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## PRESENTING THE RESULTS TO MANAGEMENT

One of the most important skills for every member of a project team, and especially for a project manager, is to be able to make effective oral presentations. Two types of oral presentations normally are required during the life of a project. The first type may be called a technical presentation; its objective is to review a piece of work, as in a structured walkthrough, or to describe and explain some portion of the solution. Technical presentations tend to be less formal, and in many instances are extensions of brainstorming or working sessions.

The other type of presentation is a more formal management presentation, which is often done to receive approval for the next phase of a project, including a request for additional funding. These kinds of presentations also report the results of some evaluation or analysis. These presentations are especially difficult for several reasons. Usually the audience is a mix of executives, users, and technical people. Often the time frame is constrained. Finally, the objective of such a presentation is frequently to obtain an immediate decision from the participants, such as additional funding. Obviously, all of these conditions put more pressure on the presenter.

All too frequently, systems developers do not take the time to prepare for a management presentation. Often they treat it as a technical presentation, which is a mistake. Management presentations require careful thought and planning, detailed preparation, and much practice. Good presentations do not just happen. They are carefully constructed and crafted. Each one must be designed to meet a specific objective and must be delivered to a particular audience.

Unfortunately, systems developers underestimate the importance of developing good speaking and presentation skills. They focus exclusively on their technical or interpersonal skills and do not take the time to sharpen their oral presentation skills. The purpose of this appendix is to provide some basic principles for giving good presentations. However, this appendix is only an introduction; an effective systems developer will take time to search the Web or buy some books and develop good presentation skills. You should study and learn the principles of good presentations and then develop your own style over time. In many instances, you will have to give a presentation as part of a group activity. If you understand the principles, you can combine forces with your teammates and develop a powerful presentation. In any case, it is better to develop your presentations based on effective principles rather than simply gathering opinions from others.

The following section discusses important concepts to consider while you prepare your presentation. Later sections discuss issues for giving a presentation, how to use questions effectively, and how to use visual aids during your presentation.

During preparation, you should consider three important aspects of every presentation—strategy, content, and style. By strategy, we mean deciding on the purpose and focus of the presentation. The content of the presentation defines the meat of what you present and how it is organized. The style, of course, refers to how you make the presentation interesting to your audience.

### THE STRATEGY

When you must present your results to management, be sure you precisely understand these two critical points:

- What is the purpose and objective of the presentation? Why are you giving it?
- Who will attend the presentation, and what are their backgrounds, interests, expectations, and knowledge of the subject? What do they need to know or decide or do?

You should not even begin to prepare the presentation until you have firmly established the primary objective and you know who your audience is. These two items will determine both the content and the format of the presentation.

While a presentation may have multiple purposes—to inform, to motivate, to persuade, to teach, and so forth—you should try to identify a single specific objective. In many instances, especially in the context of development projects, the objective may be to make a firm recommendation for action and have that recommendation accepted. In other cases, the objective may be to establish a framework in which the most viable alternatives can be discussed and a selection made. Sometimes the project is already approved, and the objective is to inform the client about the status and next steps. In each case, the content and format of the presentation are different.

The characteristics of the audience are also an important consideration. Most senior-level executives are interested in summary information: how much it will cost, how long it will take, cost/benefit trade-offs, how the system fits with the organization's strategic direction, impacts on the organization and operations, and so forth. Middle-level managers are more likely to be interested in how the new system will work and how it will affect their staff, budget, and operations. If the audience is too diverse, it may be better to make multiple presentations and hold an executive-level decision meeting and a mid-level information meeting. In any event, to have a successful presentation, you need to know your audience and its characteristics.

In the opening part of your presentation, you must get the attention of audience members and prepare them to receive your message. You may want to include two primary items in this opening:

- Establish the rationale for the project—that is, recap the problem or the need that initiated the project. You should keep this recap short in the opening, however. A frequent mistake is to assume that everybody understands the need or initial problem.
- Present your final recommendation, unless you want to build up to it as a conclusion or climax of your presentation.

Basically, these two items indicate the problem and the solution. The rest of the presentation will fill in the details and elaborate on them. By presenting the problem and solution together, you reinforce that your solution does solve the stated problem. In this opening, you want to establish rapport and grab the audience's interest. Otherwise, you are fighting an uphill battle in the remainder of the presentation.

## CONTENT

Once you know your objective and understand who your audience is, you need to decide on the best way to achieve that objective. What material needs to be presented and how should it be organized? Make sure each element contributes to the objective and climax of the presentation. Also, consider whether each element is discussed at the right level of detail for your audience.

You must determine how best to present your material so that it is clear, accurate, and easily understood. You want your audience to understand the details of the topic you are presenting. It should also be obvious to the audience how this content contributes to the final objective. Your task is not to keep the audience guessing, but to make everything in the presentation crystal clear. Listeners should never have to wonder where the presentation is going. Your approach should be to lead them by the hand to your logical conclusion.

