

## **The Secret to Being a Natural Communicator: Plan, Prepare, Practice**

***By Bill Young***

The Strickland Group has found a flexible, conscious approach to communication essential for successful career management. All of us have accepted the demands of our indirect communication world: email, internet, intranet, fax, answering machines, palm pilots, even video conferencing. How many of us wish we'd taken that typing class back in high school? Nevertheless, we have *learned* how to match the right technology with what needs to get done.

As coaches and people of influence we must continuously stress the need for our clients to learn new and flexible ways of expressing themselves when speaking with others. Whether it is interpersonal communication or formal presentations, no two speaking environments are the same. All have their own conventions, challenges, and yes, mysteries. There's nothing like the self-confidence that goes along with knowing you can communicate effectively in any situation.

### **The First Ninety Seconds**

8:30 Tuesday morning, a tall, well dressed woman in her late 30s stepped through the door of my office, confidence glowed from her face, her intelligent brown eyes making comfortable contact with mine. The frames of her glasses highlighted her light brown hair and complimented the shape of her face, revealing a sense of subtle personal style. Hand extended, a resonant, well articulated voice announced "Elizabeth Pierce, it's very good to meet you, I've been looking forward to our discussion."

She moved decisively to the chair, following my gesture to take a seat. "Thank you for seeing me this morning," pausing to make certain I was comfortable. "It's my pleasure," I said. "What can I do for you?" She continued, "I'd like to get an idea of how you think I can be most effective in talking to a rather particular audience."

Elizabeth's voice, crisp, words well articulated let me know, in no uncertain terms, that she was enthusiastic about her challenge. For the next 25 minutes we talked about a strategy for making certain her audience's expectations were met; while insuring her message remained true to her convictions.

When Ms. Pierce first appeared walking into my office, making comfortable eye contact, shaking my hand and saying hello with energy, I had already made a very personal, positive evaluation of her credibility—and I wasn't even aware I had done so.

## Three Elements You Can Control

Effective, person-to-person communication has three clear components. The *look*—the physical appearance of the speaker; the *sound* of the speaker’s voice—not the words being spoken, but the physical tone; and finally the *content*—the actual words used to convey ideas. Coordination of these three elements will greatly enhance the possibility of getting the intended message to the right audience.

If you examine these three basic factors, most of your work is done for you. As Woody Allen says “showing up is eighty percent of life.” We can pretty well determine beforehand how we are going to look and what our voice is going to sound like. Attention to clothes, personal grooming and movement will take care of the main attention getter: our appearance. A melodic tone, in mid-register, conveying enthusiasm and energy signals confidence and intellectual exuberance.

According to Albert Mehrabian, in his provocative study of what people remember after meeting another individual, 55% of what we recall is appearance. He went on to say 38% of what contributes to one’s memory of another person is the sound of the voice. If you do the math, 7% of what’s remembered is the verbal information, or content.

Now, you may think, “wow, if only 7% of what somebody remembers is my words, why do I spend so much time on what I am going to say?” The choice of words used to express our message is like a caption under an exquisite photograph. When Ansel Adams puts a title under a photograph of a mountain range in winter: it focuses in a precise way what he wants the viewer to understand. Our word choice and delivery style let’s our audience know what we want them to take away.

The key to making the critical 7% work in your favor is to know what you want to say. Organize your thoughts so they can be expressed in a way that your listener, or listeners, will relate to. This doesn’t mean a script. Choose your key messages and support them with clear, simple language. If you’ve prepared properly, remaining *flexible* with your messages and *listening actively* to your conversation partner, are all you have to do.

## **Presence**

One word sums-up the combination of look—sound—content: *presence*. What is presence in practice? It is having a pre-sense of how you wish to be perceived, heard and defined by your audience. Three simple tips for having credible presence are:

1. Look great
2. Sound relaxed
3. Be brief

Presence is action. One of my favorite old fashion words is *etiquette*. The conventions associated with *having* presence are dynamic and need to be practiced constantly, the way a pianist or painter practices their art. The etiquette of executive presence can best be summed-up in the five following actions:

1. Listen carefully
2. Respect others
3. Acknowledge contributions
4. Integrate differences
5. Act decisively

Mark Twain quipped “*Confidence is the thing you had before you knew better.*” As Executive coaches and outplacement professionals it is our responsibility to make certain communication skills are honed to the point that they become second nature to those who use them. Then the freedom of “. . . *before you knew better*” will once again be a reality. Once again fluid, confident communication will meet whatever challenges the moment has to offer.

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