

Speaking On Course: Before You Speak

by Margaret Keys

Someone once told me that travel to the moon was off course 98% of the time. As I shook my head in astonishment and with a bit of disbelief, my informant further pointed out that being on course and hitting the objective requires constant monitoring and minute mid-course corrections.

Public speaking is like that. But sometimes we allow speaking opportunities to fall into a convenient routine: prepare the speech, and then deliver it exactly as written.

It's clear to me that successful communication with an audience lies in *constructing a dialogue*, not in "making a presentation" perfectly.

The key is to continuously correct the direction of your talk in order to communicate with the audience. To do this, the audience must be a known factor.

There are two critical times to analyze the audience: when you prepare your speech, and when you deliver it. I'd like to concentrate here on audience analysis *during preparation*.

Enlightened preparation involves a three-step process:

1. Analyze yourself. In this analysis look at:

- *Style.* You have a point of view. Understand your own bias going in. It colors any presentation and your behavior during a presentation.

- *Skills.* What are you capable of doing? Don't structure a talk that you can't deliver with ease and confidence. What is the setting? How much rehearsal do you need to be effective? Factor that in.

- *Anxiety level.* Is this an important talk? Are there people in the audience who intimidate you? Do you anticipate hostility? Apathy? A large crowd? Unfamiliar territory?

Deactivate the things that get you going through internal (deep breathing, centering) and external (practice to develop muscle memory) rehearsals. For some excellent tips, read sports coaching books on internal performance state. Confront your worst scenario for the occasion, to make sure you have a strategy to cope with it.

- *Blind side.* Where will you shoot yourself in the foot? For example, if you avoid bottom-line concerns because you feel they rush the process, temper that bias. By not showing how your approach meets those concerns, you'll lose that part of your audience.

2. Analyze the audience. Look at:

- *Their reasons.* Why does the audience want to hear from you? What is their perception of you? Their stance on the topic? Their relationship to you (subordinate, colleague, boss)? Your history with them? Your credibility factor going in (must you build it, keep it, monitor it)?

- *Size.* How large is the group? Its critical mass dictates certain adjustments. The larger the group, the more

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directive and crisp you must be. Thoughts “play” longer. Group reaction builds differently. Take these dynamics into account.

- *Time of day and agenda position.* Morning or evening? Noon? Before or after the keynote? Last on the program? First? You must tie your remarks into the group's meeting or event experience.

You need to monitor (and correct) the group's energy level and ability to attend to you. Afternoon audiences typically need to be brought into the discussion, to be involved. They also

need a break every hour. Morning audiences can sit for at least an hour and a half before the silent mutiny starts.

- *Physical set-up.* Speeches can fail because the physical environment is uncomfortable. I've seen speakers destroyed by loud noises from the next room, chilling temperatures, awkward sight lines, overcrowding, or an overly formal atmosphere.

Know what you are walking into. You are more in control of the setting than you believe. Exercise that control to make the setting *work* for your audience and you.

- *Intimidation factor.* Do audience members intimidate each other (mix of manager/staff)? Does your topic bring up fear in the group? Are you in the position of being the first to bring up “the (yet unsaid) truth in the room”? Watch for dynamics like this. Plan strategies to break through the tension that destroys dialogue.

- *Ritual of the audience.* What do they want as an interaction with you or your information? What is the common practice? Rapid-fire questions and a lively exchange? A more formal interaction? What is their protocol?

3. Determine your goal and your message. Only after analyzing yourself and the audience should you set your goal for your talk.

Then you can determine the verbal phrasing (your message) that best translates your goal to the audience for “their reasons.”

To be effective, you must be continuously audience-focused. You must monitor the effect your remarks are having every moment.

Management expert Peter Drucker says the goal is to “be effective, not just right.” In speaking, this translates to not being so locked into your talk that you forget to build a dialogue with your audience.

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