

Training 101

BOTH SIDES OF THE PLATFORM

This month's "Training 101" articles can help make you a better presenter. They look at the issue from opposite sides of the lectern.

In the first article, Kittie Watson and Larry Barker turn the spotlight on your audience. They describe eight dangerous assumptions about listeners, and give advice for dealing with the realities of audience attention and motivation. The second article, by Richard Plavetich and Brian Kleiner, focuses attention on you, the speaker. Here are tips for preparing, delivering, and wrapping up effective presentations.

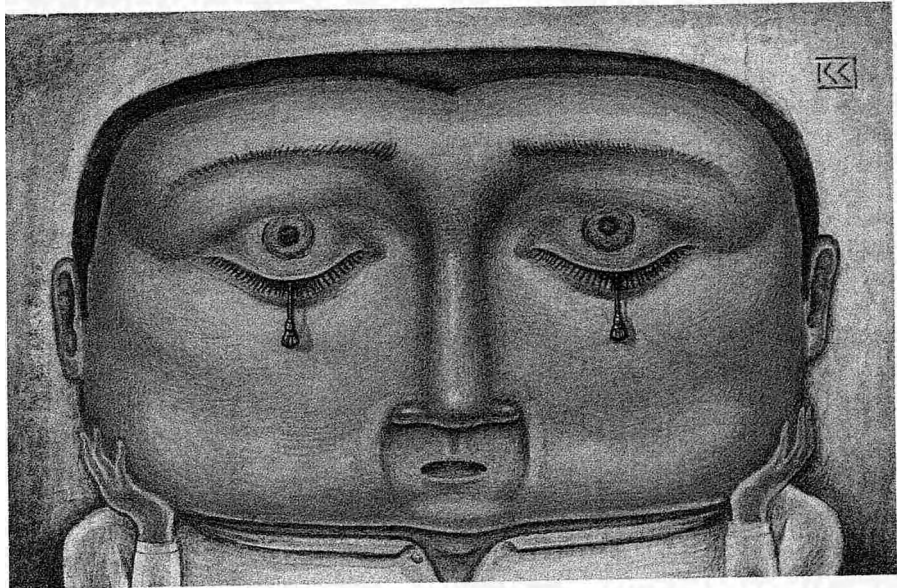
Eight Dangerous Assumptions About Listeners

Most trainers would agree that effective communication is vital to training. When we present ideas to trainees, we like to believe they are listening. If we assume people will listen effectively just because they are physically present, then we enter a communication "danger zone."

It is easy to forget that many trainees are not highly motivated, and that many are not skilled in effective listening. To be effective trainers, we have to understand typical listener habits. Below are eight dangerous assumptions that some inexperienced trainers make about listeners.

Assumption: "If participants are looking at the trainer, then they must be listening." The reality is that many participants fake attention.

Parents and teachers tell children, "Look at me when I'm talking to you." Years of that kind of conditioning and experience have taught us face and eye behaviors that make people think we are listening even when we are not. Trainees have



Kent Christensen

received that conditioning, too. Such behavior makes it difficult for trainers to know when trainees are really listening actively.

We can tell whether they are listening if we check for understanding by looking for nonverbal cues and listening for verbal ones.

Participants usually show attentiveness through appropriate facial expressions and head nods, and by leaning forward. They also may repeat important phrases, ask questions related to the topic, and seek clarification. If participants fail to demonstrate active listening, ask questions or use a small-group activity or a role-play exercise to encourage involvement.

Assumption: "When trainers start speaking, participants start listening." The reality is that trainees do not immediately focus their attention on the presenter. They don't listen at the beginning of a class.

When trainers begin to talk, it takes most participants several seconds or even minutes to orient themselves to

Trainees may be present and may seem alert, but that doesn't mean they're listening.

the message. Previous thoughts or worries, noises, distractions, or competing messages from the environment can keep participants from listening at the moment the trainer begins to talk. So any important point, fact, or information presented during the first minute of a presentation will probably pass by the average listener.

To make sure that important learning points get through, first help participants get past that brief period of acclimatization. Just as we shake hands when greeting a person, we need to "shake hands"—verbally and nonverbally—with participants when beginning a training session.

A warm-up statement or exercise can help you build a relationship with participants before you get to the heart of the training content. Be sure that participants are on track before you dive into the content or the course preview. Hook your listeners into the topic early in the presentation by using attention-getting examples and demonstrating the value of the course.

