The audience/other party will notice incongruence (for example if your words express enthusiasm, but your face looks annoyed) and focus more on what your face says.
- **Your hands are a powerful tool, use them wisely.** The use of hands when talking is very personal and can often be linked to our cultural heritage. The way you use your hands when presenting should feel natural. However, the following guidelines can be helpful:
 - Keep your hand gesture within an imaginary box the size of a shoe box in front of you:
 - Too much hand-waving can be distracting.
 - No hand movement at all can give the impression of listening to a robot.
 - Move your hands purposefully:
 - Pointing with a finger can easily be perceived as accusatory, even if that is not your message.
 - Hands facing downward, convey command and authority, this can be risky depending on the audience as it can be offensive and disengaging to them.
 - Hands facing upwards are generally perceived as welcoming and engaging.
 - Hands together (at fingertips) can convey the message of wisdom.
 - Resist the urge to fidget
- **You can use visual aids, particularly if presenting.** However, they should remain as “aids” not something you read! Visual aids such as slides and graphs can be very helpful to convey your

² Source: Wong, Linda (2014). Essential Study Skills. Cengage Learning. ISBN 1285965620;

https://books.google.ch/books?id=yL2iAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA348&dq=conversation+words+per+minute&hl=en&sa=X&ei=U6waU7uIFMbokQfiwYCoAg&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=conversation%20words%20per%20minute&f=false

message. Irrespective of what type of visual aids you create, make sure you don't read it to your audience/the other party. If you limit yourself to only reading it, your presence has no added value. They could simply read it. Make sure you talk about it, add perspectives, examples, etc. that make listening to you worthwhile.

Be aware of your surroundings; oral communication is a two-way stream of information. Too often we think that presenting or arguing for something means talking at an audience / the other party instead of to them. We tend to forget that in its richest form, oral communication should be a two-way-stream of information. That information might be verbal (e.g., questions and answers from the other side) or non-verbal (e.g., people losing interest, rolling their eyes, falling asleep, etc.). Notice and respond to the verbal and non-verbal cues, don't march along your agenda without observing reactions. Make eye contact with them; watch their body language to ensure they are following your points. Demonstrate sincerity. Be willing to stop for questions, ask for feedback, or stop for discussion. Speak to them, not at them. Use humour appropriately. When in doubt, avoid using humour.

PREPARE FOR A DIFFICULT AUDIENCE.

In some circumstances you might expect to face a difficult audience/party. Prepare for it. Think through what questions, objections and comments they might have. Prepare answers. On the day, the actual questions might differ from what you had planned, however it is highly likely that part of the answers you have prepared can help you answer the real questions. There might be answers you did not foresee and don't have an answer to. You can choose to:

- **Answer part of it:** You might be able to answer part of the question, if so do so. For the remaining part of the question you can revert to some of the other options below.
- **Answer based on hypotheses or scenarios:** In some cases you cannot answer the question because there are some underlying facts that you don't know. You might, however be able to respond based on hypotheses or scenarios. Be clear that you are making up a scenario and that in such a situation your answer would be X.
- **Postpone the answer:** Clearly say that you don't know and will get back to them on it. Many think this option is a no-go for them as they would 'lose face'. However, in many circumstances it is preferable, as you show rigor and truthfulness. Make sure you do get back to them with an answer if you said you would.
- **Answer a different question:** You might not have an answer to that specific question, but could answer a slightly different question. You can respond to what you would be able to answer. Sometimes, this might be close enough.
- **Deflect to someone else:** You might have worked with someone else or know that someone else in the room could answer the question for you. If so, you can deflect. There is no need for you to know all the answers.
- **Answer back with another question:** If the question is not clear to you, you don't think the question is pertinent, or for another reason can't answer the question or want to gain time, you can respond with another question. E.g., I don't understand why this question is pertinent to what I explained, could you please elaborate? How would my answer change your perspective? This is a very interesting question, before I share my thoughts; I'd like to hear what you think about it... etc.