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Guidelines for Improving Communications Skills

Walter D. St. John

Offered here are some principles and techniques for improving speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills—valuable tools for the administrator.

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION IS the lifeblood of the modern organization. No organization can achieve its goals and no administrator can accomplish his tasks without the existence of sound communications policies and procedures.

The challenge of achieving and maintaining effective communications is increasingly awesome for today's administrator as the need is so great, time is so limited, and the barriers to effective communication so many. The steady growth in school size, increased specialization of tasks, the premium on time, and the greater total job demands on managers all promise to intensify this challenge in the future.

It is hoped that the following guidelines will prove practical and will assist you to meet better the communications challenges facing you today and tomorrow.

Guidelines for Improving Your Speaking

Making effective speeches is a difficult art for many educational leaders to master. Difficult and unpleasant as it may be, ad-

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ministrators are normally required to make frequent oral presentations and to lead large-group activities. There is little doubt that speech making is an integral aspect of the principal's leadership role. It naturally follows that the administrator who is not an effective speaker is severely limited in his potential service to his school.

Even the most successful public speakers not only must know, but must faithfully observe several basic principles related to preparing and delivering speeches if their presentations are to succeed.

As he prepares his speech the successful speaker adheres closely to the following set of guidelines:

1. Analyze the true purpose of the speech.
2. Determine the appropriate scope of the topic consistent with the purpose.
3. Identify the potential audience and learn key facts about it—especially regarding its knowledge of the topic.
4. Learn the overall organizational climate and peoples' attitudes concerning the subject of the talk.
5. Consider the speech situation and relevant conditions.
6. Adjust specific purpose of the speech to the audience and situational factors.
7. Research the topic carefully and fully.
8. Develop and organize a speech outline.
9. Collect relevant data and select key concepts to present.
10. Develop strong introduction and conclusion.
11. Practice style of delivery, timing, and use of audiovisual aids.
12. Revise style and content based on personal reactions and feedback from trusted colleagues.

Exhaustive listings of how to deliver an effective speech have been prepared by speech authorities and are readily available in textbooks; however, the following guidelines for delivering a speech encapsulate the most relevant of these suggestions:

1. Accept your introduction graciously with a smile and little or no comment.
2. Begin with an interesting and attention-gaining opening statement or appeal—preferably memorized to guarantee careful wording.
3. Strive to develop commonality and rapport with the audience immediately.

4. Show you like the audience and appreciate the opportunity to speak on the topic (smile often).
5. Provide a good image by being appropriately dressed and by acceptable mannerisms.
6. Establish and maintain good eye contact with the audience (try to have each person feel as though he is being periodically looked at by smoothly and regularly moving your eyes throughout the group).
7. Demonstrate enthusiasm and vitality (act convincing and sincere).
8. Use pleasant voice and friendly tone.
9. Employ correct grammar, proper pronunciation, and careful articulation.
10. Act natural and genuine (speaker authenticity is essential for credibility).
11. Vary voice volume, change pace, and modify your style periodically to emphasize key points and to keep the group's attention.
12. Use motions and gestures effectively to emphasize your major ideas.
13. Present points logically and with frequent examples to promote increased understanding.
14. Use references such as *you*, *us*, *we*, *our*, etc. to personalize the speech and gain acceptance (avoid using *I* and *me* too often).
15. Provide periodic opportunities for quick "mental vacations" by using meaningful but relaxing anecdotes, especially when the material being presented is conceptually difficult to understand.
16. Watch members of the audience carefully to observe nonverbal cues which provide valuable feedback.
17. Adjust style and modify content based on feedback secured from the audience.
18. Close your speech promptly with a strong ending—preferably memorized—to assure precise wording (finish your speech while interest is still strong).

In addition to sharing key principles for preparing and presenting a speech, it might be helpful at this time to share several admonitions which are widely honored by especially competent speakers:

1. Know your subject thoroughly and be prepared (never apologize for not being prepared even when you aren't).

2. Avoid the tendency to begin your talk with a joke or humorous story (restrict your jokes and stories for giving examples and then if they fall flat they have still served a useful purpose).
3. Make the content of your talk live and humanize it (neither memorize your entire talk nor read it—both are deadly).
4. Connect your purpose and content to the needs and desires of the audience to maintain their attention and to win better acceptance of your ideas.
5. Avoid acting too positive or talking down to your audience as this antagonizes them and invites opposition.
6. Be sure to adapt your style, content, and examples to the particular audience and occasion.
7. Limit the scope of your topic and restrict the number of main ideas offered. Too many ideas given at once will overwhelm people and defeat your purpose.
8. Avoid using too many statistics, overly technical language, unfamiliar words, and the language of bafflelegab or gobbledygook. Speak to express, not to impress.
9. Be alert to possible negative emotional overtones of your words, especially with a diversified audience and when using words with multiple meanings.
10. Avoid such distracting practices as juggling chalk, jiggling change, playing with your watch, and adjusting your glasses.
11. Remember that you speak *with* people, not *at* or *to* them.
12. Assure understanding by appealing to all of the senses of your audience and by drawing on their own personal experiences. Assure retention of your ideas by telling them what you are going to tell them (introduction), telling them (body), and telling them what they were told (conclusion).

Guidelines for Improving Your Listening

Listening is a communicative skill that must be developed, practiced, and polished. (It is not easy—it is hard work.)

Although listening is acknowledged to be vitally important to communicating effectively, it is still the most neglected and poorly practiced of the four communications skills. Effective listening is clearly an imperative for the modern administrator who wants to make informed decisions and be accepted by his associates.

True listening involves an auditory reception, concentration, and perception of the feelings and thoughts expressed by the speaker as well as a comprehension of the message conveyed. It involves far more than merely hearing and politely looking at the speaker with seeming interest.