Assumption: "Participants will remember the points that the trainer thinks are most important." The reality is that after most 10-minute presentations, listeners remember only 50 percent or less of the information that was given. So the odds are against participants remembering all the points in a training session. The odds that they will recognize the items that the trainer believes are the most important are also low.

Without specific cues from the trainer, participants are likely to remember the first and last ideas that are presented, whether they are the most important or not. Other items remembered most frequently are specific facts, numbers, and interesting examples. If the most important points in your session do not fall into any of those categories, then there is little chance of them being retained, unless you work to raise the odds.

You can do that by previewing major points in your introduction, providing summaries of important information at various times throughout your presentation, and highlighting key ideas in your conclusion. Reinforce main ideas with interesting and compelling examples. Because

participants remember most what they hear first and last, state the most important points at the beginning and end of the presentation.

You can also help participants retain information by having them review important points from exercises, films, and discussions. Use specific verbal and nonverbal cues to emphasize important points. Increases in vocal variety, volume, and emphasis—and changes in facial expressions and gestures—will suggest to trainees which ideas are important.

Assumption: "Participants finish listening when trainers finish talking." The reality is that participants tune out whenever they want to. It may be after your opening sentence, or it may be 30 seconds from the end. But when participants' listening

FIGHT LISTENER "TUNE-OUT" BY KEEPING YOUR PRESENTATIONS BRIEF

energy runs low, they will tune out, even if you are still speaking.

Trainers sometimes forget that it is the listener and not the speaker who decides how and when to listen. And the longer the trainer talks, the less likely it is that participants will stay tuned in all the way to the end.

Fight listener "tune-out" by keeping your presentations brief. Look for ways to cut irrelevant or unimportant material.

Use variety in your presentations to wake up participants who may have tuned out earlier. Get people involved throughout the presentation. Ask rhetorical questions, get participants to take part in exercises, or suggest ways for them to visualize what you are saying.

Plan breaks strategically. Instead of one long break in the morning and one in the afternoon, schedule two short ones in the morning and two short ones in the afternoon.

And be sure to leave time for questions throughout your presentation so that participants who have tuned out

can become involved again.

Assumption: "Participants accurately repeat what trainers tell them." Who are we kidding? Most of us have observed the "rumor game," in which a message is transmitted through five or six people and repeated at the end. The final version rarely resembles the first message.

Repeating a message accurately is difficult, even if it is your own message. The task is even more difficult when it's someone else's message. Memory limitations as well as differences in language interpretation, personal interests, and priorities make it hard to repeat accurately information we hear. Participants perceive, remember, and repeat ideas based on their own frames of reference and value systems.

You can help trainees accurately understand and remember training content. Provide written reinforcement for the most important messages of your presentation. Use visual aids during the presentation, including accurate spellings of critical words and phrases.

Repeat important information at least three times, and ask trainees to repeat the information before they leave. Make the information more vivid and relevant by sharing personal examples, role-playing new techniques, or creating case studies. Such approaches make it easier for participants to reinforce the learning by applying it to their work situations.

Assumption: "Participants process information the same way the trainer does." We all know there are myriad techniques and styles for presenting information. Many people assume that others prefer to have learning presented as they themselves would.

In other words, trainers with technical backgrounds often include many statistics, equations, and professional terminology in their presentations. Those with nontechnical backgrounds are likely to use personal examples, illustrations, and familiar language. Many trainers believe that participants are interested in the same facts, examples, and points that they are interested in.

Unfortunately, what works for one learner may not work for another. One person may want "just the facts," while another person wants

to see "the big picture."

It is critical for trainers to remember that participants prefer different approaches to organizing and listening to information.

Analyze the characteristics of your audiences in advance. Determine appropriate kinds of examples, support material, and structure. Especially when working with a mixed group, such as men and women, executives and hourly employees, or people with varying levels of education, attempt to provide information that can engage all segments of the audience. Have participants interject their own examples and illustrations.

Because people learn at different rates and in different ways, attempt to vary the pace of training. Organize the content carefully; use humor when possible.

Assumption: "Participants ignore distractions such as the trainer's appearance, body language, or mannerisms, and the room's appearance, lighting, or temperature." When we assume that participants are listening, we sometimes fail to consider how internal and external factors influence their listening abilities.

