

HANDOUT 1

WHY DO WE COMMUNICATE BY SPEECH?

Apart from the obvious need for efficiency and speed in routine communication (you don't write a formal report about a box of paper clips arriving), there are many other less obvious qualities evident when you talk rather than write.

Speech is perhaps the best way of determining how confident a person is about the information that they are conveying. Listeners do not have "confidence meters", but we are quickly aware of someone who knows their stuff. We can pick up every nuance of a person's speech by observing and listening. We recognise a person who is confident about what they are saying.

Confident speakers typically speak up because they are not ashamed of themselves. They use a clear speaking voice and they look directly at the audience. They do not avert their eyes because they are confident that they know what they know. They do not shuffle papers while talking. They do not put their hands in their pockets. They are not nervous because **really knowing what you want to say annihilates nervousness.**

By the same token, people communicate orally to determine if the other person can be trusted on important matters. For example, assume you are a contractor and you offer services for a fee. You write up a quote and send it in, then speak to the client on the phone. The client asks you why in the quote there is an item "extra work at \$50/hour". Does this mean that the quote is not complete and the work is under-designed?

You say, "Well, if there are some things that do not work then I might have to fiddle around until it does" and you add a little laugh after this, possibly involuntarily, to make it sound unimportant. But the client notices, and having heard that nervous laugh before in another context, decides that you, the contractor, are not confident enough about your design. They choose someone else for the job.

There was nothing concrete about this. There was no wrong answer written down. There was just an impression, given orally, by you to the client.

FOUR MAIN FORMS OF ORAL COMMUNICATION

Oral communication can vary from a simple request ("Got the time, mate?") to a nationwide address given by a high-ranking dignitary. There is a huge gulf between these extremes.

The four main types of oral communication that you need to recognise as young professionals are:

- The quick head-around-the-door exchange in the boss' office.
- The five- to ten-minute formal presentation
- The major address
- The spontaneous grab-the-podium speech, which frequently occurs in a meeting.

In the boss' office

The head-around-the-door is both the easiest and the hardest form of oral communication. If your relationship with your boss is good, then it's a breeze. If you and your boss loathe each other, then perhaps it is time to look for another position because you cannot even say what is on your mind, let alone do it with confidence.

- The trick when confronting the boss is:
- If you have a problem, either personal or professional, then **go to the boss with a set of solutions** as well. Bosses do not want to think of everything on the spur of the moment. This is what their staff is for.

If you are asking for information from the boss, then make sure that you are well briefed in the background before you use the boss' time. Every question to the boss is likely to elicit a question back. This is to see how well prepared you are to do something with the answer. Before asking the boss a question, do some homework.

The formal presentation

This is a favourite mode for technical meetings, where there are a lot of speakers, all of whom feel important and all of whom want to get to the podium for their share of the spotlight, however brief it may be. This talk needs to be well rehearsed before being delivered. There should be several types of visual aids. Use 35 mm transparencies, overheads, live models – anything, so long as it can be easily transported and demonstrated in the short time available.

HANDOUT 1

How do you create maximum impact? One thing stands out: **Never read from your notes.** This advice should be repeated again and again. The best way to give a talk is without even looking at your notes. This promotes an easy, comfortable style which relaxes the audience and allows them to concentrate on the content. If you are uncomfortable yourself, the audience begins to feel uncomfortable as well, and they begin to anticipate your next gaff – losing a slide, forgetting a key technical work, or just appearing lost, confused, and embarrassed.

Doing without notes does not mean that you memorise every word and recite it. This is just as bad as reading your notes, and perhaps worse, as you are just spouting a whole series of sounds with no feeling that they mean anything. Apart from that, if you get lost, you may find yourself either repeating the script or missing a big slab of it. The feeling of a hundred pairs of eyes on you at this moment of public confusion is worse than any humiliation you can think of. Never do this.

The preferred and time-proven way is:

1. Write out your speech longhand, with every word that you intend to say written down – every word, in full, and not abbreviated into note form.
2. Stand (that is, stand up, do not sit) in a room by yourself and read your speech aloud to the ever-sympathetic walls. The louder the better.

You will frequently find that changes to the text are needed. Edit the speech by cutting and pasting as required, until you have a second draft.

3. Repeat the speech alone in your room, incorporating your visual aids at the correct time. Time the speech so you can fit it in the time allowed. If it is too long during practice, it will be far too long on the day. Cut it back and simplify.

4. For the third go, put down your notes and do it all from memory, using the visual aids as prompts for what you want to say. Do not try to present your speech word-for-word. The precise words do not matter, so don't worry about them. Present the **content** and **meaning** of your talk using spontaneous speech. This lets you speak in a fresh and vigorous style using the parts of your written speech which pop into your mind, as well as new words and phrases which you make up on the spot.

After several goes, the content of the original speech will be etched into your consciousness. You will understand its meaning and intention, so the words can be changed at will. Think about when you talk casually to friends. You can have an animated conversation about all sorts of subjects – sport, course work, social activities – and you don't need a script. The same goes in a technical talk. If you really like your subject, you can talk on it in an entertaining and imaginative way. The audience enjoys the experience when the speaker enjoys the experience.

The major address

This is in many ways a lot easier to do than a formal presentation. Historical speakers, Churchill may have been one, said that when asked to talk for five minutes, he would need a few days notice, but to talk for an hour ... well, he could do that right away.

The major address has many similarities to the formal presentation. It is unlikely that you will be asked to give one of these longer talks until you progress to being a junior engineer and have been involved in a particular project for some time. However, when that happens, you should attempt to follow the style of the formal presentation, above, with appropriate detail to flesh it out to 45 minutes or so.

The spontaneous grab-the-podium speech

People who do this well often turn out to be natural leaders, such as managing directors or heads of departments. The situation arises in a meeting where an issue is being discussed with everyone entitled to their point of view, and equally allowed to speak. However, often the most confident and self-assured members of the meeting dominate because the meeker members cannot summon the courage to contradict them. It takes great nerve and skill to extemporise on a subject given the possibility that one slip will cause another person to butt in with a stronger argument.

STRUCTURE

“Tell ‘em what you are going to tell ‘em. Tell what you want to tell ‘em, and tell ‘em what you told ‘em.” (Aphorism for the new speaker.)

In the five- to ten minute formal presentation, the structure of your talk should follow that of a standard engineering report. You must tell everyone right at the start what you will talk about and what you will prove or show. It is not good practice to leave the audience waiting for a big pay-off at the end. In other words, don't tell shaggy dog stories. The aim is to inform the audience and to let them know right from the start where the talk is going.

Present a *summary* at the beginning, where you state your premises. For example, “The environment is here to stay as an issue in every professional field. Where might it go in the future? My analysis shows that the following areas will be important In this talk I will present data and evidence that new technology will be used to help environmental concerns and that new legislation will probably follow this”

After this, a *conclusion* is appropriate, where you reiterate the summary, but use the past tense. “I have shown this, that, and the other, and my conclusions are that . . .” Always finish with this sort of **take-home message**.

Hint: Be specific. In two minutes, few people can explain the universe. Talk about something that is specialised and unique to you.

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