**Topic 5. PRESENTATION SKILLS**

INTRODUCTION

It is of key importance to get a good beginning. Apart from introducing yourself and subject of your presentation, you should plan carefully about what point of entry will stimulate your audience and at the same time, form a springboard into the main topics of your delivery. When thinking about your openings, keep your audience and their ‘needs’ very firmly in mind. A good beginning can make the presentation; a poor, inappropriate one can seriously undermine it. Many people tend to fail to have a proper introduction that contextualises the topic.

Once the ground rules have been established, you then need to outline the main points that you will be covering during your presentation. If you can say something that catches your audience’s attention at the beginning and makes them want to hear what follows, then the presentation is likely to go well. You can be creative too. Instead of starting with a series of statements about what is coming next, you could consider stimulating more interest by posing a question, presenting a puzzle or a conundrum, showing a picture, or telling a story. Any of those devices are more likely to capture the imagination of your audience and help you create an engaged and interested atmosphere which can really set the scene for a strong and effective delivery. However, do be careful of starting with a joke; make sure that it will not cause offence and that it is not too well known.

Consider any cultural considerations and sensitivities.

This will be influenced by the general context and aim of your presentation and the expected audience. You may need to decide between a big picture approach and one that selects a smaller area with more detail. As you develop your knowledge of the topic, you will feel more confident about what to include and what to exclude.

Identify the key messages. Three or four main points are normally sufficient for a presentation of up to a half hour.For a longer presentation, do not exceed seven main points in order to avoid overloading your audience. Remember, less is almost always more. You should also decide what is best covered through speech, text, images and what could be given in a handout rather than used as presentation content.

Support your key ideas by choosing clarifying examples. Because it is usually difficult to follow a spoken argument, you need to make sure that it is relevant, accurate and interesting to the audience, your audience will find it easier to maintain concentration and to stay with your argument. You should choose carefully examples to provide interest and improve understanding and think where to place them in the structure of the content. Use such things as examples, stories, statistics, quotes from expert sources, or research findings.

CONCLUSION

Because of the relief of having made it through, otherwise excellent presentations often suffer from an uninspiring, hurried ending. Do not let the pace and energy of your presentation drop at the end. This is the ‘tell them what you have said’ section. You need to summarise your points, again using visual aids to reinforce them if possible. Always leave your audience with something memorable, say a powerful visual or a convincing conclusion, with a key idea, a central theme to take away and want to reflect on later. It is also good practice to thank the audience for their patience and to invite questions or discussion.

TIMING

In most presentations, it is usually better to deliver less content at a reasonable pace, than too much content at a faster pace that may leave the audience feeling overwhelmed and confused. You should fit the topic into the allotted time and plan time for breaks, asides, questions. This means you should think clearly about what

to include and exclude from the final version of your presentation. Inexperienced presenters will find difficult to fit into time allocated. On the one hand they have prepared too much material and then have to jump to their conclusion, rushing over key points and running the risk of leaving their audience confused. On the other hand they have under-prepared and have to face one of the most embarrassing of all public speaking experiences – running out after ten minutes with your audience expecting

the full half hour.

Where the presentation timing is preset, it is important that the pace of the verbal and image presentation are in a correct sequence. In five minutes your message must be to the point with little by way of illustration. Twenty minutes, on the other hand, will enable you to make an impact both verbally and visually. Ensure that you are not trying to squeeze too much information into the allocated time. Enough is enough; no one wants to hear you rushing through the material in the hope of getting to the end. Rehearsal will help you to set realistic timing and adjust your pace of delivery to accommodate pauses and changes of voice tone for emphasis. You will then be able to edit the content, perhaps deciding what facts you need to discuss and what can be covered in the handouts or visual aids.

DELIVERY (FULL SCRIPT VERSUS NOTES)

Inexperienced presenters attempt to write down the whole speech, even including ‘Good morning ladies and gentlemen’. They prepare a closely drafted text, each line filled, with very little space left. Experienced presenters have their own style of notes, but never fill the page with text. You can organize your speech notes

in many ways and it is very much a personal preference. When it comes to the actual presentation you need to decide whether you will read from what amounts to a script, or whether, based on your notes, you will speak without reading directly. Certainly when a presentation is delivered in one of these two ways there is a noticeable difference, and in most cases the reading of a script comes across definitely less well. It depends to a certain extent on the way that you have written the script. If it is written in a formal academic tone then it will sound overformal. If you are able to write it in a more conversational style, then you will have a better chance of making it sound natural.

Apart from very brief, well-chosen text, it is better not to read from a prepared text. A written text from which you need to read can stand like a literal barrier between you and your audience, but also typically when people read their voices go dead and they deliver the topic in an ill-paced monotone that has the average audience losing interest after about the second sentence. If you are marking for successful communication, then an audience must be listening to and following your presentation. You should work to become as comfortable as possible with your material in advance, so that you do not need to rely on a prepared text. Delivering your presentation using a natural conversational style is the best way to make the most of face-to-face presentations, and is much more likely to result in a performance that everyone will evaluate positively. Try do not pack too much into your notes – they are, and must always be, a distillation of your preparation, not a script of all that you have prepared. Your notes must support, not distract you.

There will be times when you may need a fuller script and these short notes will not be enough, especially if you have to give a paper. Again, do not clutter up your page. Remember to put in some markers when you can pause and paragraph breaks. Many presenters use a cue card system. For each point they are to make, they write a heading, a short phrase or two, or a set of key words, on a post card, or similar, and arrange the numbered cards in the correct order to follow through the presentation. These cards might also have other reminders: ‘Refer to diagram’; Write in bold and in the centre of the card so that you do not have to peer. These are particularly useful when you have to walk about while you are presenting.