Instead of focusing on what we are saying, many participants focus on what we are doing. If the topic or discussion gets a little repetitive, or if the trainer fails to relate to the listener, then a trainer's out-of-date clothing, change jiggling in his or her pockets, dangling jewelry, and verbal mannerisms become more interesting than the training content.

And when the room is hot, the chairs are uncomfortable, the blinds are open, or the lighting is low, participants can find it difficult to pay attention to the trainer, especially if the trainer is less than charismatic.

The best suggestion for overcoming this obstacle is simply to anticipate and adjust factors that may take participants' attention away from the real message.

Think of ways to monitor your own distracting behaviors. Put pens or pointers out of reach if you tend to fidget during presentations. Consider the size of the room, the furniture arrangements, the lighting, and the temperature. If possible, adjust them to meet the needs of the message and participants.

During the presentation, be aware of participants' needs. If you're working with a group that is accustomed to being active, give shorter, more frequent breaks than you normally would. After lunch, when participants' stomachs are full, some trainers keep the temperature a little cooler than usual to help people stay awake.

Assumption: "If participants understand and agree with the information presented, they are likely to apply the newly learned principles on the job." The key to this assumption is motivation. If the participant is highly motivated to apply course principles, then the assumption is not dangerous at all. But assuming high motivation is often dangerous.

Even when trainees indicate immediately after listening to your presentation that they will follow through with some action plan, the reality is that they will not—unless they have some motivation for doing so.

You can help motivate participants by explaining how and why they will benefit from acting on newly acquired knowledge. Explain why failing to follow through could be costly or painful. To be effective in motivating action, rewards and punishments need to be carefully adapted to the values and needs of the participants.

Get any participants who work together to commit to helping each other apply course principles or change behaviors. And use follow-up methods such as phoning them; sending reminder cards, letters, or related articles; and talking with them face-to-face. Such techniques can prompt participants to act.

It would be wonderful to have highly motivated listeners, but the reality is that we rarely have this luxury. Most training participants are easily distracted and are not highly motivated even to listen, let alone to act on what they have heard.

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How To Be an Effective Public Speaker

We've all heard that speaking in public is the greatest fear of Americans—that it outranks death, taxes, and driving in Los Angeles. And because so many people hate making presentations, businesspeople who have mastered the art of effective public speaking have a tremendous advantage over those who have not. Improving your communication skills can make you more valuable to your organization.

Here are some suggestions for preparing for, delivering, and wrapping up your presentations.

Overcoming nervousness. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to overcome before delivering a speech is fear. Stage fright is natural for most of us: Even seasoned actors find they have rapid pulses, sweaty palms, dry mouths, weak knees, and shaky hands before performances.

The key is to realize that this build-up of adrenaline can be used to your advantage. It is a sign of energy within that can be used to help you function at a high level of enthusiasm and vitality. But first you have to control it.

Reviewing your notes immediately before a presentation can intensify your nervousness. Instead, calm your nerves by taking the focus off yourself. While waiting for your turn at the lectern, concentrate on other speakers, audience members, or even paintings on the wall.

Burn off excess nervous energy with a few simple exercises. "Push-ups" done against a wall can relieve tension and loosen up your potentially shaky hands and upper body. If you are already seated in the presentation room, try reducing tension by tightening, holding, and then relaxing muscles. Extend your arms, neck, fingers, or legs, and then relax. With each repetition your level of anxiety should lessen.

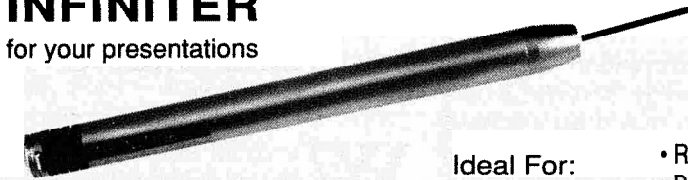
As you reach the lectern, stop and take a slow, deep, inconspicuous breath. Hold it for a few seconds before exhaling. This will help you avoid nervously rushing into your speech.

It can also help keep your voice from quivering, a condition that can

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snowball into bigger, more obvious jitters.

Win a few friends in the audience before the speech. Meeting, talking with, or just making eye contact with people beforehand will encourage receptive behavior from them as you speak. And seeing a few faces that are already smiling back as you start your presentation can bolster your confidence considerably.

