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## IN DEPTH: EDUCATION & TRAINING

### Forget gender-specific advice - observe communications basics

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Many books and articles offer women advice on how to improve their business communications skills.

Some experts encourage them to adopt a masculine communication style -- direct, hard-hitting, data-driven -- the kind used by Margaret Thatcher, Geraldine Ferraro and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Others tell women to embrace their innate feminine style of communicating -- empathetic, non-combative, self-revealing. Think Katie Couric and Oprah.

Much of this gender-specific advice misses the mark, for the simple reason that it usually fails to address the most serious communications mistakes.

Communications training -- for both men and women -- can provide a realistic appraisal of existing communication patterns through individual video critique that points out individual strengths and weaknesses.

A major component of good training should building confidence, credibility and competence. The training should stress the importance of connecting to the audience -- how to get an audience to listen to, hear, understand and act on what is said. And, since many people are uncomfortable making presentations or seeking training, it is extremely important that instruction and guidance be provided in a positive and encouraging manner.

Communications training must be customized to meet the needs of each individual. However, several basics should be included:

- Have a key message. Don't expect listeners to infer it. Whether delivering a presentation or a speech, or talking to reporters, employees, customers or shareholders, the speaker should know what he wants to convey, asking, "What do I want my audience to know, think, feel or do after I finish speaking?" Messages that are personalized, evoke emotion and come from trusted sources resonate best with audiences.

- The audience must see the speaker as credible. Half of a speaker's credibility comes from communicating empathy or caring, and it's assessed in the first 30 seconds. The other components of credibility are competence/expertise, honesty/openness and commitment/ dedication.
- Speak plainly. Most people incorporate the specialized vocabulary of their professions into their communication. A speaker should define all technical terms and acronyms. Language used should be of a level that would be understood by a 12-year-old and should avoid business jargon or "corporatespeak."
- Be interesting. The average person speaks at a rate of 150 to 200 words per minute, but listeners can comprehend at least 600 words per minute. That leaves a lot of time for their minds to wander. However, people respond to stories, examples, illustrations, anecdotes, analogies, compelling data and memorable lines. Use them to take ideas from the abstract to the concrete.
- Communicate with energy. Communicating is selling, and successful selling involves the transfer of energy and enthusiasm from speaker to listener. Most business people need to increase their energy level 50 percent. Politico Henry Kissinger is a good negative example. Much fun is poked at his accent, but it's actually a minor part of his problem as a communicator. The real culprit is his lack of visual and vocal energy. There are some 80 muscles in the face capable of generating 7,000 different facial expressions; Kissinger uses very few of them. And then there's that monotone!
- Eye contact is critical. Most business and social situations call for involvement. It is achieved by delivery of one complete thought to one pair of eyes for roughly 5-10 seconds and then repeating this process. When a speaker is excited, enthusiastic and confident, eye contact will be sustained longer. Avoiding eye contact makes a person seem uninterested and distant.
- Make a personal connection with the audience. When people see and hear someone interesting and personable, they are receptive to what that person says. The mistake many people make when communicating is that they ignore this emotional component. In general, all television stations report the same news. People often watch a particular channel because they have connected with the anchors or reporters. In other words, they like them.
- Use PowerPoint sparingly. Most business presentations today include a heavy dose of graphics. The speaker often becomes a mere footnote to the presentation. Visual aids should enhance a presentation, not be the presentation. It's best to use only a few, well conceived visuals. Good candidates are pie charts, bar graphs and flow diagrams. Avoid extensive use of word visuals.
- Watch TV. Today's audience judges a speaker by what they saw on television the night before. If the speaker appears uncomfortable, unprepared or uncaring, people will tune him out. Many people in the business world assume the information they are sharing is inherently interesting and that they don't have to infuse it with excitement. They are wrong. They should watch the morning shows, news and other programs that rely heavily on narrative and storytelling and use the techniques of the entertainment industries to capture and sustain attention.

For the foreseeable future, verbal communication skills will remain one of the most important contributors to success in the world of business. Those who have something to say and a creative way of saying it -- those who can communicate confidently and competently -- will continue to make significant, valuable contributions to businesses.

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