



8 ways to show speaking skills in a meeting

By Jeff Wuorio

Careers are often enhanced, or blunted, in business meetings. Do you sound like someone on his way up -- or on his way out?

How you come across as a meeting participant can be pivotal. The skills involved in getting your point across are not vastly different than those of a keynote speaker giving a speech to a meeting group.

"Just because the spotlight isn't shining directly on you doesn't mean that you can't be seen," says Susanne Gaddis, a Chapel Hill, N.C., speech coach and communications authority.

Like public speaking, the art of effective business-meeting communication is very much a learnable skill. Here are eight important, yet often overlooked, tips on speaking well as a meeting participant.

1. Keep it upbeat. Speech tips and body language aside, nothing is more critical to constructive give-and-take in a meeting than emphasizing the upside. Rather than criticizing, stay focused on the implicit value of what someone else says.

It's not just Pollyanish. A study at the University of Michigan suggests that a preponderance of positive remarks at business meetings genuinely contributes to successful companies. Try keeping score between positive comments and those designed more to sting than support. "Stay solution focused, offering up twice as many positive comments as you do negative," Gaddis says. "When it's possible, affirm others' ideas by using active and constructive feedback. For

example: 'I really like Bill's idea on how we can use a different approach when responding to customer complaints.'"

2. Talk to the entire group. We've all been treated like a fifth wheel – being part of a group, but somehow off the planet when someone is supposedly addressing everyone in the room. Don't make the same snafu. When speaking in a group, move your eyes around and talk to anyone who's listening to what you have to say. "When responding to a question, address the entire group, not just the person who asked the question," Gaddis says. "In this way, everyone feels included."

3. Reach out and encourage feedback. Another meeting pitfall is that hollow sound of silence – comments by speakers that disappear over the horizon leaving no follow-up discussion in their wake. This silence is not golden. So actively encourage comment and feedback based on what you have to contribute. Not only does that make for a better meeting, but it can broaden, amplify and substantiate your remarks. "Get your point across but also open it up for discussion," says John Baldoni, an Ann Arbor, Mich., consultant and the author of "Great Communications Secrets of Great Leaders." "Call on people and ask them what they think. The point is not just to be a participant, but also a facilitator."

4. Mirror the tenor of the meeting. Another business meeting basic is establishing a comfortable atmosphere where everyone feels at ease. One effective way to achieve that is to establish a consistency in communication. If, for instance, most participants are keeping their

remarks short, do the same. If their tone is low and reserved, follow their lead. The point is not to mindlessly mimic but, rather, to affirm and contribute to the overall tenor of the meeting. And that makes for productive and efficient give and take. "You can also mirror other behaviors such as leaning forward, crossing your legs and other movements," Gaddis says.

5. Don't be a time hog. Anyone speaking in a business gathering wants to take enough time to identify and, if need be, dissect the point he's trying to convey. But it's all too easy to slip into a filibuster. Gaddis identifies this element as "conversational balance": Be thorough, but don't take so much time to get your message across that you lose others' attention or, even worse, alienate someone who may be waiting their turn to talk. Again, if others are being succinct, try to do the same. If need be, keep an eye on your watch when you've got the floor so a comment meant to be short doesn't dissolve into a diatribe.

6. Check the clichés and rhetoric. A central tenet of powerful business-meeting communication is being as clear as possible. Don't muddy your message by wallowing in tired catch phrases -- just watch for facial tics when you suggest "pushing

the envelope" -- or too many rhetorical questions that don't advance the discussion. "Be particularly careful with negative rhetorical remarks like 'What were you thinking?'" says Gaddis.

7. When and if necessary, take it offline. Not every in-meeting topic warrants brain surgery. Don't derail meetings or drag them on endlessly by going into detail that can be addressed at another time. "If you make a point that warrants a lot more discussion, tell someone that you'll talk about it in greater detail at some other time," Baldoni says. Or address the issue one-on-one with the questioner after the meeting.

8. Be aware of your body. Not everything you convey to others comes by way of your mouth. How you say what you say is equally telling in your ability to share your thoughts with others. Here are a few body language precepts you may wish to embrace (pun definitely intended): Don't limit supportive interaction to just what you say. Show it by nodding your head, making eye contact, raising your eyebrows and making other gestures that demonstrate that your interest and involvement in the discussion aren't mere lip service.