Rehearsal. Practice is undoubtedly the most important factor in a successful presentation. It gives confidence and makes you familiar with the material to be presented. Practice in front of a mirror, preferably with a tape recorder or a video camera. This enables you to analyze your voice and see how your gestures and expressions come across.

Better yet, find family members or co-workers who can give you an honest evaluation.

Composition. A presentation should have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion.

An essential part of writing an effective speech is to know the audience. Ask yourself who will be in the audience and why they will come. How much do they already know about the topic? What are their attitudes toward it? Gearing your speech toward the audience will arouse their interest and improve their comprehension.

You can probably learn a lot about the audience from the person who invited you to speak. An even better way is to spend time with the audience beforehand, to learn about specific concerns that you can then focus on in your speech.

Know your topic intimately. The better you know your subject, the more confident you will be of your ability to handle any difficult situations that come up.

Supporting material. Notes can provide a quick reference for organizing your thoughts as you stand onstage. Don't bring a manuscript; reading a prepared text can eliminate spontaneity and enthusiasm. It's easy to lose your place in a manuscript, and reading from a script can decrease your level of eye contact with the audience.

Consider outlining your speech on a single sheet of paper. An outline can remind you of the main points

you want to cover, while eliminating the need to shuffle papers. Some speakers use stacks of 3-by-5-inch cards instead. If you use this method, make sure that each card contains only one topic, written in big, bold letters that are easy to read. It is impossible to lose your place if only one topic is in front of you at a time.

Some experienced speakers can get away with only one card, on which all key words are written.

Slides or overhead transparencies can remind you of the main points to be discussed. But don't overwhelm the audience with too many figures or graphs. Information overload can cause interest to wane and comprehension to drop. A simple way to emphasize the main points in your presentation is to project an outline that highlights the topics you want the audience to focus on.

Before delivering a presentation, become familiar with the speaking environment. Plan thoroughly for any equipment or supplies you may need, with backups available if possible. If your presentation is based solely on overhead transparencies, a burned-out bulb could spell disaster.

Your physical appearance. Your choice of clothing influences the audience's perception of you. Generally speaking, you should dress to a level of formality that is at or slightly above that of the group. Audience members may perceive snobbishness on the part of an overdressed speaker, but may doubt the credentials of one who is dressed too casually.

If your presentation is going to be videotaped or televised, plain clothes that are neither too dark nor too light tend to work well. Blues and grays generally photograph best. A bright color accent, such as a red tie or scarf, may help grab attention, especially if you are part of a panel discussion and want to stand out just a little from the other speakers.

Introduction and opening remarks. If possible, write your own introduction. If you write it yourself, it is more likely to present a clear picture of who you are and how you might be able to identify with the audience.

Standard introductions begin with such phrases as, "It gives me great pleasure to introduce...." Try something a little different. You may not

Speakers' Resource Groups

Several organizations can help you enhance your communication skills—and possibly your career. Three of the most popular groups are Toastmasters International, Dale Carnegie and Associates, and the National Speakers Association.

◆ Toastmasters is an association of businesspeople who aspire to be more effective public speakers. You can reach Toastmasters International at Box 9052, Mission Viejo, CA 92690-7052; 714/858-8255.

◆ The Dale Carnegie organization conducts classes to help build communication skills. Reach it at 6000 Dale Carnegie Drive (PVT), Suite 109 TRD, Houston, TX 77036; 800/231-5800.

◆ The National Speakers Association is at 1500 South Priest Drive, Tempe, AZ 85281; 602/968-2552.

— compiled by ASTD staff

need to include a long list of credentials in the introduction. With some audiences, a speaker who comes across as down-to-earth may seem more impressive.

Start your presentation with a bang. The first few moments of a talk influence the audience's reception of the rest of it. Try to convey an air of dignity, authority (on the topic, not over the people), confidence, and trust. Raising your voice for the first few sentences can help grab and hold audience members. They will be less inclined to think that another drab speech is underway.

A rhetorical question is a good way to spark the interest of an audience. Such questions generally begin with "What if...?" or "What do you think about...?" The question should lead into the topic at hand, and should get audience members to think, "Why am I being asked this?"

