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COMPETENCE AND COMPETENCE STATEMENT: Can speak effectively in public settings

Essay: Principles of Effective Public Speaking and Assessing Effectiveness

Principles of Public Speaking

Public speaking is a skill that comes easier to some than others, but being effective takes time and effort. There are a number of principles common in successful speeches as gleaned from my years of work experience and time in Toastmasters International. In this essay I will discuss the principles of clarity in purpose of speech, knowing your audience and topic, and speech organization to lay the foundation for the speech. I will discuss use of vocal variety, gestures and eye contact to engage the audience. Finally I will assess a speech given by former President Regan and discuss its effectiveness, and review the most recent presentation I delivered.

The first principle is to know the purpose of your speech (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 12-14). When one person addresses a group of people, they need to know if the purpose is to inform, educate or to be persuasive or to be humorous. For example, a teacher would have a purpose of informing students, as would someone giving a lecture on, say, recycling. The sales person would need to have a persuasive presentation to close the deal. And if you're giving a speech after dinner, a humorous topic is likely to be the kind that can keep the audience awake. So the first principle of

public speaking is to know the purpose of the speech. Here are more principles of effective public speaking

Knowing your audience is one of the most important principles of public speaking. You can deliver your best speech, but if you're speaking Greek and your audience speaks English, they are not going to understand you. Likewise if you are speaking on a very technical topic, as I often did in the IT industry, you need to make sure you are speaking a language the audience understands. For example, you cannot speak in technical jargon and acronyms to directors and vice presidents. It would be almost like speaking Greek to them. Likewise it's important not to speak down to the audience if they are unfamiliar with terms you are using. You need to speak at a level that is appropriate to the group.

Knowing your topic is also a principle of effective public speaking (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 44-46). This sounds so elementary on the surface, but it is crucial that you know your subject thoroughly. Your confidence will come through to the audience, giving you more credibility. Knowing your topic also means being able to discuss anything you introduce or utilize in the course of your speech. For example, if using a PowerPoint presentation, any seemingly innocuous remark or comment used in the slides (which are sometimes created by someone else) can be questioned by the audience. You need to have an answer or it will appear you don't know your topic as well as you'd like the audience to believe. There will inevitably be a time when someone brings up a question you don't have an answer for and that's alright, but you must simply state that you don't know right now, but will get back to them. Then ask someone to note the question and the person asking so that you can research and respond at a later time.

When you follow up, you will have gained credibility and maintained your integrity with the audience.

An effective speech should have good organization (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 16-18). A good speech or presentation must have an opening, body and conclusion. The opening needs to grab attention. “I’m here today to talk about blah, blah, blah” does not grab attention. Some good attention-getters are starting with a surprising statement, or a question that gets the audience engaged, or even some appropriate humor. I’ve found that getting the audience involved early helps to put the focus on the topic at hand and gets people interested in the topic. For example, I once gave a technical presentation in an auditorium-style conference room – with a microphone – and I was a bit nervous at the beginning. I asked the audience polling questions such as how many of you... and then asked someone to elaborate. By doing this I took the focus off of me and right into the topic. Getting involvement early puts the group on notice that they’ll need to stay tuned to the presentation.

The body of the speech needs to be well organized so that people can follow what you are saying. Introduce three to five points and develop each point as you go along. If you have less, maybe you don’t have enough for a speech yet and if you have more, you’ll lose people’s attention. The conclusion should reinforce your main points. It’s like the old adage, tell them what you’re going to tell them; tell them; then tell them what you told them.

Another principle of public speaking is the use of gestures (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 16-18). Body language says a lot about the speaker. If you are fidgeting, playing with coins in your pocket or pacing, it can show nervousness. Not

moving or clutching the lectern shows you are very self conscious. When the presenter is uncomfortable, so is the audience – they feel your pain. Natural movements, coming away from the lectern and walking about (some, not pacing) shows you are not afraid of the audience and projects confidence. I learned that keeping your arms straight and hands at your side feels and looks uncomfortable, but keeping hands and arms in a ‘ready’ position, where your elbows are bent to about a 90 degree angle, is a great start to natural gesturing. Rehearsal, feedback and more opportunities to speak build the needed confidence.

Vocal variety is a principle that helps make the speech more interesting by eliminating monotony (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 24-26). Of course you must speak loud enough to be heard, and a microphone may be used if needed. Your voice should sound natural, pleasant and upbeat (unless you’re giving a eulogy). When speaking, your voice should alternate in tone, louder to softer, higher to lower, depending on what you want to emphasize. Change the speed too and use pregnant pauses to let your point sink in.

