

CASE STUDY

The Engineer as Public Speaker

Training for Grace, Engagement, and Authority

IMAGINE YOU'RE A FORTUNE 500 technical manufacturer selling systems to large organizations, such as state and local governments and other Fortune 500 companies. Imagine further that you have hit upon an elegant marketing technique: staging an exhibition for customers and prospects with booths devoted to different components of your systems and sessions featuring presentations by senior management.

Now imagine that nearly all your executives have come up through the engineering ranks and have never had any training in public speaking. One executive arrives for a 30-minute presentation with 150 slides, each densely packed with schematics, graphs, and text. Another arrives with a script, which he distributes to the audience then reads aloud. Yet another responds to a question from an audience of CEOs, city managers, and financial analysts with a lengthy discourse, filled with irrelevant detail and technical asides.

It doesn't take any imagination, however, to know what kind of effect such presentations would have on a typical business audience: the people who were still awake at the end of the presentation would likely be shell-shocked by the avalanche of technical information.

This was the situation faced by one Fortune 500 manufacturer. Its executives were unwittingly sabotaging its marketing efforts because they didn't know how to relate to lay audiences.

Executive Presentation Skills

The company knew it had a problem. Its reputation was at risk, and that endangered its market position. Its executives needed to learn how to organize a presentation around the needs and interests of an audience. They needed to learn to sort the relevant material from the welter of technical detail. And they needed to learn the behaviors that would give them self-possession and credibility on a platform or stage.

The company asked Communispond for a version of its *Executive Presentation Skills* course, tailored specifically to the company's products, market, and industry. This would teach company executives vital platform skills.

Executive Presentation Skills, Communispond's flagship course, trains business professionals in both the principles of organizing a presentation and the platform behaviors of effective speakers.

To teach platform behaviors, *Executive Presentation Skills* uses a technique Communispond calls "in-the-moment coaching." The technique has four parts: 1) the instructor explains and models the behavior, 2) the trainee practices the behavior before the class and a video camera, 3) the instructor provides feedback on the trainee's performance, and 4) the trainee goes to a private setting to review the videotape.

Skills-Based Training

In effect, the trainee actually watches himself or herself improve over the two days, creating positive reinforcement for lasting behavior change.

Each trainee enjoys a number of these “in-the-moment coaching” experiences over the two days of the course and learns how to stand before a group, how to gesture, how to control voice volume, how to interact with a slide, and how to perform several other behaviors. These specific behaviors, combined into a single performance, create the grace, engagement, and authority that an audience perceives when it's in the hands of an effective public speaker.

The course also has practical exercises in audience analysis, creating visuals, organizing a presentation for impact, handling audience questions, and speaking on the spot. At this Fortune 500 manufacturing company, the trainees had a particular need to learn how to create audience-friendly visuals.

How to Make a Visual

Communispond recommends that presenters create slides by the Rule of Four: no more than four bullets per slide, no more than four words per bullet. The former engineers in this case, however, insisted that the Rule of Four was entirely inadequate for what they wanted to explain. Their Communispond instructor suggested they analyze their own slides to determine the three most important items for highlighting.

They responded well to the idea of analyzing and, after working with visuals highlighting the three most important items, most of the trainees saw the virtue of discarding everything but the

highlighted points. The result: much cleaner, more communicative visuals.

The company decided to put nearly 100 people through Executive Presentation Skills—everyone from the director level and up—in order to impart these skills to its entire senior executive echelon.

What They Learned

Executives completing the training found themselves with a whole new level of confidence in presenting to large groups of people. They learned specific techniques for controlling (and making use of) their nervousness. They learned to research the audience ahead of time in order to target the presentation to audience needs. They learned to make elegant visuals that explained rather than obscured the story.

They learned to organize their material so each presentation begins with an opener that grabs the audience's attention and only then follows up with evidence. They learned to vary this evidence and eliminate redundancy in it. In short, they learned to be effective, self-possessed speakers.

As a result of finding itself with an executive echelon infused with confidence, grace, and charisma, the company contacted Communispond again. They requested training for the company's entire product sales force—over 1,000 people.

If you're ever invited to a communications expo put on by a Fortune 500 company, don't miss it. If it turns out to be this particular company, you'll learn about the industry's most advanced products, and you'll witness some of the most exciting presentations you've ever seen.