

TECHNICAL PRESENTATION SKILLS

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SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

I recently heard a psychologist on National Public Radio discussing the speaking styles of the presidential candidates and it reinforces the premise that a good public speaker can find favor even if their ideas are not the best. Alternatively, you can see a public speaker lose favor because of poor public speaking ability, in spite of having the best ideas. So, it would seem to me, in light of the subjective judgment that a speaker/presenter must endure, that you would not only want to have good, supportive and well thought out ideas, but you will want to be able to present them in such a way as to ensure that they get the benefit of full consideration by your audience. In other words, don't risk losing your audience simply because you have failed to adequately develop your presentation skills. Those skills include organizing your material, vocabulary, body language, vocal variety, visual aids and persuasive skills among others.

1. INTRODUCTION

There are many books dedicated to the subject of public speaking, effective communication, interpersonal skills, etc, and this workshop brings many of those aspects together in one context, titled *presentation skills*. Every time that you cross the path of another human being, whether it be in person or on tape, television, book, etc, you are presenting yourself to them. Basically your encounter with an audience has in it three elements, opening, body and closing. So, considering that you will make a first impression with them, negotiate ideas through the discourse of the presentation, and subsequently dispatch them to conclude whether you were adequate or inadequate in your attempt, you should be considering the three elements in detail. There is a behavior model that will serve well as an analogy here. Stemming from work by notables such as the highly recognized behaviorist B. F. Skinner, is the ABC behavioral model. The three elements are A= antecedent, B= behavior and the C= Consequence. The model is used to both describe behaviors and to shape new behaviors. The antecedent, or trigger, as it is more often referred to, is the stimulus for the initiation of a behavior. The behavior itself can be one that is already well established, or one that is to be established. The consequence is the resultant of the behavior, and can most often be classified as positive or negative. i.e. a visitor to a county fair observes that there are

people paying to be able to bungee jump from a high platform (behavior). They note that they seem to be having an exhilarating experience and this motivates (triggers) them to want to give it a try. They pay the fee, take the jump, and consequently resolve to never try that again (consequence). Adapting this model to presentation skills, we could say that the presenter is, or issues the triggers to the audience. The presenter is also the prime element that will be attempting to assess and manage the behaviors in the presentation, both his own and those of the audience. The desired behaviors that he is looking to establish and sustain are ones of attentiveness, receptiveness and acceptance of his ideas and/or proposals. This is accomplished by the successful employment of a combination of elements in the presentation. At the end of the presentation, the members of the audience will ultimately deliver a consequence which most likely fits into one of three categories; likeable, unlikable, or indifference. In this workshop we will strive to reveal numerous tools, techniques and tactics that will enhance a presenters ability to favorably trigger your audience, manage their behaviors as you navigate your presentation materials, and subsequently influence them towards a favorable consequence in the end.

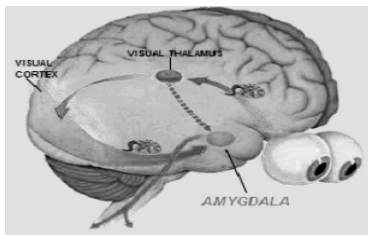
2. MOTIVATION

If you are not mindful of the way you present yourself to the world around you, then that would be classified as ignorance. *"To be ignorant of one's ignorance is the malady of the ignorant"*- Amos Bronson Alcott. No disrespect intended, this is just an observation. If you are required to make presentations, or if you feel compelled to share the wealth of your knowledge through presentation, or if you simply like to be the center of attraction, etc, etc, then you should take time to inventory that skill, and determine whether it is getting you accolades or criticism and scorn. *"All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts....."* - William Shakespeare - (from *As You Like It*). We live in a time when entertainment seems to count more than content, and even though we would like to think that the audience will overlook our limitations as speakers, the fact is they make judgments on things like appearance, introduction, body language, voice, etc. As a presenter, you are called to be somewhat of an actor.

