

You Cannot Not Communicate

Elaine Cogan and Ben Padrow

Note: In the following excerpts from our prepared remarks, we have included some of the matters discussed in the lively give-and-take discussion which followed.

Working with volunteers is far different than working with employees. Volunteers do not have to be there. They do not have to give their precious time or money to your cause. They do so because they are dedicated. They are the "true believers." Even so, and though they probably will not admit it, they need rewards as much or more than paid staff—not in salary increases, perquisites or bonuses—but in knowing that they do make a difference and are appreciated and needed.

In our experience as consultants and trainers, it is apparent that a mastery of written, nonverbal and verbal communicating techniques is important to the job of administrator or manager of volunteers in an array of service organizations.

How much time is wasted when an individual works at the wrong task because the original instructions were unclear and he/she did not want to lose face by asking questions? How many boards or committees ask for a "simple" explanation of a complicated report it has taken you days to prepare? Is a short handwritten message ever more effective than a multi-page typed memo? What clues do we give about ourselves when we don't "say" anything at all? How can our written brochures and verbal presentations be more effective, informative or persuasive?

Some clues about how we can improve our communication skills follow.

WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Many well adjusted and able professional people become stylistic cripples when they take up a pen, talk into a dictating machine or sit in front of a word processor. Their written prose may be grammatically correct but it is stilted, verbose, redundant, and laced with professional jargon. The latter is an especially common problem. Shorthand words that serve professionals so well can alienate those outside the circle. This can be especially damaging to communications with volunteers or to those we solicit for funds. All reports, memos and letters that are read by the outside world should be written in plain, clear language.

One good, quick way to test the readability of your writing is to review some month-old memos, letters or reports. By that time, the crisis or immediate situation will have passed, and you can be somewhat objective. Be honest and try to put yourself in the reader's shoes. Is your message clear at first reading or do you have to look it over several times? Is it brief and to the point? Are your sentences and paragraphs short and simple? Is the conclusion or recommendation obvious? What impression would you have if you did not know the writer?

Two other important areas of written communications that volunteer organizations often neglect are descriptive brochures and fundraising appeals. Be-

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Ed. Note: Just as THE JOURNAL was going to press, we learned that Ben Padrow had died suddenly. We are pleased that his words will be remembered through this article.

fore writing anything, do some brainstorming about your audience:

What do they know about your organization?

What should they know about your organization that will make them willing donors of money—or time—or both?

What design—in words and pictures—best tells your story?

No brochure or fundraising appeal can be all things to all people. An all-purpose informational brochure probably should be supplemented by special material for specific receivers. Aim for the personal approach. Graphic design, color, and typeface are other very important considerations. This is a case where enlisting professional assistance can be vital to the success of your efforts—unless, of course, you are fortunate enough to have the help of a volunteer who also is a qualified professional in the field.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATIONS

We reveal our attitudes to others by gestures and movements—what is known as “body language.” How we hold our hands, where our eyes are focused, whether we sit back relaxed or hunch tensely forward—these and a host of other nonverbal clues tell people a great deal about ourselves.

We call this type of communication “what we say when we don’t say anything at all.” By being aware of this, we realize how much we reveal from these silent signals. A true example may illustrate our point.

A successful executive we know is very busy and has only ten minutes or so for visitors. But during that ten minutes, the visitor has her full attention. The executive’s eyes are focused. She doesn’t fiddle with papers or pencils. Her posture is erect and shows she is listening. Except for emergencies, no phone calls or secretaries are allowed to interrupt the conversation.

Invariably, the visitor is flattered and takes care not to waste the interview with irrelevancies. Respect is returned, and the busy executive gains the most impor-

tant information from the conversation that she can—in the least amount of time. She also impresses the visitor with her obvious attentiveness.

Another executive, also very busy and important, generously grants each visitor an interview of half an hour or more. However, during that time he continues to conduct business as usual. He answers the phone, fusses with papers on his desk and takes messages from his secretary and aides. During this seemingly “generous” 30 minutes, he is wasting the visitor’s precious time. This executive also sends a clear message. He makes it clear that he thinks he is such a busy, busy man no one is worthy of his full attention. In this atmosphere, very little useful information is communicated by either side, and the visitor goes away dissatisfied.

What kind of a nonverbal communicator are you?

When you hold a conversation, is it a monologue or a dialogue? Are you really listening and responding to what the other person is saying, or are you just waiting for him to take a break and stop talking so you can say what you wanted to all along? If so, you need not even be in the same room. You can send a memo and save you both much time. If you are a true listener, you not only will show your respect by giving the person your full attention, but you will realize you can learn something, too. It is a rare conversation in which we do not hear a new idea or point of view. But this happens only if you are truly interested and receptive.

VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Whether we are making presentations to committees or boards of directors, calling on prospective donors, speaking before our local PTA, Kiwanis or professional society, it is essential to learn and perfect techniques of communicating verbally. They are so important we wrote a book on the subject, *You Can Talk to (Almost) Anyone about (Almost) Anything*.¹ Some of our more important rules are:

- Know your audience and tailor your message to them.
- Prepare well in advance.

- Rehearse sufficiently, preferably with a tape recorder, so that you can develop an oral quality. A speech is not a theme on its hind legs.
 - Remember that one picture is worth a thousand words only if it is a good picture. Use visual aids sparingly and with great care.
 - Speak no more than 20 to 25 minutes and cover only three main points, avoiding slang and jargon unless you are making a technical presentation to your peers.
 - Be yourself. Tell a joke only if it fits your personality and the setting.
 - Arrive early enough so you become acquainted with the room; test the microphone and any other equipment.
 - Except in a small room, use that microphone. "I hate these things—I'm sure you can all hear me if I don't use it," says the inconsiderate speaker. She may be comfortable without the microphone, but inconsiderate of the people in the back who cannot hear a word but probably are too polite to say anything. They also are not likely to "buy" her message.
 - Rehearse likely questions and your answers. Learn how to deal with a hostile or critical audience.
2. Remember—people are persuaded by people, not by information.
 3. Organize or orbit—get it all together.
 4. Do not reinvent life—use common phrases and experiences.
 5. Do what comes naturally to you—tell a joke or story only when it fits.
 6. Own the speech or it owns you—practice makes permanent.
 7. Analyze the audience—not yourself.
 8. Control your territory—use every facility to advantage.
 9. Pull out the props—always be prepared when your mind goes blank.
 10. Ecstasy comes after agony—everyone has butterflies; successful speakers teach them to fly in one direction.

Most importantly, remember that you *cannot not communicate*. Everything you do conveys a message. Learn the written, nonverbal and verbal tactics that put you at the best advantage. You will be very glad when you do.

As for stage fright, by the responses at your conference and other training seminars and workshops we conduct all over the country, we believe in the accuracy of a recent poll which shows that 40 percent of Americans say they would rather get cancer or a heart attack than give a public speech.

You can deal with these problems through diet, preparation and practice. Put in simple form, we have devised these "Ten Commandments of Public Speaking":

1. You cannot not communicate—so do it well.

FOOTNOTES

¹Elaine Cogan and Ben Padrow, *You Can Talk to (Almost) Anyone about (Almost) Anything*, Continuing Education Publications, P.O. Box 1491, Portland OR 97207, Cloth: \$14.95; Paper: \$7.95; Audiotape: \$6.95; \$1.50 Shipping.