FACTORS ENHANCING COMMUNICATION OR WHAT (NOT) TO DO WHEN SPEAKING IN PUBLIC

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Abstract: This article aims to focus upon certain aspects to be regarded when speaking in public. Public speaking has forever been considered one of the most stressful human activities, therefore, we believe that pointing out and training how to cope with some of the factors that aid human interaction can never be considered a redundant approach.

Keywords: stage fright, human interaction, communication, feedback, active listening, cooperative dialogue

It the recent years, it has been observed that inter-human communication is 'doomed to suffer' from the effects of a world marked by speed, technology. People all over the world need lots of information and they need it fast. Sadly enough, if not performed with care, communication is hindered and human interaction fails. Communication of information among people, thus, gained paramount importance and its participants owe it to themselves to understand the factors involved in this process. Communication is not just exchanging information between a sender of the message by means of a channel and the receiver who decodes the message. It is a more complex, sophisticated process, also involving the action and reaction of all participants, their feelings, their responses to their exposure to new information, their understanding and acceptance of the factors involved and skills desired in order to ensure a viable act of communication.

The participants in communication process need to be aware of the fact that they are, in turn, in both position of the communicative act: senders and receivers of the message, offering the so-desired and necessary feedback. The same is the case when dealing with public communication, public speaking, where the sender of the message is the public speaker and the audience, the receiver. This may be, indeed, a special type of human interrelation, but it is, nevertheless, very interesting, challenging and worth debating upon.

The famous American stand-up comedian Jerry Seinfeld, once said in one of his shows: "I saw a thing, actually, a study, that said that speaking in front of a crowd is considered the number one fear of the average person. I found that amazing. Number two was death. Death was number two??? That switched to the average person: if you have to be in a funeral, you would rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy."[1] It is true that the American comedian approached the matter in his humorous (and somehow morbid) manner, but it is also worth noting the truth that lies behind his words. Common people are experiencing all kinds of overwhelming stressful sensations when asked to become *sender* of a *message*, i.e.: speak in front of a *receiver* i.e., the public, as they feel exposed, naked, maybe even experiencing unpleasant feelings.

[1] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yQ6giVKp9ec

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This paper attempts to underline some of the main aspects to be considered when dealing with such an interesting, necessary and in the same time, terrifying act, that of public speaking.

Few years ago I had the opportunity to take up teaching a course in communication techniques for first year students of the philology department. By then I had already been a teacher for a number of years, hence, used to speaking in front of a class. But this was a first time to me regarding lecturing about techniques of communication. I started doing my research covering the subject, truth be told, I have been doing it ever since, as it occurred to me that it is a topic that can be approached from infinite perspectives in infinite manners according to infinite factors.

I surrounded myself with books debating upon the subject of communication only to realise how challenging the topic is, how many people have actually been and still are interested in it, how much is yet to be said about it. But probably the most remarkable aspect of it all became the practical approach of the matter and its usefulness in human interaction.

There is an impressive number of specialists in human behaviour, psychologists, sociologists, public speakers, teachers of communication-related subject matters who author books that form the specialised literature of the communication techniques field. What all of them seem to have in common is the belief that qualitative inter-human relation and rapport is possible only by complying with a set of common sense rules, imposed by a well-supported awareness regarding the individual as a part of a community.

The main concern of the researchers in the field is the fact that the individual is likely to play the 'victim' of his condition as a 'mortal'. In less metaphorical or even dramatic terms, this means that every human being is normally expected to need and wish to interact to other human beings for whatever reasons, and be emotional (to be read as: nervous, anxious, happy, concerned, etc.) about the entire endeavour. There may be cases when we are 'dying to meet' someone, and almost dying out of stress or willing to speak in public as much as the dog loves its collar.

No matter how humans may feel towards speaking to someone, speaking in front of their fellows, there seem to be certain aspect to consider.

