

The Art of Communication

CONNECTING WITH YOUR AUDIENCE

BY JAY SULLIVAN

In college public speaking classes, we were all told to make eye contact with the audience. Most of us heard that message as, "Scan the audience. Make eye contact with as many people as possible." Unfortunately, when we scan the room, whether we are talking to three people or 30, we increase our anxiety because we try to process information about each person we see.

Strong eye contact is essential to effective communicating. But the best way to maximize the impact of eye contact is to look at one person at a time, and maintain that eye contact for a complete thought. A full thought is generally about five to seven seconds, long enough to make a connection, but not so long that your eye contact devolves into a manic stare that might intimidate someone. Delivering a full sentence to each member of your audience, rather than scanning the audience, will have three main effects.

First, you will become less nervous. Any sane person is nervous about

talking to a large number of people at once. Most of us are fairly comfortable talking to one person at a time. When you are delivering that full thought to one individual, that person becomes the only person in the room. Everyone else disappears. You will automatically calm down and keep your heart from racing and your palms from sweating.

Second, if you talk to one person at a time, you will avoid distractions. When we scan the room, we notice everything. We notice that one person is playing with their BlackBerry, someone else is doodling, and a third is walking in late. Such distractions can derail our train of thought. If I am speaking to one person at a time, the fact that someone a few seats away is responding to an e-mail, opening a piece of candy or folding a paper airplane, doesn't throw me off.

Third, and most important, we relate to our audience. If you maintain eye contact with someone for a full thought, you actually communicate two messages. First, you communicate the content you are saying. But second, and sometimes of greater importance, you communicate that, at that moment, nothing is more important to you than that this person receive this information. You convey your sense of commitment to the

audience learning your content. You can't make a better connection with an audience than that.

The same technique applies no matter how large your audience. You don't have to worry about making eye contact with every individual. If you are speaking to 50 people or more, as you look out at an individual in the back of the room, each of the people sitting around that person thinks you are looking directly at him or her. The effect is the same as if you had looked at each individual.

In general, we have a hard time trusting people who don't look at us when they speak to us. Establishing rapport through eye contact is so essential, it has always been a core principle of trial advocacy classes. Every trial attorney knows how to maximize or minimize the connection between a witness and the jury.

A witness' instinct will always be to look at the attorney asking the questions. Therefore, when you question your own witness and you want that person's integrity and sincerity to come across to the jury, stand near the jury box so that as the witness answers she is more likely to look at individual jurors and make eye contact. The opposite applies when cross examining

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someone or dealing with a hostile witness. To minimize the witness' ability to connect with the jury, stand away from the jury box so the witness will be less inclined to look at the jurors.

Some points about eye contact:

- Don't move methodically across the front row, one thought per person, and then move to the second row. Look randomly around to the different sections of the room.

- If you look out to the room and the person you lock eyes with looks down or away, your instinct will be to look for someone else. Don't. Finish your thought to the top of that person's head. Keeping your eye contact on that one individual will help maintain your composure in front of the room.

- People often ask if they should give all of their attention to the key decision-maker in the room. Let's say you meet with the general counsel of

a potential client and his staff. You give all of your attention to the GC and essentially ignore everyone else. At the end of the meeting, the GC decides to retain your firm—and then directs you to deal with his deputy, the person you ignored during the meeting. Even before you start the relationship you have offended your key contact. Obviously, the key person should receive more attention than others in the room. However, share your attention with everyone.

- We often present information from notes. After you have gathered your thoughts about your topic and figured out what you want to say, it's important to create a set of notes that act as a delivery tool, rather than a compilation of every thought you ever had about your topic. Keep your notes simple. Write only bullet points—no complete sentences. Keep all bullets in a single column down

the center of the page. You know your content; trust your brain to provide the information needed by giving it simple prompts on the page.

The goal is to speak only when focused on your audience. That means no talking when looking at your notes. Glance down, grab the bullet point, look up at your audience, deliver the phrase and then add your comments. The pause as you look down for the next bullet point will give you greater presence and will allow the audience to digest your first point.

In college we were taught to make eye contact because as nervous teens, we preferred to stare at the floor rather than look at our audience. As professionals, we need to manage our eye contact to have the greatest impact.

The most effective communicators are those who focus less on themselves and more on others.

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