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If you're thinking about improving your persuasive communication skills, begin by asking yourself - in which situations/contexts are you having the most trouble?

For example, you may have a challenge with your team but not with clients; you may communicate really well in a presentation but don't do so well in a negotiation; perhaps you are good one to one but not in a group. Once you have identified the situation or context and the trouble spot it is easier to identify what you can do to improve.

Each situation requires a different set of skills and preparation.

A colleague of mine* designed this self-assessment – I think it is really clever. And you'll get something important out of it.

Click on the different communication situations where you need to perform at your best and see how you rate.

COMMUNICATION SITUATIONS

- ❖ Persuasive presentation
- ❖ Negotiation
- ❖ Change leadership
- ❖ Team meetings
- ❖ Sales/client relationships
- ❖ Facilitation/small group

PERSUASIVE PRESENTATION

When you make a presentation where people need to do or think something differently as a result.

Common complaints:

- ❖ The purpose wasn't clear
- ❖ The content wasn't relevant to me
- ❖ Took too long to get to the point
- ❖ Gave too much detail
- ❖ Too boring
- ❖ Confusing
- ❖ Don't know what was expected of me as a result of the presentation
- ❖ I didn't believe him/her
- ❖ Too much focus on what they wanted and not enough on what I will get

What you need to be able to do:

- ❖ Your planning is done with knowledge of how your listeners perceive you, your idea or the problem.

- ❖ You need to identify the main blockers to your idea/recommendation being accepted – and use your presentation to neutralise the blockers.
- ❖ Clearly state what you want the listeners to do, feel or think as a direct result of your presentation – AS PART OF YOUR PLANNING. In other words, formulate a clear objective.
- ❖ Write your presentation so it serves the objective in a very focused way.
- ❖ Order the content so the listeners hear what they need in the order they need to hear it
- ❖ Decide where your recommendation should go – too early and it could be rejected; too late and they could have destroyed your presentation by asking questions.
- ❖ Know when to use visuals and not to use them in order to engage your listeners.
- ❖ Align your delivery style with the tone and mood needed to make the audience feel comfortable with you.
- ❖ Close the presentation by asking for a decision or a clear next step that will lead to a decision.

NEGOTIATION

Common complaints:

- ❖ They kept offering me something I didn't want.
- ❖ They weren't listening.
- ❖ It was like doing business with two different people – he was nice when he was selling to me and awful when we were negotiating.
- ❖ There was no need to be rude; we've known each other for years.
- ❖ I didn't trust him; he kept changing his position on important issues.
- ❖ I felt like I had been done over – I don't want to use them again.

What you need to be able to do:

- ❖ Know when to negotiate and when not to negotiate.
- ❖ Understand the other party's issues and priorities and the reasons for them.
- ❖ Listen to what is important to the other person and factor that into your planning.
- ❖ See the tactics you most often use and how transparent they often are.
- ❖ Recognise tactics when they are being used on you – so you can neutralise their effect.
- ❖ Isolate issues so planning can be done issue by issue.
- ❖ Question those facts you don't understand.
- ❖ Control the flow of the negotiation so you can revise your planning and control when bargaining takes place.
- ❖ Build a persuasive case that will encourage them to move toward you position/s.
- ❖ Manage your behaviour so relationships can be protected during the negotiation.

CHANGE LEADERSHIP

If you are responsible for implementing change and for communicating the change through your organisation.

Common complaints:

- ❖ The boss told me what he wants us to do, but I don't know how to do it.
- ❖ He/she says one thing and does another.
- ❖ There are conflicting stories about the change; I don't know what to believe.
- ❖ I know what the business is doing but I don't know how I will be affected.
- ❖ It all started with a 'big bang' but I haven't heard anything about it since.
- ❖ I feel like I'm having it 'done' to me, I have not been included in any of the decision-making.

What you need to be able to do:

- ❖ Plan what the change looks like and sell vision of success.
- ❖ Clearly articulate the change required relevant to the individuals affected.
- ❖ Bring an emotional element to your communication and share how you feel about the change and empathise with the team's feelings.
- ❖ Share some of the story even though a lot of the details aren't clear yet.
- ❖ Be congruent in what you say and do – lead by example.
- ❖ Reinforce at every opportunity the story of the change and why it is necessary.
- ❖ Plan and communicate the behaviours that are no longer accepted and the new behaviours that need to be in place for change to happen.
- ❖ Coach individuals into the new behaviours and give the feedback when they are or are not demonstrating them.
- ❖ Facilitate discussions to identify the blockers to successful change.
- ❖ Pitch recommendations to the board and others to get what you need to make it happen.
- ❖ Regularly inform the team of progress.

TEAM MEETINGS

Common complaints:

- ❖ We call ourselves a team but we don't act like one.
- ❖ If we are a team, why does our boss tell us what to do all the time?
- ❖ Nothing gets achieved – team meetings go in circles.
- ❖ The team was working well till the new boss arrived.
- ❖ The team isn't aligned.

What you need to be able to do:

- ❖ Clearly articulate the purpose of the team, and the roles and responsibilities of each team member in achieving the purpose.
- ❖ Understand and work with the different behaviour styles of team members.
- ❖ Shift from facilitator/coach to more assertive communication styles depending on the needs of the team or individuals.
- ❖ Plan and lead meetings with clear objectives and outcomes.
- ❖ Coach team members when skill gaps get in the way of their doing their job.
- ❖ Facilitate as and when required during meetings if issues come up.
- ❖ Mediate discussions between team members when tension between them is affecting the team's success.

SALES/CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

If you are a salesperson and responsible for building client relationships.

Common complaints:

- ❖ He/she doesn't listen.
- ❖ I like the product, but I don't like the salesperson.
- ❖ I felt like I was getting the same spiel as everyone else.
- ❖ They were too keen to sell to me before they understood what I want.

What you need to be able to do:

- ❖ Understand who else will be involved in the decision.
- ❖ Appreciate where you are in the sales cycle and to plan your communication accordingly.
- ❖ Get beyond the facts and understand what will help or hinder the decision making process.
- ❖ Build rapport with people you may not typically spend time with.
- ❖ Integrate what you have learned about the client and their needs into proposals and conversations.
- ❖ Manage the subtle timing of when the client wants you to talk and when they want to talk.
- ❖ Choose evidence that is relevant to the client's concerns.
- ❖ Ask insightful questions without prying or damaging rapport.

FACILITATION/SMALL GROUP

If you are managing or facilitating a small group meeting or discussion.

Common complaints:

- ❖ We talked for hours and nothing was achieved.
- ❖ My ideas weren't acknowledged.
- ❖ The boss already knew what he/she wanted to do and pretended to get the team involved.
- ❖ Actions were agreed but never followed up.
- ❖ The discussion was derailed and served a hidden agenda.

What you need to be able to do:

- ❖ Articulate a clear context for the discussion and what the expected outcomes will be so all expectations are managed.
- ❖ Be willing to let the group work it out rather than feeling like you need to solve all their problems.
- ❖ Listen to both the rational and emotional issues underlying the subject for discussion.
- ❖ Balance the communication – if it is too rational, introduce some emotion. If it is too specific, introduce some broader perspectives. If it is too focused on a few individuals, get others involved.
- ❖ Sort and prioritise information so that the group “owns” the outcome.
- ❖ Control the discussion so it stays focused on the purpose of the day.
- ❖ Plant seeds of inspiration if discussion and ideas are drying up.