In one of her books, Dr. Laurie Rozakis[2] reminds us that that it is only natural and even healthy for the public speakers to display nervousness before giving speeches, as it is considered a sign that they care about doing well. In the same time, the author of the book warns her readers that too much stress and nervousness might work against public speakers, thus she considers offering a number of tips that might come in handy in dealing with the speakers' stage fright. Therefore, she advises the future public speakers to try to become familiar to the venue where they are going to deliver the speech, get accustomed to the visual aids available.

The public speakers also need to keep in mind how imperative it is to permanently attempt to obtain a perfect blend between body and mind; although this might sound like a yoga-oriented type of speech, one needs to admit the usefulness of such physical exercises especially designed to aid this body-mind harmony. Thus, the future public speakers are advised to actually perform physical work-out exercises in order to help them eliminate stress and focus better on their target. And while working with the body and the mind to achieve the purpose, the public speakers are invited also to do some 'mind-work-out', i.e. imagine themselves in the actual instance of delivering the speech in front of an audience, and, more than anything, believe that they are successful.

[2] Laurie Rozakis, *Public Speaking*, Alpha Books, USA, 1999

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Another important aspect underlined refers to the audience, a very important factor in the entire communication-delivery process. Rozakis, just like every specialist in inter-human communication techniques, emphasises how imperative it is for the speakers to know their public; i.e. on the one hand, know their needs and expectations regarding the speech and the speaker, and on the other hand, know the public literally, if not all of them (as sometimes this might literally be impossible), at least a few of them.[3] In an usual public-speaking circumstance, the audience is, more likely than not, expected to behave in a supportive manner towards the speaker. "Audiences want you to be interesting, stimulating, informative, and entertaining. They don't want you to fail." [4]

That is exactly why future public speakers are advised against drawing attention towards their possible minuses regarding themselves as individuals or their speech. Thus, words like "I'm sorry I'm not such a good public speaker/ I'm not very familiar to this/this is out of my comfort zone a.s.o." are definitely to be avoided, since they are more likely to make the audience aware of the negative aspects[5] than to gain tolerance.

Focusing upon the message and the audience more than upon the medium might aid this endeavour. Therefore, the public speakers should 'forget' that they are talking in a large, unfriendly room, in front of an entire audience, who may, at times, be perceived as foe, as the one fishing for mistakes and hoping for the speaker to fail. Therefore, the public speakers should focus more on what they wish to transmit to the audience, on the message and its content, which, needless to say, must be well built, well designed.

A material which is not well-prepared by the speaker will be in danger to also be ill-delivered to the public, since a speaker who is not able to handle[6] the information he needs to transmit, will very likely display stress, anxiety, nervousness, negative stage-fright. All these will hinder the entire presentation and thus, the communicative process will suffer.

It is not always the case for public speakers to deliver a speech on subjects in their 'comfort zone'; this means that they need to take time to prepare the speech in advance, to do research, to find the perfect linguistic register to fit the presentation. No matter what the case may be, it is imperative for the speakers to design their speech in the shape of a dialogue, a cooperative type of dialogue, to always keep an open mind and consider the effects their speech might have on the public, to maintain an active listening type of behaviour, to be able to make the right decision regarding the balance between the amount of new and already known information.

According to the educational resource Management Study Guide[7] "Communication needs to be condensed down to essential facts and then put into a form that the receiver can understand in order for it to be effective. Once the message is received and understood, then a detailed discussion regarding the topic can begin. People are sent a variety of messages all day long. In order to help your message be understood you need to learn how to properly format it and present it. A communication system is only as effective as its ability to deliver the message."

[3] there are speakers who are known to welcome the people attending their speech and shake hands to as many participants as possible, in order to establish a well-desired rapport to them, to make them feel important, thus 'win them on their side'
[4] Rozakis, *idem*
[5] maybe the audience wouldn't have noticed (all of) them
[6] to be read: be familiar with, have knowledge of

[7] quoted from *Factors of Effective Communication*, by George N. Root III, Demand Media

http://smallbusiness.chron.com/factors-effective-communication-3183.html

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