Basics of Presentation Skills

Leaders make presentations to a wide variety of audiences, for example, Board members, employees, community leaders and groups of customers. Usually there is a lot that can be quickly gained or quickly lost from a presentation. A little bit of guidance goes a long way toward making a highly effective presentation.

Note that meeting management skills are often helpful in designing an effective presentation. Also note that the following guidelines are intended for general presentations, not for training sessions where your presentation is to help learners to gain specific knowledge, skills or attitudes in order to improve their performance on a task or job.

Basic Guidelines For Designing Your Presentation

1. List and prioritize the top three goals that you want to accomplish with your audience. It's not enough just to talk at them. You may think you know what you want to accomplish in your presentation, but if you're not clear with yourself and others, it is very easy - too easy - for your audience to completely miss the point of your presentation. For example, your goals may be for them to appreciate the accomplishments of your organization, learn how to use your services, etc. Again, the goals should be in terms of what you want to accomplish with your audience.
2. Be really clear about who your audience is and about why is it important for them to be in the meeting. Members of your audience will want to know right away why they were the ones chosen to be in your presentation. Be sure that your presentation makes this clear to them right away. This will help you clarify your invitation list and design your invitation to them.
3. List the major points of information that you want to convey to your audience. When you're done making that list, then ask yourself, "If everyone in the audience understands all of those points, then will I have achieved the goal that I set for this meeting?"
4. Be clear about the tone that you want to set for your presentation, for example, hopefulness, celebration, warning, teamwork, etc. Consciously identifying the tone to yourself can help you cultivate that mood to your audience.
5. Design a brief opening (about 5-10% of your total time presentation time) that:
a. Present your goals for the presentation.
b. Clarify the benefits of the presentation to the audience.
c. Explain the overall layout of your presentation.
6. Prepare the body of your presentation (about 70-80% of your presentation time).
7. Design a brief closing (about 5-10% of your presentation time) that summarizes the key points from your presentation.
8. Design time for questions and answers (about 10% of the time of your presentation).

Basic Guidelines About Presentation Materials

You might be handing out supplemental materials, for example, articles, reports, etc. along with making your presentation. You might also be handing out copies of your presentation, for example, handing out copies of your slides that you will be referencing during your presentation. You might be using transparency slides or showing slides from a personal computer onto a project screen.

1. If you plan to project your slides from a computer onto a projection screen, then be sure to check out the computer system before people come into the meeting room, if at all possible.

2. Use a consistent layout, or organization of colors and images, on your materials.

3. If you use transparencies on an overhead projector, then allocate one slide for every 3-5 minutes of your presentation. Include 5-8 lines of bulleted phrases on each slide.

4. If you provide the supplemental information during your presentation, then your audience will very likely read that information during your presentation, rather than listening to you. Therefore, hand out this information after you have completed your presentation. Or, hand it out at the beginning of your presentation and ask them not to read it until you have completed your presentation.

5. If you hand out copies of your slides, be sure that the text on the slides is large enough that your audience can read the text on the table in front of them without having to hold the handouts up to their faces. Be sure to leave space on the handouts for the audience to make notes on them.

Basic Guidelines About Your Delivery

1. If you're speaking to a small group (for example, 2-15 people), then try to accomplish eye contact with each person for a few seconds throughout your delivery.

2. Look up from your materials, or notes, every 5-10 seconds, to look into the audience.

3. Speak a little bit louder and a little bit slower than you normally would do with a friend. A good way to practice these guidelines is to speak along with a news anchor when you're watching television.

4. Vary the volume and rate of your speech. A monotone voice is absolutely toxic to keeping the attention of an audience.

5. Stand with your feet at shoulder-length apart.

6. Keep your hands relatively still.