

By Pat Rocchi, ACB

Speaking in Business

Five lessons in corporate communication.

My employers gave me an unexpected crash course in communication. I was working for a large global company when they transferred me from the sunny climes of Daytona Beach, Florida, to upstate New York. My new assignment was to manage the internal and external communications of a leading power-generation business.

After a few weeks on the job, my boss revealed why they needed me: I would be implementing the announcement of 13,000 layoffs and other actions designed to save the business in an era of worldwide competition. After recovering from this startling development, I spent the next two years communicating to local and national media, employees and their families and a stunned community about the background of these changes, the organization's steps to become more competitive, and our eventual recovery and success.

The communication principles I learned on this job and in subsequent corporate assignments have helped shape my skills as a Toastmaster. I have dealt with many issues that concern global economics (e.g., industry trends), contention (strikes) and even mortality (an employee death by accident). We in Toastmasters view ourselves as more than speakers, which is evidenced by the change in our educational awards designations from

Toastmaster to Communicator. To further develop my fellow members into better communicators and leaders, I'm sharing some of my experiences that helped elevate my own platform and leadership skills:

1 GET SMART! – Maintain a broad base of knowledge on topical issues. Over the last few years, major world events changed our lives. In his book, *The World Is Flat – A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, Thomas L. Friedman cites events such as Y2K, the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11 and the rising global competitiveness of countries such as India and China.

It is important to understand such historical markers so that we can apply their lessons to new situations in our world. For example, I wrote a successful motivational speech for my current CEO that he delivered to the medical segment of our company. I referred to the profitable future of healthcare-related industries due to





the increasing ages of baby boomers and the treatments they would require, and the speech painted an optimistic picture of the medical products market. Maintaining such a wide knowledge base can also help you prepare interesting and informative club speeches. There are many ways to stay in touch: Subscribe to and read a variety of news papers and business publications regularly, whether they are daily, weekly or biweekly publications. Arrange to receive Internet business news on your computer every day. Most importantly, turn off your television and read as much as you can!

2 TABLE TOPICS, ANYONE? – Keep up your extemporaneous speaking skills. Nothing focuses your attention quite like the reporter and camera operator who show up unannounced at your office door. It is important to keep abreast of the facts of your industry and any contemporary situations you are facing. This helps you com-

municate your side of the story coolly and with control. A nervous spokesperson is like blood in the water for that subset of journalists who behave like sharks.

I find that my work and Table Topics combine to sharpen my off-the-cuff speaking. Filler words are distracting and dilute our messages. Table Topics help Toastmasters minimize or even eliminate those habits outright. (You will want to thank all those Ah Counters who helped break you of the tendency to use filler words.) Practicing extemporaneous speaking can also help you learn to look squarely and confidently at your audience, whether that is a group of fellow Toastmasters or a television audience. This is also a good time to have your facts at the top of your head so you can draw on them effortlessly (revisit point number 1 above).

You don't need to be a company spokesperson to benefit from these skills. Chances are you'll be called on at your workplace to give an impromptu project update



A nervous spokesperson is like blood in the water for that subset of journalists who behave like sharks.

or some other unplanned presentation. Practice Table Topics as often as you can to stay sharp and look your best in front of co-workers and management.

3 RIGHT MESSAGE, RIGHT AUDIENCE – Speak to your stakeholders. John P. Kotter's book, *Leading Change*, says that "The real power of a vision is unleashed only when those involved in an enterprise have a common understanding of its goals and direction. That shared sense of a desirable future can help motivate and coordinate the kinds of actions that create transformations." But to achieve transformational communication, it is important to create a variety of messages that address the concerns of your individual stakeholders.

Stakeholders might be defined as those who have a particular interest in your company or organization. These may include employees (whose fortunes are tied to the success of the company), local government (whose economy may be linked to your employment or to services provided to the community) or investors (who care about the current and future value of your share prices). For example, you may need to motivate employees to work more efficiently in the face of

growing costs and rising competition. That requires a different message than communication to customers who want to know if they can depend on the same level of quality and service or even if the business will be around tomorrow.

