

Nuts and Bolts: Effective Public Speaking for School Business Administrators

All the elements that create a confident speaker are part of the preparation.

By Gail M. Zeman



School business officials are often called on in meetings large and small to present cogent comments. A few SBOs are natural speakers; however, most must practice to learn the art of public speaking. And while they are learning, they're probably presenting. On-the-job training is part of an SBO's life.

All the elements that create a professional, confident speaker are part of the preparation—both long term and

for the specific event at hand. If you think of public speaking as a more formalized version of a social interaction, the process may become easier and abate the jitters.

“How was the session on teamwork?” she asked. “I don’t know. Her scarf was in the way,” he answered.

Your appearance should be professional and well groomed, and it should not detract from your message. To present well, you need to be both physically and

Your appearance of calm confidence will enhance your message.

psychologically comfortable in how you look. Ladies, this is not the day for your favorite chandelier earrings; gentlemen, perhaps the tie that screams *Peanuts* isn't the best choice.

Arrive at the session ahead of your audience so that handouts and technical issues are fully under control and you're at the podium or panel table, ready and composed. Marshall McLuhan informed us that "the medium is the message" almost a half century ago. When presenting, the messenger is the medium and is thus a major part of the message.

"Was the presentation on budget development worthwhile?" he asked. "It might have been; I couldn't hear her," she answered.

Integral to the messenger is the voice. Keep reminding yourself—especially if your voice is naturally higher pitched—to keep it low in tone (not volume) and slow. It's easier to hear words spoken in the lower (think baritone) ranges; audience members with hearing impairments may be unable to hear higher (think breathy soprano) tones at all.

Sound amplification may be essential. If you are unfamiliar with the microphone, take a moment to practice with it. Nothing takes the punch out of opening remarks like squealing feedback or "I can't hear you" from the back row.

Equally important in your opening is a confident delivery (even if your knees say differently). One of the easiest ways to achieve confidence is to engage your audience immediately. If you have a worthwhile quip as an opener, use it. They'll attend to you and you will have broken the ice.

Perhaps you can begin with a question that requires limited participation. Asking for a show of hands or an audible response will engage your audience, and with engagement, your confidence gets a boost. This trick also works later in the presentation if you start to sense disengagement.

Briefly make eye contact with various audience members as you move through your remarks. Doing so ensures that you're not reading your script (an absolute no-no) and enhances a sense of participation.

"Did the speaker answer your questions about the new bus routes?" she asked. "Yes, it looked like he understood the issues," he replied.

Techniques vary according to the type of presentation you make. SBOs are called on to speak to groups that range in



size from the office or administrative team to large public hearings. Whether you are presenting a routine report or speaking about a highly charged and controversial topic, your appearance of calm confidence will enhance your message. Obviously, a command of the pertinent facts (read: do your homework well) is also critical.

Double-check your visual supports to ensure that you're on the same page with the slides. Again, don't read your remarks or the slides. Enhance your presentation with examples or illustrations.

If you miss a step or fumble words, don't stop and apologize, just correct and move on. And keep an eye on your audience to gauge whether they're with you or need faster or slower delivery. You may even ask for questions if you sense that a complex point needs clarification—it's another way to engage the audience.

At school board or larger meetings, the media—print, broadcast, or both—may be present. Use greater caution in *what* you say when you're being recorded, but don't let the presence of media change your demeanor or tone. You're still speaking primarily to your visible audience.

"Did you agree with what she said?" he asked. "No, but I understand why she said it," he responded.

Knowing your audience is a critical element of your preparation for a meeting, speech, or interchange. That knowledge tells you how much background your audience brings to the event and what learning style(s) may be most effective in communicating your message.

Quite often, using more than one delivery technique is helpful. Witness the popularity of PowerPoint visuals when used to enhance a spoken presentation. Some effective speakers print their slides so people can take and keep notes. Other presenters would rather have full attention on the podium and use handouts only for supplementary or highly detailed and complex material. In a large group, unless you're using material too

complicated to put on a slide, you may want to wait until the end of your session to hand out this material. Otherwise, it will immediately take your audience's attention off you and slow your pace.

People often attend a meeting with their own agenda—besides the one that's printed. This factor is another element of knowing you audience. You have an advantage if you are prepared for the unwritten agenda. Don't let it take you off message or rattle you.

A meeting around a table with the building leadership team can be one of your most challenging. Remember, none of them stand in your shoes or have your command of the school business operation, even if some might think they do. (Nor do you have a command of their specific issues; ergo the need for dialogue.)

"Would you have him present again?" she inquired. "Absolutely," he replied. "He really had command of his material and I learned a lot."

The successful speaker provides information in an accessible format, without distraction, and in a manner that is useful and that the audience can understand. This process takes preparation, practice, and planning. You gather the facts relevant to what you want to convey;

assemble them in a logical format; prepare a presentation plan, including opening remarks (perhaps with an icebreaker at the outset); delineate points leading to your conclusion; and plan a wrap-up that makes your case. Then, you prepare any special audio or visual materials that will be

part of the presentation and arrange to have printed copies available if needed. These steps are the nuts and bolts of speech preparation. (MIT's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program has an excellent online resource with further tips for public speakers: <http://web.mit.edu/urop/resources/speaking.html>.)

Most presenters spend the bulk of their time preparing their content material, whether that includes writing out a speech, an outline, or notes. Many forget to also prepare themselves as a critical part of the message. Your effectiveness in conveying what you came to say depends on doing that part of your homework well. You want the members of your audience to understand you and to "learn a lot."

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Knowing your audience is a critical element of your preparation.

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