3. GETTING STARTED

First things first. The all time number one reason why people don't get up in front of an audience is because of fear. The fear of speaking in front of an audience seems to be universal, transcending race, gender, age, religion, culture, nationality, etc. Over the many years of public speaking experience that I have gained, and the many people that I have had the pleasure to have met along the way, regardless of who they were, or where they were from, they all shared the common fear of speaking in front of an audience. The good news is that this is an irrational fear, and as such, can be overcome with awareness and discipline. To illustrate, take the historical account of Pavlov's dogs. This is an account of conditioning that falls into the domain of what we identify as habit. Ivan Pavlov was a Russian physiologist who lived from 1849-1936. He founded the Institute of Experimental Medicine in 1890, where his primary interest was digestion. During the course of his investigations, he performed some experiments with dogs that illustrate the ability to condition behavior. The point here is that we all have "conditional behavior", "habits" if you will, that we can exercise control over. Changing them requires a certain discipline, but nothing that the average person couldn't attain. Better yet, given that the fear of public speaking is an irrational fear, this makes it an attractive candidate for change. Pavlov's conditioning experiments with the dogs provides clinical and favorable data for anyone seeking to change a habit. Other areas of irrational fear include things like fear of heights, fear of flying, fear of snakes. etc. They fall into the category of phobias, and in more pronounced emotional reactions, neurosis.

Stalnaker et al (2007) investigated the neural basis of what they call cognitive flexibility. The context of the study, which performed experiments on lab rats, was to investigate the effectiveness and limits of a conditioning paradigm known as reversal learning. The method used and the approach to finding the limitations are fascinating, and included attempts to short circuit and truncate the neural pathways that allow the Amygdala and the Orbitofrontal lobes to interplay in the domain of cognitive flexibility. Surgical methods of separating the various neural pathways were employed, and in a number of different combinations. The investigation was focused on refinement of the nature of the neural networks involved and the ability to be able to deconstruct and reconstruct neural networks when apparent disruptions to the pathways are introduced



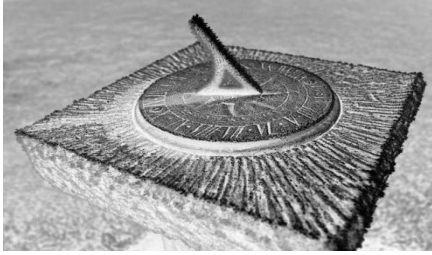
Amygdala-Orbitofrontal interplay in cognitive flexibility

This, in layman's terms, represents the ability for people to learn things and then relearn them in a new way. The process involves the original construction of the conditioned behavior, then the recondition, which entails the abandonment of the existing neural pathways (net) and the construction of a new pathways that are different in the cognitive sense and behavioral sense. Still not getting it? It's the way we perceive and integrate the world around us, react to it by developing habits, and then when we no longer want the habit we learned, we unlearn it and replace it with a new habit/perception. Keeping in mind that we are well over 90% habitual, and other than things like burping, sneezing, flatulence, etc, we are all habit. Even our thoughts are habitual, and according to some reports, are highly repetitive, which is no surprise, given that they fall into the domain of habitual. The study of such patterns relies on self reporting, and falls to the category of phenomenology, so there isn't any conclusive prescriptive method (formula) that I can inject here. None the less, the fact that one knows that they are habitual to an extreme percentage, and that habits are changeable, should give confidence to the attendee of this workshop that fear of public speaking can be overcome, and if approached correctly, can even become a gratifying experience. Back to our rat story. The rats were conditioned to respond to an odor behind a door, in one situation an attractive odor, and in a second case, an unpleasant odor. Getting through the door with the attractive odor resulted in the rats being presented with a treat. The alternative path held no reward for the rat. Once the rats were properly conditioned, that is, they performed well repetitively, then the treat was moved from the door that held the attractive odor to the door that held the unpleasant odor. The result was that the rats were able to effectively recondition themselves, albeit at a slower rate than it took them during the initial conditioning. Keep in mind that even with the various surgeries employed to hinder this reconditioning, the rats were able to reverse the behaviors. This of course invites a conversation that includes the metaphysical and mystical aspects of our physical manifestations. Let it be sufficient to say that we are able to overcome the fear of public speaking, and in most cases that will require commitment and perseverance.