In the same way, you'll want to tailor the content of your various Toastmasters speeches to match your club audience. For example, your fellow club members are unlikely to be interested in the intricacies of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act unless they are all accountants.

4 WRITE EFFECTIVELY – Choose your words carefully, creatively. Jim Ylisela recently wrote in ragan.com, an online newsletter for communicators, that communication to various audiences "should be tailored to what they need to know, and what's most important to them."

I find that many corporate scribes choose their words as though their audiences are interchangeable, each possessing the same level of knowledge and interests. This usually reduces all messages to a bland pabulum that serves no one in particular.

In my experience, you can easily alienate an employee audience by serving up the same baloney about "benchmarks," "synergies" and "value added." Like most audi-

ences, employees have self-interests. While they probably care for the company, they are likely more interested in the status of their jobs and how to keep them. Similarly, investors are much more concerned with the value of the stock than bromides about customer service.

These experiences have raised my awareness of how my words affect my various audiences. As Toastmasters we are all different. Members of community clubs may have limited knowledge of business terms but have interests tied to the local community. Audiences outside of Toastmasters also have their unique sensibilities. For example, if you find yourself speaking to a group of healthcare professionals, you should know they're generally not interested in the language of economics, despite the financial challenges facing hospitals. They are, however, responsive to language about their chosen mission: the provision of medical care.

I once wrote a speech about changes in the defense industry. To make a point about the exacting standards of the customer, the United States government, I showed a slide detailing the specifications for a cookie. A cookie! It needed to be so many centimeters high and a certain

diameter, exactly. What's more, the icing needed to be free of "spectral reflection," meaning the icing shouldn't shine too much. I had the speaker deadpan to the audience, "I never heard a child turn down a cookie because it had too much 'spectral reflection.'" It wasn't a line you'd hear on Comedy Central, but the audience howled. Why? Because it was the language of their profession, and it had relevance to them.

In general, know your audience and their hot buttons when constructing your speeches. Use warm, caring words when appealing to their emotions and sensibilities. Use action-oriented words to drive them to action. Use clear language with ample definitions when instructing them. In all cases, use terms and examples to which they can relate. Above all, remember that one size does not fit all when choosing language.

5 MEASURE UP – Evaluate your effectiveness. Often, the most important part of a Toastmasters meeting is the evaluation portion. This also applies to the corporate world. Business types are fond of saying, "If you don't measure it, you can't manage it." Likewise, if we don't go to our audiences and learn how well we performed,

we can't be sure if we succeeded or if we'll be able to repeat that success in the future. So I learned to take surveys and seek out anecdotal evidence of how well my speeches did. Likewise, take your evaluations seriously at Toastmasters. It is the only road to improving your organization and delivery.

The company to which I was transferred in New York State did weather the storm. It not only survived, but most of its competitors of the time are now either diminished as players or out of the power-generation business altogether. Management acknowledged that much of the success was due to my ability to articulate a cogent, coherent and consistent message that rallied the troops and calmed our customers and communities. In turn, I took away a core set of beliefs that I find relevant every time I put pen to paper or set foot on a podium. 📌

Pat Rocchi, ACB, a four-time champion of Toastmasters District 38, is an award-winning corporate writer and video producer. He recently launched a new career as a professional speaker. Reach him at patrocchi@comcast.net.



Become Certified to Teach the Speakers Training Camp Workshop

*Turn your talent and passion for speaking
into a dream job*

- 📌 Provide on-site training, US & International
- 📌 Deliver public workshops
- 📌 Coach individuals

Imagine delivering two-day award-winning presentation skills training workshops to small groups of twelve in Fortune 500 Companies. You are your own boss, set your own fees, develop your own schedule. We provide the training and materials. The rest is up to you. For over 20 years the Speakers Training Camp has been top-rated, hands-on, and famous for results. Contact me personally to discuss how you can become certified to deliver the Speakers Training Camp workshops.



Speakers Training Camp
instructor certification • on-site training • public workshops



Sue Gaulke

Founder, Speakers Training Camp
President, Successworks

Author:
101 Ways to Captivate a Business Audience

sue@successworksusa.com

1-800-473-1969

www.successworksusa.com