

Messaging and Speaking Skills Can

INFORM, INFLUENCE and MOTIVATE

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It remains at or near the top of the list for the most frightening of human endeavors ... public speaking.

Yet, as county leaders, pretty much everything you say can be considered public speaking – in its own way. You speak with legislators, residents, employees, media representatives – the list is endless. And, this communication takes many forms: one on one in person, on the phone, in small groups or with large audiences. It also encompasses constituents with a variety of education levels, socio-economic incomes and levels of power. Yet, it's easy to forget that almost everything you say or don't say sends a message and has the ability to influence.

➤ “It usually takes me more than three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.”

MARK TWAIN

WHAT YOU SAY. HOW YOU SAY IT. TO WHOM YOU SAY IT.

Issues are complicated. Context and reason are suspect. And to make things more difficult, perceptions about county services and your credibility are varied. You can be judged instantaneously based upon one word, a pre-conceived notion, the look on your face, one event, or even the dreaded misrepresentation. And, managing others' anger and apathy require skill and fortitude.

All the more reason to know your subject matter – the details and the big picture. All the more reason to know your audience, how they perceive things, what emotional triggers they may have and, particularly, how the issue affects their lives. Understanding through the other person's eyes, through their context, is critical to using the correct methods of communication and messaging to break through barriers, solve problems and provide the best service possible. Choose your words carefully and tailor the message to your audience. It's not about you. It's about them.

➤ “A genuine leader is not a seracher of consensus, but a molder of consensus.”

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

A MEANINGFUL MESSAGE

Influential speaking must take into account many variables, but beyond learning the intricacies of the subject matter and your audience, no easy tasks, there are things you can do to deliver an influential message – a message that motivates – a message that resonates and is remembered.

First and foremost, remembering that you are a leader should form your thought processes, preparation, delivery and response. You are the one sought by many to be the voice of information, reason and rationality, the one who molds consensus. You are the helping hand. This means that preparation, including knowing the red flags and anticipating specific questions, is important to the eventual outcomes.

And, delivering a meaningful message relies on many factors. Your appearance, controlling nervous energy, gestures, facial expressions, sounding professionally passionate, eye contact, intonating and pausing to allow your audience to process your message – all of these factors play a role in getting your message understood.

Understand the difference between what you want to say vs. what the audience wants to hear vs. what the audience needs to hear. What are you going to say to a legislator and how does it differ from informing and engaging a community leader or fellow county employee?

▶ “A wise man speaks because he has something to say, a fool speaks because he has to say something.”

PLATO

WHITE NOISE

At times, listening seems to be a lost art, so the old adage – tell them what you’re going to tell them – tell them – then tell them what you told them – stands the test of time. Many people will remember only up to three things from any conversation or speech. So think in threes, use short sentences with active words, and your chance to be impactful will be increased. Above all, say only what you want to be heard. You also need to listen and process messages. Resist the temptation to make immediate responses without first taking a breath, then delivering a thoughtful, constructive message. And, know when to stop talking or you’ll just become white noise.

Under any circumstances, one on one or in a large group, read your message as little as possible. Reading diminishes the effectiveness of your words and provides an unwanted opportunity for the audience to disconnect. If visuals are used, make them supplemental. And, be concise but say what needs to be said. You always can add information via an email, a newsletter article, editorial, website, social media link or other communications vehicles. And while we’re there, think about how what you write and how you write it portray the same message, care and professionalism. Tone takes on a whole new meaning in writing, so make sure that your written words build trust and a collaborative spirit.

▶ “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

MAYA ANGELOU

ENGAGEMENT AND BALANCE

What are you going to do locally and at the state level to make a difference? Engaging your audience, whether it’s one person or one hundred people, means telling a story that they can appreciate, stating the effects, producing statistics and making the messaging relevant to their concerns or lives. Get them to think about what they are not thinking about. Teach them what they don’t know. Understand beforehand what you want them to feel after they’ve heard your story. As the old saying goes, people don’t care what you know until they know that you care.

Know the goal. What are the bottom-line reasons for your message? If an ask is involved, tell the story then consider starting sentences with, “Let’s help people who have this problem, by ...,” “You and I can use funding more wisely by ...,” “The other options we can explore to help with this issue include ...,” or “We need your help to make this service”

Engagement also means balancing pleasantries with the seriousness of the message, as well as soliciting feedback and acting on it. Prepare messaging and your demeanor to meet a specific setting and the specific relationships with participants. Is it a casual or formal relationship or event? Do you know the audience or is this their first impression of you? Of course, a good handshake, eye contact and a smile always speak volumes.

Think about who can help you to break through the cacophony of information we each encounter – who can help you really connect with your audience. Perhaps other leaders or experts can collaborate? Perhaps county employees? Perhaps civic leaders? Nothing builds relationships like a common goal.

➤ “Recognizing the ‘moment’ of opportunity allows you to influence timing, circumstances and results.”

CLIFF KRASINSKI

TIMING AND ISSUES

The speed of information today is, well, essentially instantaneous. Word of mouth isn't far behind. Knowing when to get ahead of a need or an issue - and to act rather than react - is critical. So, preparing for an event, a concern or an action to become public is more important than ever. It gives you time to think about messaging and influence eventual outcomes. You may be hamstrung by legal and political factors, but recognizing the potential fallout of not saying something is critical to your impact on the issue as it progresses. In general, say the best thing at the right time.

It is when you are caught off guard or you regard something as being blown out of proportion that you quickly must gather information, determine what the perceptions are and determine how you will proceed in the best interest of your constituents. You may not think it's an issue, but others might, so respecting their belief and preparing with sensitivity and thoroughness can make or break your influence and future perceptions of you. You are always building trust for the next issue - whether you are being proactive or reactive.

➤ “The more I practice, the luckier I get.”

ARNOLD PALMER

ANALYZE

Influential speaking takes practice and repetition for most people: practice in front of a mirror, practice by recording yourself and critically listening to it, and practice in front of others who will tell you what you need to hear not what you want to hear. Ask others how you can improve your messaging and speaking style. Even a seasoned leader can benefit from analyzing their communications skills and abilities to influence.

Also, think about how others, in various settings, have made you feel engaged. Incorporate their skills into your delivery style.

Be yourself, be genuine, but model the commitment you want from others. If they remember you in a positive manner, chances are they will remember your message in a positive manner. 🍷

Getting Your Message Across

- Know the subject matter and audience
- Your message is about them, not you
- Study how you communicate
- Be professionally passionate
- Teach them what they don't know
- Be memorable