Numerous approaches can be taken to develop major points: cause and effect, comparisons, examples, details, tables, explanations, stories, visuals, multimedia, and so forth. You should be sure to give the audience some way to remember what you say. Because people forget 90 percent of what they hear, you must select a strategy that helps them to remember.

People tend to remember information better under the following conditions:

- The information is interesting.
- The information is important to them.
- The information has an immediate application or fills an immediate need.
- The audience has prior knowledge about the subject.
- The audience takes notes from the presentation.

Finally, it is important that you build credibility with your audience during your presentation. Credibility comes in the details. If you make statements or assertions with little or no substantiating detail, your credibility is questioned. That means you must do your homework before you stand before the audience. Every premise and conclusion that you draw must be supported by facts, analysis, and logic. You may not want to include all of the detailed analysis and calculations as part of the presentation, but you should be able to provide additional detail when needed. In some cases, this may mean having backup visuals or materials handy for questions that may be asked. You must be prepared to field the types of questions that your audience is likely to ask. The better you know your audience, the better you can anticipate their questions and the information that might be requested. Your credibility with the audience heavily influences its acceptance of your conclusions.

As you plan the outline of your presentation, think about the following points.

- Don't assume that everybody understands the problem or the need. In fact, assume the opposite—that you must get everybody to the same starting point.
- Begin by placing your topic in context; context is the overall big picture of the need.
- Organize the presentation logically so that it is easy to follow.
- If some parts are complex, be sure to lead in the audience gently with examples or a step-by-step discussion.
- Build credibility and trust. Credibility comes from understanding the issues, from having supporting details, and from not being afraid to discuss the pros and cons.
- Be sure to identify specific benefits to the organization and to the participants.
- Conclude on a positive note with conclusions and possible action steps.

As you develop the outline for your presentation, you should ensure that all the items you include contribute to your objectives. Sometimes presenters have a favorite point or story that may not directly contribute to the objective. Leave them out. We repeat: If some items do not contribute to the stated objective, omit them.

## STYLE

As part of your preparation for the presentation, spend some time thinking specifically about the style—the pizzazz that makes your presentation interesting and captivating. Even though it is related to the content and structure, style answers the “how” question—“How do we present this material so that it will be unforgettable and effective?” Effective presenters recognize that communication is both intellectual and emotional. Organizing your ideas is part of the task, as well as gaining and maintaining attention. The following list contains some basic techniques to maintain attention:

- Exhibit enthusiasm for your subject. Your enthusiasm, or lack thereof, will be contagious.
- Your audience will catch your attitude. Be confident without being preachy.
- Use appropriate gestures to make points and add variation.
- Sometimes, moving around or coming closer to the audience will increase attention.
- Add examples, stories, demonstrations, and anecdotes to help recipients remember critical points. Again, don’t add them just to provide interest and variation. Each one must contribute to the progression to the presentation’s conclusion and objective.
- Audiovisual aids can draw attention. However, if used inappropriately, they can detract from important points. Use them very carefully.
- Finally, remember that eye contact is the most critical aspect of connecting with the audience.

Do not distract the audience from your message. We want the audience to focus on our message rather than on us, so it is important to consider anything that might detract from our message. This can be a sensitive issue, because some of these factors are personal and part of who we are.

- Be aware of your physical mannerisms. Speakers who pace or jingle change in their pockets, for example, will distract from the subject of the presentation.
- Experienced speakers generally emphasize the lower tones of their voices; however, do not be afraid to change tone and volume appropriately to emphasize important points.

## GIVING THE PRESENTATION

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All of us get nervous when we have to give a presentation. You can minimize your nervousness if you are well prepared and have practiced your presentation. As you prepare, remember the following:

**Time.** Stay within the allotted time. If you practice, you will know how to adjust your presentation to fit the time and still make your essential points.

**Room layout.** Be sure the room is arranged so that everyone can participate in the presentation. Be sure the facilities and equipment all work correctly.

**Dress.** Dress appropriately for your audience. Although there are exceptions, normally you should dress to the same level as the ranking individual in the audience. Remember, your objective is to gain the respect of your audience, so you should dress to fit in with them.

**Body language.** Eye contact is a necessary component to building rapport with your audience. As much as possible, maintain eye contact with the audience, including people at the ends of the rows. Use arm gestures as appropriate to emphasize your points and to add vitality to your presentations. It is appropriate to move around from time to time if the setting permits it. This helps maintain the attention of the audience.

**Prepare for contingencies.** Have a plan for every possible contingency. What if the projector breaks or a bulb burns out? What if someone is disruptive? What if one of your co-presenters gets sick?

**Practice, practice, practice.** Just thinking about it is not the same as actually doing a practice walkthrough. Nothing will help more to relieve nervousness and eliminate rough spots than practicing. Always leave enough time to do a walkthrough before the live presentation.