Telling a joke can be a great way to start a speech—if it's a really good joke. But jokes can also be disasters. Use humor only if it arises naturally from your subject. A joke that pokes fun at yourself can help audience members relate to you. Never poke fun at others, especially people in the audience.

The body of the speech. The attitude you project has a tremendous effect on the receptiveness of the audience. Consider yourself honored to be asked to speak, and show it. Appreciate the fact that the listeners have taken time out of their busy schedules to hear you. Mention their names to involve them further.

Refer to the group as "we," not as "you and I." This makes the audience feel closer to you and the topic at hand. Act like you're having a great time in front of the group, even if it feels like torture. And welcome criticism. That attitude will build respect and admiration.

Make the most of your voice; it is the main tool you use to transmit your message. Put enough power into your voice to reach the back row comfortably. Many speakers prefer to forgo the limitations of a microphone.

Changing the volume and tone of your voice can keep an audience interested. Lowering your voice at the end of sentences can make you sound more authoritative. Ending on an "up" note can make you sound weak, as if searching for agreement.

The speed of your delivery can affect comprehension and the level of confidence you project. Many inexperienced speakers rush through their speeches, but that leaves the audience less time to absorb the material.

If you find yourself paying attention to your breathing as you speak, you may be going too quickly. If you have to stop for air after a few minutes, slow down. Silent pauses between points give the audience time to reflect on what you have said and to prepare for the next point. On the other hand, a very slow style of speaking, with a lot of "ums," "ahs," and "you knows," can detract from the message and lessen interest.

Consider having a friend in the back row signal you if there are any problems with your speed or volume. A waving scarf can get you back on track or can warn you of time limitations.

Body language can also influence the success of your speech. If you spend the entire presentation behind a lectern, people may think you are hiding.

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Step in front of the podium to emphasize important points. Let the audience see you and your hands. They are important communication tools. Gestures give rhythm to sentences and can display ease and competence. Your hands assert the authority and impact of your words; keep them free so that you can use them for emphasis. They should be held waist-high, never in your pockets or tightly grasped.

Folded arms give a standoffish appearance that is sure to alienate an audience. If you hold your notes in nervous hands, you may amplify any shaking that's going on.

Eye contact is vital in maintaining a good relationship with an audience. Many speakers look above a group to the back wall. Instead, start a talk by looking squarely at the center of the group, focusing on an individual listener when you have an important point to make. Move on to another person to make the next point. This "scanning" of the audience gets people personally involved with the speech and keeps them attentive.

Smile. It gives the audience a comfortable and secure feeling. Start with a smile to emphasize your pleasure at speaking to the group. And remember that the impression you make begins before you reach the stage and lasts until you're completely out of sight. So keep a positive expression.

Your language and sentence structure are important. Keep the vocabulary simple and geared to the audience. Big words do not impress most people; they may make people feel that you're speaking down to them. But don't go too far in the other direction. Slang words may be too informal.

Keep sentences down to a manageable size—probably shorter than you would use in a written piece—to help the audience absorb what you're saying. Experts recommend a 15-to-18-word limit per sentence. That allows you to breathe normally and can help you manage a tendency to speak too quickly.

Your concluding remarks. It's important to summarize your major points at the end of your presentation. The audience should realize that you've

made it to the homestretch.

Make your finish a strong one. A great quote or a plea for action can inspire listeners and help them remember your message. A feeble "thank you" can leave the audience hanging. If you've done a good job on stage, the "thank you" should come from the audience.

After the speech. Your presentation should answer most of the questions the group has about the topic. When planning your speech, ask yourself if any questions are likely to arise. Then include the answers in your planned remarks.

Chances are that audience members will still ask you to expand on or clarify some points. The best preparation is to know the topic well. But if you don't know an answer, don't make one up. An audience will have more respect for you if you admit that you don't know it all than if you pass on incorrect information.

If an audience member asks nasty questions, keep your cool and act with respect toward the questioner. The last thing you want is to escalate the confrontation.

More tips and resources. Effective public speaking is a vital skill that can be learned. Improvement takes practice and an understanding of some of the basic behavioral traits of an audience.

Aspiring presenters may find it easier to start building their speaking skills with smaller, more familiar groups, and to advance to larger ones as their confidence increases.

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"Training 101" is edited by **Catherine M. Petrini**. Send your short articles for consideration to "Training 101," Training & Development, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043.