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Strategies for Speaking Like a Professional

By Linda S. Eck Mills, MBA, RD, FADA, LDN

Many people find the idea of speaking in front of a group frightening. If you fall into that category, help is here. The standard public speaking model is outlined, along with content ideas and other tips.

Many people are afraid to speak in front of a group. In fact, *The Book of Lists* states that the greatest fear is that of speaking, with 41 percent of people having this fear. Yet, the skill of speaking effectively to a group can be extremely valuable to your career as a CDM.

To get started taming your jitters, think about SPAM, an acronym for the standard public speaking model – **S**ituation, **P**urpose, **A**udience, and **M**ethod – not to be confused with a luncheon meat or junk e-mail.

Situation

What is the situation in which you will be presenting? What is the time and place of the program you are to present? If you don't know this information you may very well lose impact no matter how effectively you deliver your speech. To be effective, you should also consider the history behind the need to present this information. Situation also includes the physical, social, psychological, and time element in which the speech takes place. Perhaps the situation is an identified problem or concern in your facility.

Purpose

What do you hope to achieve with your speech? Your ability to determine the purpose of your speech comes from your understanding of the situation. This is where you determine the goal or learning objectives for the speech. Your purpose may be to make employees aware of subjects ranging from infractions to regulations.

Audience

Audience is probably the easiest of the variables to understand and frequently the most overlooked area. Speakers become too busy obsessing about what to say, how to say it, and dealing with timing, that they forget about the most important element – the audience. Where would your speech be without an audience? These are the individuals to whom your speech is directed, and their response determines whether the speech is good or bad. The most important tools in audience analysis are common sense and empathy, or the ability to put yourself in someone else's place. Most likely, your audience is not just like you. While your audience may be the employees in your department, you may be asked to speak to a group of individuals you don't know as well. Determine how many people will attend the presentation. What is the age span and gender involved?

Consider the culture and background of the audience. Select the words and level of diction that suit the audience, purpose, and occasion. Avoid clichés, euphemisms, jargon, and sexist language. Most importantly, match your words to your personality. Determine what the audience members have in common and what they already know about the subject. Keep in mind there are potentially four types of attendees:

- *Vacationer* – You can't teach me anything. I'm taking the day off.
- *Prisoner* – You can't teach me anything. I was *told* to be here.
- *Graduate* – You can't teach me anything. I already know this stuff.
- *Student* – Anxious to learn, willing to look at anything that will help me be a better person.

Method

Once you have determined the situation, purpose, and audience, it's time to consider the method you will use to best convey your message. Consider which method best fits the situation and best serves your purpose. Which method best fits the audience? Which methods could be combined for a better effect? Which public speaking methods are you most comfortable with?

Along with method is the development of content. What is the introduction? What will be in the body of the speech? What is the conclusion? The best introductions get the audience involved, provide background information, and create interest in the topic. Speak clearly and with confidence, and establish common ground with the audience. Remember WIIFM – what's in it for me? But think about this from the perspective of the audience, not you as the speaker.

For the body of your speech you need to organize the presentation into some logical sequence, develop the content, and create and use visuals. Organize your speech in the order most appropriate: chronological, alphabetical, numerical, cause and effect, or topical. There is no one way that works best all the time, but lack of organization can result in a poor speech. You should present three to five main ideas. More than five points will lead to sensory overload for the audience.

Involve the audience by selecting an appropriate method. Consider choosing at least one of the following: brainstorming, case studies, games, questionnaires, role-plays. You can also get the audience involved by responding to your information using one or more of these methods: polling, rating, small group discussions, listing responses on newsprint, interviewing partners, and sentence completion.

The conclusion should do three things – sum up the speech with emphasis on key points, remind the audience why this topic is important to them, and call the audience to action.