Skilled listeners concentrate not only on the spoken words, but also the nonverbal behavior of the speaker. Skilled listeners are open people who conscientiously attempt to understand the other fellow's viewpoint. Skilled listeners listen for key ideas and main points and attempt to relate them into an organized whole or complete pattern.

Suggested attitudes for managers desiring to improve their listening include:

1. Taking the time to listen (this means putting everything else aside for awhile).
2. Giving the speaker your full attention and concentration.
3. Showing consideration and appreciation for the speaker and his views (providing positive feedback).
4. Wanting to hear about new things, different ideas.
5. Attempting to view things from the speaker's viewpoint.
6. Being empathetic and compassionate.
7. Being objective and fair-minded.
8. Recognizing own prejudices and blind spots and compensating for these.
9. Striving to listen for understanding rather than to refute.
10. Being willing to ask questions to ascertain if you really understand the speaker.

Several of the successful techniques used by effective listeners are as follows:

1. Listening for main ideas (not getting lost in details or distracted by sub-points).
2. Developing genuine interest in the speaker with positive intent.
3. Opening the mind, looking for specific good things about the presentation, and resisting the temptation to disclaim opposing ideas.
4. Making the speaker feel comfortable and at ease.
5. Becoming other-person-centered and trying to understand the cultural background and motivation of the speaker.
6. Overlooking differences in status, position, and seniority while listening (everyone has something to contribute).

7. Avoiding unnecessary interruptions and jumping to conclusions.
8. Asking relevant and penetrating questions (e.g., "Is this what you mean?").
9. Restating and reviewing main points mentally.
10. Perceiving nonverbal cues put forth by speaker and being alert to the need to read between the lines at certain times.

In addition to practicing proven techniques, good listeners observe these admonitions when listening to others:

1. Avoid trying to lead the speaker (e.g., "What are you really trying to say?").
2. Secure clarification when the speaker's meaning is not clear. (e.g., "Would you explain that idea more fully?").
3. Obtain feedback to assure clarification (e.g., "Am I correct in my understanding that . . . ?").
4. Avoid selective listening and tuning out or distorting what is said.
5. Try to understand the meaning of words as used by the speaker.
6. Look for total meaning by focusing on major points which constitute the heart of the presentation as opposed to concentrating on certain words or ideas in isolation.

Guidelines for Improving Your Writing

The task of writing is demanding. This challenge is accentuated by the fact that different words have different meanings for different people.

The prime element in writing effectively is to have something to say and to be able to express it simply, clearly, yet powerfully. Effective managers are able to get their thoughts and feelings over to the readers of their communications.

The measure of success of any written communication depends upon the degree of acceptance and understanding of the writer's thoughts. A person can write frequently, but if no one reads or understands his messages, no communication has occurred.

Administrators desiring to improve their written communications would profit from being certain that their messages meet the following criteria:

- Writing is both clear and interesting.
- Words are selected carefully.
- Receiver is kept in mind (message stresses the receiver's needs).
- Wording is concise (irrelevant words and thoughts are omitted).

- Language used is forceful and persuasive.
- Structure is appropriate and language is grammatically correct.
- Complete ideas are presented in proper sequence.
- Style is lively and expressive.
- Thoughts expressed are specific and concrete (not nebulous and abstract).
- Sentences and paragraphs are short.
- Ideas are clarified and supported by examples or graphic representations.
- Language is natural to the writer.
- Message has application to reader.
- Desired reaction is obtained from the reader.

Principals would improve their written communications by avoiding these commonly made mistakes:

1. Goal of the message is unknown or obscure.
2. Thinking and ideas presented are unclear.
3. Ideas are unorganized and nonsequential.
4. Sentences and paragraphs are rambling and too lengthy.
5. Word choice is imprecise and sloppy.
6. Tone is cold, authoritative, and impersonal.
7. Reader is assumed to have a degree of understanding or background he may not have.

Guidelines for Improving Your Reading

Effective reading requires disciplined, creative effort as well as critical thinking. The executive skilled in reading digs beneath the surface meaning of words. An important point to remember is that not everything worth reading will be easily read and readily understood.

Good readers employ the following principles and methods:

- Determine the exact purpose for reading.
- Adjust reading approach to the purpose and the content.
- Vary reading speed according to the difficulty, familiarity, and importance of the content.
- Develop an extensive vocabulary.

- Get in the habit of looking up unfamiliar words in the dictionary.
- Transfer personal experiences to interpreting the content of the message to promote fuller understanding.
- Concentrate.
- Approach the content objectively and yet critically.
- Study accompanying visual representations for further understanding of the printed word.
- Control eye span—read by total thought group rather than word by word and without routine eye regressions.
- Avoid moving fingers, head, or lips reading.
- Develop skills in skimming and scanning (read selectively and screen out irrelevant content).
- Work to increase both reading rate (speed) and understanding (this has the potential for saving massive amounts of time).
- Use Robinson's SQ3R method to promote understanding and retention of what is read. *Survey* the total message, convert the main points into the form of *Questions*. *Read* to answer the questions. *Recite* the main points contained in the communication. *Review* the unclear points.

Some common problems to avoid when reading follow:

- Believing that the printed word reflects the absolute truth.
- Reading into something that which was neither stated nor intended.
- Reading that is too specialized, narrow, and limited in scope.
- Reading too much material without appropriate prior screening.
- Reading without really thinking, concentrating, or comprehending.

Fewer Watching TV?

According to the A. C. Nielsen Co., there has been a decline in the number of households using TV since last March. For prime time, the drop has been about three percent below the record levels of a year ago. Nielsen officials say the downward trend is the longest continuous decline the company has recorded in its 27 years.