Eye Contact is principle of public speaking and allows you to connect with individuals in the group (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 48-50). To truly connect with the audience you need to have eye contact with numerous people. Not darting back and forth like a ping-pong game, or locking in on one non-threatening listener, but a connection for a few seconds, then move on to another person in the same general area and over the course of your talk you should have made eye contact with a number of people in different areas of the audience.

Bringing it all together is what makes a speech effective (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 48-50). Up until now I have discussed the mechanics of public speaking. To make a speech effective, all of these tactics are important, but what you say – your message – and how it resonates with the audience is what makes it effective. The principles are used to help make the audience more receptive to your point. Be clear on the points you want to make and use documentation, props, and/or stories that support your points. An effective speech is one that has a clear objective and communicates in a manner that is easy for the audience absorb.

Even while we're speaking, we should be "listening" to the audience. They are talking to us too, with their body language and eye contact or by asking us questions. For example, when someone in the audience has their arms crossed with an angry look on their face, they may not like what they're hearing or they may not think of you as credible. If one – or many – of the audience has their eyes closed or are writing or otherwise distracted you've probably lost them. It's time to get them back by livening things up, perhaps by relating an appropriate story or humor, or asking them some questions about their experiences on the subject. If they make eye contact and are nodding in agreement, you are making a connection with them.

Assessing Effectiveness based on Established Criteria

Did the speech achieve its objective (Toastmasters International, 1974, p. 5-14)? The audience came to hear about your topic and if they walked away having learned what they came to learn, the basic objective was met. But this doesn't necessarily mean the speech was effective. The speech was effective if the audience is inspired to act on the

information or ponder your proposition or dig deeper because they were intrigued by what they learned (Toastmasters International, 1984, p. 48-50).

Consider President Reagan's "Tear Down this Wall" speech. This speech was delivered to the people of West Berlin in June of 1987, but was audible to the people in East Berlin. Reagan has a strong opening talking about the history and beauty of the city and the courage of the people, but clinches the opening with a warm, jovial spirit when he says "Ich hab noch ein koffer in Berlin" (I still have a suitcase in Berlin). The surprise was Reagan speaking in German. Most people think Americans won't take the time to learn another country's language and are presently surprised when they do.

Reagan builds up the excitement when he addresses the people in Eastern Europe directly and expresses his firm belief that there is only one Berlin ("Es gibt nur ein Berlin"). He talks about the Marshall Plan and how West Germany and Japan were able to rebuild into flourishing economic centers after the war, even though Khrushchev predicted the Communists would bury the free world. He introduces an inkling that maybe the Soviets are starting to reconsider their position, and then boom – he addresses Gorbachev directly and says "General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!"

Wow – that was a bold, knock-your-socks-off statement that caught the world by surprise. And as we now know the wall did indeed come down. Regan went on to propose arms reductions and to begin to work peacefully towards solutions regarding the differing philosophies between the two nations. This speech coincided with the beginning of the end of the cold war and great progress was made in Eastern Europe. So

why was his speech so effective? President Reagan had likeability; his voice was friendly, and he was so natural in his style. He was easy to listen to and understand, and he was clear about his purpose; he instilled hope in those that may have lost it. As President of the United States he carried with him the credibility of the office – at least at that time. The people of the Eastern Bloc countries were very ready for change and here was someone with authority calling for a big change. This speech inspired major changes.

A speech that motivates, inspires or gets the listeners to reflect on a subject and consider an alternative they hadn't considered before is effective. To deliver a speech that's effective, the principles of public speaking are exploited to get the message out. Making a connection with the audience is crucial for effectiveness. A sound foundation – the content – can be made more effective by employing the principles of communication including eye contact with local variety, gesturing or body language and listening to the audience. Using visual aids or props can clarify the points are trying to make. Sharing a story to support your point can make your speech more memorable, or inspire the audience to act. An effective speech brings all of these components together.

I most recently used these principles of effective speech when delivering a class presentation on Independent Learning Pursuits. I opened the speech a bit unconventionally with – “Wow! What a concept – college credit for learning from life experience” - to get the audience's attention and followed with a couple of polling questions. I used good eye contact and natural gestures, coming out from the lectern to be closer with the group. I used vocal variety with pregnant pauses and a little humor when describing the cycle of writing the paper and having it returned with suggestions for

improvement. My teammate and I worked together on the content and believe it had a logical flow. Every time I give a speech I reflect on what went well and what could be improved upon and in this speech the one area that could be improved upon was the transfer of speaking turns. I felt the presentation went well and I received lots of positive feedback from the other students and Michelle.

Working on speaking in public increased opportunities for me at work and enabled me to get a sought-after promotion with my previous employer. Now in my own business, I have used these skills to deliver presentations on behalf of the Financial Planning Association and for educational and public relations purposes. I anticipate continued use and improvement of my public speaking skills.

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