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Creating and using visual aids is a key component to a presentation. Remember there are many visual learners who will remember much more if you show them what you are talking about. Visuals make you more persuasive, help people grasp more information, add variety and emphasis, reinforce your verbal message, help organize your presentation, help you be concise, and can help to facilitate meetings. You must select the appropriate medium for your situation, purpose, and audience. Visuals can include: flip charts, handouts, transparencies, videos, posters, models, and PowerPoint slides. If you are utilizing any equipment, make sure you practice using it beforehand so you feel comfortable during the presentation.

With many professional presentations utilizing PowerPoint slides, you need to remember the *rule of 6* – 6 words per bullet, 6 bullets per slide, 6 text slides in a row. Also, keep in mind the font size should be a minimum of 24-28 points for text and 28-42 points for titles on visuals.

All effective speakers have one thing in common – they talk to their audience, they don't read to their audience. If your material needs to be read, let the audience read it by providing a handout. Don't memorize the presentation. That creates too much pressure to get the speech absolutely perfect. Professional speakers who repeatedly deliver the same speech often memorize their speech, yet with each delivery they adjust the message to suit the occasion and audience. This takes a lot of skill. When you are using notes, they should be in a minimum of 18-point font. Keep note cards or outline pages numbered. Use colors for different sections or highlight key words in a different color. Keep a back-up copy of notes in a different location for safekeeping.

Effective posture and movement also plays a role in a good presentation. Remember to stand up straight with your feet slightly apart. Avoid keeping a tight grip on the podium, as this conveys nervousness. Maintain good eye contact with the audience. If this thought frightens you, look at the forehead of audience members instead of their eyes. This will give the appearance you are looking at individuals behind the person. Putting your hands inside your pockets, or putting your arms behind your back for short periods is acceptable, but refrain from folding your arms across your chest. Be mindful to not play with a pen, paperclip, or pointer, jingle keys or coins, play with jewelry, twirl hair, bite your lip, or stroke your chin or beard when presenting.

To be a successful speaker, remember these points. Have a passion for the topic. If you don't, find someone else to present the topic. Present the material in a unique way but keep it relevant to the situation, purpose, and audience. Prepare for the speech, but avoid scripts and the temptation to read to the audience. Remember the KISS principle – keep it short and sweet with a maximum of five points. Finally, get the audience involved – people remember 10 percent of what they read, 20 percent of what they hear, 30 percent of what they see, 50 per-

cent of what they see and hear, 70 percent of what they say, and 90 percent of what they say and do.

It takes time and practice to build strong speaking skills. Consider reading some books on the topic, taking a public speaking class at a local college or university, or joining a group such as Toastmasters to learn more. You will never regret becoming a more confident, poised speaker. ■

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When You Forget What to Say

You're flowing smoothly through your presentation when – whammo! You draw a blank. A temporarily empty mind doesn't have to undermine your professionalism. Follow these suggestions:

- **Use an ounce of prevention.** Rehearse out loud frequently enough to master your message. Strangely, if you try to memorize your remarks, you're almost sure to go blank. Understand why you're speaking the words you choose, and rehearse them until you have a feeling for the essence of your message.
- **Keep your notes nearby.** Use large, colorful type so materials will be easy to read when you're under pressure.
- **Use your visuals as a road map, if possible.** Graphic images or bullet points can keep you on track, serving as a series of trigger points.
- **Repeat what you just said.** Keep repeating yourself until your mind clicks into gear. Or say something that parallels your subject, and chances are, within seconds, you'll be back on track.
- **Ask the audience a question.** If it's a small group, say "Marilyn, what are your thoughts so far?" You'll have time to think as Marilyn speaks. If you're speaking to a large group, ask a rhetorical question.
- **Ask for help.** "Where was I?" is not a shameful thing to say. Most audiences will be sympathetic. Everyone knows the pressure of speaking. Just don't do it repeatedly or make a big deal out of it.

Adapted from "How to Handle the Fear of Presenting," Executive Communications Group, www.ecglink.com.