VISUAL AIDS / MATERIAL FOR DISTRIBUTION

If you use more pictures and diagrams than text, you will possibly help the audience to understand better what you are saying. This is because after three days an audience will have retained 7% of what they read (bullet points, or other notes on the screen), but 55% of what they saw pictorially (charts, pictures, diagrams). You should be aware that visual aids are complementary to the presentation and you should not focus too narrowly on visual aids because you will lose the key point of presentation.

Visual aids can:

• Help audiences understand the presentation itself. For example, writing up the agenda of the talk on the board or as a handout will help an audience follow the structure of the presentation itself. (clarify the meaning)

• Emphasise different parts of the presentation. Here you might underscore a key word or point by capturing it on a PowerPoint slide, by giving a supporting quote or reference or by producing a illustrative image or object. (visual aids reinforce what you say)

• Take the pressure off the speaker. For a brief while all eyes are on something else for a moment. This is a good thing. (people tend to look at the visual aid rather at you, it helps when you are nervous)

When you think about what makes presentations effective, it will be convenient to consider how you can use images to communicate more effectively. It will be useful to remember these general principles:

• Use images to improve understanding. Sometimes, it is easier to use a picture instead of words to improve audience understanding. When you show a picture, you can ask them a question or suggest they think about the image in a certain way. You can then remain silent while they think about the image or the task you have set them. Images can also be used to direct audience attention away from you and onto the image on the screen. This may help to steady your nerves as it gives you a few seconds to perhaps take some deep breaths or check your notes.

• Use images to save time. If there is only a short amount of time you could include images as a quick way to cover some of the content. You have probably heard of the phrase, ‘a picture paints a thousand words’and this is very relevant to a student presentation.

• Use images for interest. Images use the visual sense whereas sound and speech use the auditory sense. Providing content in a variety of formats means that the audience has to use of a range of senses. This keeps them active in the process of receiving the presentation. We all have preferences and using a variety of communication approaches ensures a wider appeal to different members of the audience.

• Use images for impact. Images are more relevant for some topics than others but even if only a few can be included, they can be useful to create pauses and breaks in the delivery, generate discussion themes or make a lasting impression.

Tips for PowerPoint presentations:

1. Avoid clutter slides at all costs

2. Select a clear font such as Arial or Helvetica.

3. Use bold rather than underline and avoid italics;

4. A dark background (deep blue or black) and light coloured text (white or yellow) for contrast will make your words stand out (Use of colour that detracts from the main content of the slide, or that makes reading the text difficult.)

5. Use a font size of 20 or over: use a 36 point for titles and a 28 point for body text

6. Spelling and /or grammar mistakes

7. Use pictures and icons and beware of the special effects, e.g. spinning words or sound effects

8. Keep the presentation consistent, e.g. background and style. Do not suddenly switch fonts half way through. You may not notice but your audience will

9. Less than 30 words per slide, 5–6 words for headings a maximum of five bullet points per slide

10. Keep the number of slides down to one per minute or even one per 40 seconds

Handout material

Sometimes you will be expected to produce a handout of some kind. Handouts can be taken away as a reminder of what you said. Handouts can have details that might clutter up your presentations. Handouts distributed at the end can be a good way of concluding, but you need to tell people at the beginning that you are going to do this, otherwise they can feel annoyed if they have taken careful notes which the handout makes superfluous.

You need to consider the style and content of handout material, as well as the purpose. Some options are:

• Main points/headings.

• Notes generated by the presentation software that you have used. Possibly an edited version of a long presentation would be a good idea.

• Headings/main points, with space to write notes.

• Diagrams.

• Charts.

• Statistics.

• References.

Avoid giving handouts while you speak. The distribution of handouts while you are talking distracts people, and you will lose your audience. It does not matter how often you say of a handout ‘don’t read this now’ – the temptation to look at it immediately seems universally irresistible.

You should remember that your voice is an incredible tool. On average 7% of what the audience understand comes from the words that are used within the verbal interactions, compared with 38% of information resulting in tone of voice and 55% being dependent on non-verbal cues. Use this to your advantage. Presentations are

greatly enhanced by varying the tone of voice to emphasize aspects of the content. Make sure you project your voice to the back of the room. Try to vary the tone of your voice and the speed or pace of delivery to give emphasis to different parts of what you say. Use silence to your advantage. A short pause can give emphasis to a point you are making.

One of the ways in which inexperienced presenters betray their lack of skill is that they fade in volume. They may begin their talk with reasonable audibility but this decreases as they forget to project their voices in accordance with the size of the audience (the more bodies, the more the sound is absorbed) and the acoustics of the room. Good projection should not be a matter of straining but of being aware of where the voice is going, and making effective use of breathing to support the voice. Presenters who fail to project are usually too busy peering at their notes and being worried by what is coming next. Another concern for those giving presentations is that of speaking too quickly. When speaking to an audience of any size it is advisable to speak more slowly than your normal speed, and to leave pauses occasionally.

Speaking more slowly and pausing is even more important if you want the audience to pay attention to words, diagrams or pictures on a screen at the same time. Speaking slowly is not the same as speaking hesitantly, and although being nervous might lead to hesitance, it is a good idea to work towards eliminating this. Be enthusiastic about what you have to say. If you fail to show any interest, there is little chance that your audience will be attentive and engaged. Nothing is as boring as a monotonous voice reciting a presentation that has obviously been memorised and delivered on many occasions or, even worse, reading from notes. To keep your presentation alive there needs to be an element of spontaneity. This can be achieved by varying the pitch and tone of your voice in relation to the subject matter. Speeding up your delivery is another technique that will keep the audience’s attention. Sometimes this is followed by a moment of silence (just for effect) and then a calmer, more measured approach follows. Experiment with this during your rehearsal to ensure that you do not come over as being a little manic.