Visual aids are an important tool to assist you. Not only will they help keep the audience's attention, they can help clarify important points. However, remember that you are the most important visual. Use other visuals to enhance your presentation, not to be the center of attention and to draw attention away from you. Common forms of audiovisual aids include:

- Overhead projection
- Posters and flip charts
- Computer-projected shows and images
- Projected slides
- Handouts

When you are preparing audiovisual aids, keep several points in mind:

**Professional image.** Above all, take the time to make your visual aids look professional, crisp, and clean. They should be professionally drawn using an automated tool. Do not use hand-drawn diagrams; they will undermine your credibility with the audience. Add color and logos when appropriate. Double- and triple-check the visuals to make sure there are no misspelled words.

**Audibility and visibility.** When you are selecting the type of aid to use, make sure it can be heard or seen easily. The size and layout of the room sometimes dictate what is feasible to use. Check both the lighting and the speaker system to ensure that they work as you expect.

**Understandability and readability.** As you prepare your materials, remember that they should emphasize your presentation, not replace you. Extensive visual or audio materials tend to detract from the presentation rather than enhance it. Make the materials succinct and to the point.

**Ease of use.** Whatever media you choose should be easy for you to access and use. You should be able to flow from one point to the next without having to stop and reconfigure your materials. Otherwise, you may lose the attention of the audience. You want to create the impression that the audiovisual components flow naturally with the presentation.

**Technology.** We are all moving increasingly toward high-technology aids. However, do not choose to use such aids just because they are high tech. In many instances, the older, more standard tools will serve you better. However, if you choose to use technology, we strongly recommend two principles. First, check out everything beforehand. Do a walkthrough of your presentation using the high-tech materials in the same room and with the same equipment to be used for the real presentation. Second, have a plan B. It seems that high-tech presentations are especially subject to Murphy's Law, "If something can go wrong, it will," and to its corollary, "If nothing can go wrong, it still will."

As you use visual materials, remember the following principles:

**Referencing.** Point to the specific part of the visual aid you are referencing. However, do not turn away from the audience to do so. Glance or point briefly to the element you want to reference, and then return your attention to the audience.

**Interpretation.** Interpret the visuals and explicitly explain them. Do not expect the audience to read between the lines of the point you are trying to make.

**Flow.** Think about and practice the flow of the visuals. Remove them and turn off the source light if you are finished with a visual and plan to present topics that do not relate to it. Make sure you know how to flow from one to the next. Be sure your visuals are in the correct order.

**Handouts.** You can use handouts to help the audience follow your presentation. It can also be useful to encourage the audience to take notes on your presentation. If you plan to have detailed handouts, consider distributing them at the end of the presentation. Handouts that can be read quickly or that you will use step-by-step can be distributed as you begin. In that case, explain what you plan to do so that the audience can follow along with you.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Frequently, you should allot time for questions and answers. You may either invite questions during the presentation or at the end. Questions during the presentation tend to make it more informal and interactive. The danger, of course, is that they may take you off track. They can also take excessive time so that you cannot make your conclusions. However, if a listener does not understand part of your presentation, it may be better to clear up the misunderstanding before moving on. Often, a workable solution is to accept questions during the presentation to clarify a point but to hold other related questions until the end.

Ideally, the question-and-answer period assists you in achieving your presentation's objective. The way you handle questions can either enhance or weaken your credibility with the audience. Even questions that seem to detract can enhance the presentation if you handle them in a professional manner. Here are some guidelines:

- Make sure everyone has heard the question. Repeat it if necessary.
- Listen carefully to the question. Do not start answering before the person finishes the question.
- Make sure you understand the question before answering. If you are unsure, ask for clarification.
- When you answer, begin talking to the person who asked the question. Then include the rest of the audience.
- After you answer, make sure you answered the right question. You can ask whether the answer was satisfactory.
- If you do not know the answer, admit it. If appropriate, indicate that you will find out the answer. Do not be defensive. There are always more questions than there are answers. If necessary, find out later how to communicate the answer to the questioner.
- Use your visuals to support your answers, especially if someone requests more detail.
- Keep your answers short and concise. Clearly answer the question and then move on to the next.
- If you have a hostile questioner, listen to the question carefully. Let the person express his or her views. Show respect for that person's views, and then honestly express your opinion without being hostile. If disagreement still exists, reply that in fairness to the rest of the audience, it may be appropriate to continue the discussion later.
- Remember to end the question period with a repetition of your major conclusion or recommendation before ending the presentation.

## REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are the two most critical items to understand before you begin preparing your presentation?
2. What are the three things to consider when preparing for a presentation?
3. What are four of the six common forms of visual aids in use today?
4. Explain some ways you can minimize your nervousness when preparing for a presentation.

## THINKING CRITICALLY

1. Consider some of the presentations you have attended. What specific aspects of these presentations made them interesting and informative? What made them difficult to follow? To what extent do you think the presenter's preparation and attention to detail made a difference in the effectiveness of the presentation?