3.1 RESOURCE COMPETITION

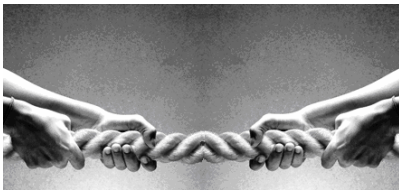
This is a challenge, to take on a task to change a habit. A habit that seems to be so inextricable from the very nature of who we think we are. I recently taught a class on public speaking for one of the adult education programs that run through the local school districts. One of the individuals in that class had complained that one of the paramount problems that they were having relative to public speaking was that when they were in front of an audience, they would simply lose track of what they were saying and end up standing in front of the audience without anything to say, and have an acute awareness of that state. The individual presented the problem in such a way as to imply that it would probably require something outside of their control to be able to

overcome this habit. It wasn't negotiable, in other words, they could have said they had this halting problem, brown eyes and two ears, all in the same sentence, and everyone knows that surgery is the only hope to change any of those characteristics.



Time seems to stand still

Time wasn't standing still, and surgery isn't required to change that habit. Keep in mind that there is more than one habit to change. One is the habitual thought pattern that keeps testifying that the behavioral (performance) habit is unchangeable, and the other is the behavior (performance) itself, both of which will require commitment and perseverance. This also requires the allocation of time, in the midst of all the other things that you now have on the list, you have to renegotiate time and energy to be able to achieve this new goal. This is a tug of war with oneself.



from Through the Looking Glass, Lewis Carroll:

`The name of the song is called "Haddocks' Eyes."

`Oh, that's the name of the song, is it?' Alice said, trying to feel interested.

`No, you don't understand,' the Knight said, looking a little vexed. `That's what the name is called. The name really is "The Aged Aged Man."

`Then I ought to have said "That's what the song is called"?' Alice corrected herself.

`No, you oughtn't: that's quite another thing! The song is called "Ways and Means": but that's only what it's called, you know!"

`Well, what is the song, then?' said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

`I was coming to that,' the Knight said. `The song really is "A-sitting On A Gate": and the tune's my own invention.'

I think that pretty much analogously sums up the discussion on fear.

4. MATERIAL DEVELOPMENT

The next step that I want to elaborate on is the development of the material that will essentially be your presentation. There are some variations here that deserve to be delineated. For instance, engineers give status updates to management teams, sales people strive to persuade customers to buy product/services, trainers present new materials and attempt to transfer/develop skills, etc. There is a long list, and

for every category on that list there are a great variety of ways to develop the materials. I vaguely recall that somewhere in my educational background a teacher had instructed me on the way to write a paper that was required. From what I recall, they told me that I couldn't even imagine how many poorly crafted, unimaginative, dull, predictable papers that they have to read every year, and grade. They then told me that if I wanted a paper that stood out I should make a comprehensive list of all the topics/themes/angles/perspectives/etc that could possibly be written relative to the topic being asked for, and then write something different. I thought that the endless stream of redundant, poorly crafted papers would be enough to get me on the Prozac prescription, but the idea of writing something that no one else had imagined seemed like an unreasonable challenge. The good news is that over the many years of experience that I have had, I've discovered that the majority of the students that submit papers are not only unimaginative, but unimaginative without much variation. I think it's a six sigma process. Those students grow up and become associates in the businesses that we work in, and still hold to the old rule they espoused in school. Don't get me wrong, I'm not advocating that you get crazy here, and do something extreme, simply give some thought to your approach. A balanced presentation can still be entertaining.



“There's no secret to balance. You just have to feel the waves”
-Frank Herbert

As we discuss in the workshop, the vast majority of people in your audience will fall into the same category. The category that I speak of is the one that identifies people who gather information about the world they encounter through the three primary avenues of internalization; visually, verbally and kinesthetically. There are other ways to integrate the external world into the domain we refer to as our “being”, but most of those that employ those utilities are safely locked away, and not likely in your audience.

