

Trainer Essentials: Presentation Skills

Presentation Skills

Think back to a time when someone—a teacher, business person, spiritual leader, or co-worker—inspired you with a very effective presentation. What did they do to capture your attention and keep you engaged?

Presentation skills are the techniques speakers use to effectively communicate their messages. When you are training, whether you realize it or not, you use presentation skills to communicate in three different ways (Warren & Windle, 2014):

1. **Verbally** (through the words you use)
2. **Non-verbally** (through your body language, facial expressions, and movements)
3. **Para-verbally** (through the way you deliver your words)

As a trainer, you will be more effective if you are aware of what you are communicating through your words, body language, and delivery. Within each of these categories there are techniques you can use to be more engaging and to communicate more effectively.

Verbal Communication Skills

Verbal communication is what we communicate through the words we use. Strong presenters will carefully consider the best words to use to explain a concept. When deciding how you will verbally communicate a particular message, consider:

- **The level of your participants:** Do not use words that are too technical if the participants has limited experience in the subject. Your words should draw them in to the subject by using ideas or explanations that they can relate to.
- **The attention span of your participants:** You can talk to participants for a maximum of ten minutes before you need to do something to regain their attention (Medina, 2008). To ensure that people retain the information you are sharing, keep your message concise, deliver it in small chunks, and build in at least a short activity every 10 minutes.
- **The preconceptions of your participants:** Know your participants and be conscious of their preconceptions. Avoid using examples or descriptions that may offend them, make them less likely to view you as a credible source, or cause them to stop listening openly to what you have to say.

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“One cannot not communicate!”

Paul Watzlawick¹

Nonverbal Communication Skills

Even if they are silent, people constantly communicate their emotions, reactions, and level of comfort with other people through the way they hold their bodies and the movements they use.

Your nonverbal communication should reinforce and emphasize the words you use. If your nonverbal communication is inconsistent with your words, your communication will become less effective (Giri, 2009).

Gestures

Gestures are movements of your body (especially your hands and arms) that represent or emphasize the message you are conveying (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Gestures can be used to clarify your instructions. For example you can use your arms to indicate where participants should go for a certain activity.

The meaning of hand and arm gestures and head movements varies between cultures. For instance, the “thumbs-up” or “OK” motion signifies approval or agreement in many cultures, but in others it can be interpreted as vulgar or disrespectful (Karr, 2013). Pointing at people is also common in some cultures and very impolite in others. It is important to be aware of how your participants will perceive certain gestures.

Movements

In addition to gestures, other movements can be used to emphasize your message. For example, by stepping forward towards the participants or moving to the side you can help to communicate a change of focus or a transition (Storz, 2002). However, other movements can sometimes be distracting for your participants and should be avoided. Examples include playing with a marker or pen, pacing back and forth too much, or fidgeting with papers. These may make people believe that you are nervous and could make your participants less confident in your knowledge and experience.

Facial Expression

Your facial expression influences how willing people will be to trust you and how receptive they will be to your ideas. Researchers in the USA showed pictures of two politicians and asked participants to choose which of the politicians looked more competent. When asked why they

¹ Quoted in: Heyne, F. (2015, May 2013). *Understanding Paraverbal Communication*. Retrieved Mar 17, 2015, from iPersonic: http://www.ipersonic.com/blog_files/Understanding-Paraverbal-Communication.html

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chose one person over the other, most participants mentioned that the politician they chose had a more genuine smile (Todorov, Mandisodza, Goren, & Hall, 2005).

Facial expressions also affect the sound of your voice: when you smile, your voice tends to sound more friendly and warm than when you frown or look serious. Having a friendly facial expression and voice will help to make your participants feel safe and comfortable.

Posture

Posture is the way in which your body is positioned when you are standing or sitting (Merriam-Webster, 2014). Closed postures, for example standing with arms crossed over the chest or hands shoved in pockets, can be barriers to communication (Warren & Windle, 2014). When you train, you should be aware of your posture. Stand up straight and keep your body open to the participants instead of slouching, clasping your arms together, or keeping your hands in your pockets.

Eye Contact

Appropriate eye contact is very important for keeping participants engaged and checking their understanding. In many cultures, it is helpful to make regular eye contact for 1-3 seconds with participants. Eye contact helps people to feel acknowledged. It also allows you to check nonverbal signals from participants that indicate whether or not they understand what you are saying. Note that in some cultures prolonged eye contact can be interpreted as impolite; in other cultures you may be considered distrustful if you do not make eye contact. Be aware of how your participants will perceive you if you make too much or too little eye contact (Stoy, 2010).

Para-verbal Communication Skills

Para-verbal communication is what we communicate through the way we deliver our words. As a trainer, you can improve your presentation skills by paying careful attention to the tone and speed of your voice and the clarity of your speech. Using a tone that conveys your enthusiasm and speaking at a pace that feels comfortable to your participants will help them to stay engaged and understand your message.

Tone

Tone is a combination of pitch, quality, and the strength (projection) of your voice. If your tone is pleasant, people will be more eager to listen to what you have to say than if they find your tone too shrill or too soft. Researchers in Canada found that voters prefer lower-pitched voices: Canadians gave candidates with lower-pitched voices higher ratings for attractiveness, leadership potential, honesty, intelligence and dominance (Tigue, Borak, O'Connor, Schandl, & Feinberg, 2012). Margaret Thatcher, the prime minister of England from 1979-1990, received criticism for the "shrill pitch" of her voice. She had voice training to lower her pitch, which increased her appeal with the public (BBC, 2014).

A person's tone also communicates emotion. The tone you use should match the message you are trying to communicate. In many cultures, speaking in monotone (without much tonal

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variation) makes a person appear bored or uninterested, so adding variety to your tone can help you express your enthusiasm for the topic you are teaching.

Speed

Most people have a tendency to speak too fast when they are presenting in public. Be careful to speak at a reasonable pace that will allow people to easily understand you without feeling like you are rushing or nervous. On the other hand, avoid speaking so slowly that your participants become bored or impatient. It is important to find an appropriate balance. Ask your co-trainers for feedback to make sure you are delivering your words at an appropriate speed.

Clarity of Speech

Clarity of speech includes a combination of articulation (the movement of the tongue, lips and jaw to make specific sounds) and enunciation (the act of pronouncing words clearly). Clear speech is important for ensuring that you are correctly understood. If you have a tendency to slur words together or mumble when you are presenting, it may be helpful to record yourself training so that you can hear whether your clarity of speech is improving.

As a trainer, you communicate in multiple ways each time you deliver a lesson: verbally (through the words you use), non-verbally (through your gestures, expressions, and motions), and para-verbally (through the way you deliver your words). Paying close attention to what you are communicating through your words, body, and voice will help you improve your presentation skills and communicate your messages more effectively.

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