

Skill development guide: preparing an oral presentation

Most of us feel great stress when faced with the prospect of making a speech. Nevertheless, at some point, organizational leaders and managers will almost undoubtedly need to address an audience and sell an idea – whether this be a pitch to an external organization or a motivational speech to internal employees. In your future management career, for example, you may need to:

- Persuade senior management to support your proposed marketing strategy
- Make a sales pitch to customers
- Speak to a professional gathering about market conditions or how your business has overcome challenges
- Address and motivate other employees
- Speak to members of a community.

Without the ability to communicate to an audience, management theory and practice is worth little. Persuasive communication (rhetoric) changes the audience's behaviour by encouraging them to accept the information they are being given and act upon it. Being able to make effective presentations will highlight your leadership, organizational, and speaking skills, and these often play an important role in building a successful career.

Oral presentations are an integral part of managing organizations – and, consequently, are likely to form part of your management course.

So how do you face up to the uncomfortable reality of knowing everyone's eyes are fixed firmly on you? For any presentation you can reduce your fears and lay the foundation for a professional performance by focusing on the three Ps: **plan**, **prepare** and **practise**.

Planning

Ask yourself the following questions before you embark on writing your presentation:

- **Time** – what is the duration of the presentation?
- **Place** – how big is the room? What lighting and technology is available? Is there a lectern?
- **Audience** – how many will there be? Who will they be? What will they be interested in/expecting? (Take into account not just their occupation but also their age, gender, experience, attitudes etc)

- **Purpose** – what exactly are you trying to achieve? For example, are you informing, explaining, persuading, motivating, building a rapport ...

Your presentation should be both practical (taking into account factors such as available resource and time) and appropriate (fitting your aims and the expectations of your audience). And don't forget to make sure you build in some emotional appeal.

Preparation

The golden rule of preparation is **KISS** – KeeP It Short and Simple. This section offers a few tips on how to achieve this.

Attention

Gain audience attention at the beginning of your presentation by using some of the following:

- Anecdote
- Humour
- Statistics
- Quotation
- Analogies
- A rhetorical question

Think about what do you have (or do not have) in common with your audience. Where possible, discuss common experiences to engage their interest. Remember that more you involve the audience in the case/problem analysis, the more stimulating the presentation will be.

Repetition

- Tell them what you are going to say.
- Say it.
- Tell them what you have just said.

(But try to vary your phrasing a little so they don't get bored!)

Visual aids

These include PowerPoint, video clips, props and transparencies. However, make sure you ...

- Avoid the colour red for text
- Minimize gimmicks (sounds, overuse of animation)
- Follow the 4 + 7 rule (4 bullet points, no more than 7 words in a line) per slide
- Ensure text and graphics fill up the whole space
- Seek guidance from your lecturer on the kinds of visual aids (e.g., PowerPoint, transparencies, posters, artifacts) that you may use.

If appropriate, you may wish to prepare handouts showing graphics, statistics an/or a summary of your presentation. These should be distributed at the *end* of your presentation.

Appropriateness

At the planning stage you analysed the audience and established the aim of your presentation. Based on this information, you should ensure that what you say is appropriate and tailored to the needs and interests of the audience as well as your own.

For example, you may have to tailor your language and style depending on the knowledge base, age and cultural background of your audience. Consider whether or not humour is appropriate in the context, and any other factors affecting your relationship with the audience (such as disagreements you may have had in the past – should they be acknowledged/addressed?).

Summaries

You should begin and end with a summary. To avoid obvious repetition and to engage their interest, you can use phrases like...

- “My talk presents three reasons for....”
- “Let me review with you the three major problems I’ve just discussed.”

General hints

Make sure you establish your personal character and credibility and offer logical proof of your arguments

- Use verbal signposts, such as “So far we have talked about... now let’s move to....”
- Use examples – statistics and factual information to improve your credibility.
- Prepare 2 to 4 main points for a 20-minute presentation.

Practice

Effective communication does not always come naturally, despite the impression of effortless given by outstanding presenters. After you have written your main idea or statement, you should practise how you will convey your main idea or purpose to the audience.

Here are a few hints to help you make sure you communicate with your audience as effectively as possible:

- Maintain eye contact – never talk to the slides or read from a slide.
- Move naturally during your presentation – do not remain in one spot.
- Use hand gestures to emphasise key points.
- Use palm-size note cards with key words or phrases to keep you on track and aid your memory (though bear in mind that they are no a substitution for rehearsing – see below).
- Rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse!
- Time yourself and make sure you are comfortable with the speed you need to read at.
- Practise in front of a full-length mirror, checking for and eradicating mannerisms (such as scratching head, hands in pockets, fidgeting, bad posture).
- Record your presentation. Critique yourself for verbal padding (“um, err, you know, like...”) and remove it.
- Practise in front of a friend and ask for their comments.
- Practise pronouncing ‘difficult’ words.
- Practise with the technology, in the presentation room if possible.
- Use breathing techniques to promote calmness before you begin
- Rehearse, rehearse, and rehearse!

Sources

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