“It has taken more than a hundred scientists two years to find out how to make the product....I have been given thirty days to create its personality and plan its launching. If I do my job well, I shall contribute as much as the hundred scientists to the success of the product.” –David Ogilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man*, Arthenium 1963

There are some among us that are convinced that every presentation that you give is a persuasive presentation. Even the entertaining speech is a persuasive speech, as it strives to persuade the audience to a humorous perspective. So when we consider the approach that we will take in crafting our presentation, we should do it if we were sales people, looking to close a deal. To our great benefit, there are many books written on the topic, and although the recipes vary, there are some common threads that as presenters we would be well served to observe. Of the three information gathering senses, one of them serves as primary, and then the other two fall to secondary and tertiary methods. An example would be a car buying experience. The person who is buying a car may insist on the color (visual) first, not even willing to look at a car that doesn't match that requirement. Then the next criteria to be met may be the kinesthetic, the textures of the upholstery, the “feel” of the interior design, etc. If this meets the requirement, then the final hurdle is to make sure it “sounds” acceptable. Car sales are a good example in this respect, take for instance the past and present projects that are focused on making the sound of car doors or a deck lids (trunks) sound appealing to the potential buyer. Proof positive that some people are auditory primarily, and getting past that criterion is a must if you want to sell cars to that faction of the buyers market. Then there are those that require the “feel” to be right before any other features are considered. The point here is that people tend to use this approach when judging presentations. So in order to give yourself a real chance of persuading your audience favorably, wouldn't you be smart to consider these aspects in that context? This workshop takes a serious look at these elements and how they are aligned.

5. HUMOR, STORIES AND METAPHOR

When I first developed this material I made it a rule to tell my audiences that it was in their best interest to stay away from using humor, stories and metaphor. The reason for that is I had seen so many bad, insulting, inappropriate and boring examples that I thought is simply better to stay safe and not try to use them. Needless to say, many of the attendees of my

workshops either simply felt that they were naturally endowed with a universally appealing sense of humor, couldn't help themselves, or weren't listening when I cautioned them and went on to include such things as jokes, stories and metaphor to their own demise. Rethinking my strategy, I decided that if they were going to do it anyway, then at least I could help them do it in an acceptable way. There are many benefits to being able to use such things in a presentation, because such an approach has a way of tying it all together in a well embedded memorable experience.

6. MEDIA

When it comes to presentations, it would seem that the media of choice is the computer. No more overhead transparencies, chalk boards, etc, its all multimedia now. I have had the experience again and again where professionals have not been able to adequately manage the devices and navigate through a presentation. In other cases it has been that they failed to use even the fundamental features of the tools, and end up looking technologically inept. In the workshop we will discuss some of the various media selections that you can use to present your material. This will include the technology, the flow of the material, the navigation through various media changes and the conclusion of the presentation. The rule here is that less is more, and trying to include too many “features” in your presentation will harm more than help. A good analogy that comes to mind is dance. Say that you are at a wedding reception and people are dancing. It is usually the case that you will observe some people with little or no natural body rhythm, and then there always seems to be the couple that can't seem to show off enough. They spin, whirl, flip and dip to the extent that it comes off more like a circus act than a dance. You have to give them credit for their practice, but in some sense, you are disenchanted with their exhibitionist approach. There is a balance in dance that allows the couple to use their skills yet not be identified as being too theatrical in the execution. It is when the dancers are enjoying the dance rather than showcasing the learned moves that gives both the dancers and the onlookers satisfaction.

7. CONCLUSION

This abstraction into the influencing forces is where the value of the process lies.

BIOGRAPHY

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David J. Auda, a Certified Reliability Engineer, has a BS in Electrical Engineering and is currently studying at the graduate level at the Center for Quality and Applied Statistics, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY. David is presently employed at AVOX Systems, serving as the senior Reliability engineer in the Systems group. David has published articles with the ASQ Reliability Division Reliability Review publication, and serves as the ASQ RD Region II Councilor. David has recently presented papers, seminars and workshops to the ASQ Rochester annual conference, ASQ Buffalo chapter annual conference, the International Reliability and Maintainability Symposium in Orlando FL, the International World Conference on Quality and Improvement in Houston TX and the Annual international Applied Reliability Symposium recently held in Reno NV. As president of the Society of Reliability Engineers, Western New York chapter, immediate past president ASQ Buffalo Section, David has organized and delivered numerous seminars and presentations on topics that serve ASQ, SRE and the community at large. A competent speaker, facilitator and trainer, David is able to combine his diverse inter-disciplinary and experiential knowledge into presentations that appeal to large audiences.

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