5 Practices of Better Communication

So you want to be a better communicator. You're just not sure how to do that.

Sometimes the art and science of becoming better seems so complex, you're not sure where to start.

After all, most people who hear you talk can't give you meaningful feedback. They can tell you whether they liked it or not, but rarely can they tell you *why* they liked it. Even if you did a great job, you will have a hard time repeating it if you don't understand what made it great.

That's why it's so critical to get feedback and coaching from other communicators. They can often explain *why* your talk worked or why it didn't, just like a hitting coach in major league baseball can help a .300 hitter become a .310 hitter by offering far more helpful tips than a simple "Hey, just strike out less."

So in this post, I share some of my favorite communication tips (including a few I've never written about before) that can make a surprisingly big difference.

Here are 5 simple tips that can definitely make you a better communicator before you give your next talk. They've definitely helped me.

1. Don't Memorize Your Talk, Understand It

This may be my favorite speaking tip of all time. It just solves so many problems and reduces tension *before* you speak and while you speak.

I get asked all the time how I can speak for 45 minutes or even longer without looking at notes. I learned the secret when I was in seminary and asked Tom Long, a Princeton professor, how he did it.

He told me: Don't memorize your talk; understand it.

He was right. Memorizing a talk is extremely difficult. Especially a longer talk. I personally find that trying to recall a memorized talk stilts your delivery because you can't focus on the moment.

So instead of memorizing your talk, *understand* your talk.

Think about it. You do this intuitively when you talk to someone. For example, you don't *memorize* inviting someone to dinner. (Okay, maybe you memorized a dinner invite once, when you were asking that girl you had a crush on out on a first date…And remember how *awkward* that was? Point made…)

No, if you're inviting a friend to dinner, you just intuitively know that you need to see if they're free, set up the details and maybe figure out where and when and who's bringing what. Your conversation follows that flow.

Your talk is no different. It's an introduction, a body, a conclusion and some transition points along the way. If you can grasp those main points, it's amazingly easy to see how you will naturally fill the space in between with what you prepared.

You need to be familiar with your talk and you need to understand it, but you'll never need to memorize it.

I wrote more on how to [deliver a talk without using notes here](#).

2. Begin Writing Your Talk Weeks In Advance

It's good to get ahead on your talk for so many reasons. But here's one you may not have known.

Your brain actually has both long term and short term memory capacity.

If you write a talk shortly before you give it, the brain stores your talk in your short term memory. This is why, sometimes, if you're a preacher who wrote Sunday's message on a Thursday (or worse, on Saturday night!), it can feel so unfamiliar to you on Sunday.

Contrast that with a talk you've worked on weeks ago and maybe delivered recently. For some reason, you probably feel like you know that talk much better than the others you write just before delivery. The reason is simple: your brain stored that information in your long term memory because it's been around longer.

Ideas stored in long term memory are just easier to recall.

I know it's hard to get ahead, but try it. I'm working on a series I'm delivering two months from now. I've even got most of the bottom lines developed for the series and I'll flesh out most of the messages in detail two to three weeks before I preach them. My guess is that by the time I deliver the first message, the series will already feel like an old friend.

Because I'm comfortable with it, the talk will immediately connect better with the audience. Your comfort with the subject may even appear to give you more authority on the subject, too, because your audience will assume you understand it well. They'll realize you own it, because you do.

Speakers, this is also why conference talks you've repeated once or twice are so easy to recall: they're stored in your long term memory.

By beginning every talk well in advance, you give every talk the opportunity to flourish into

something better.

3. Include At Least One Self-Deprecating Story

If you want to build rapport with your audience, show them your weaknesses, not just your strengths.

I almost always try to find one mildly self-deprecating story in any talk I'm giving. (Fortunately, I seem to have an endless supply of self-deprecating moments from which to draw.)

This does two things. First, it put you on the *same level* as the audience, which is exactly where you want to be in a post-modern, post-Christian culture. Theologically, that's a good thing, because you actually are on the same level as your audience. But in our post-modern, anti-authoritarian culture, the audience wants to know you're one of them.

In a post-modern, post-Christian culture, your authority actually goes up, not down, when you display your vulnerability.

Second, the audience empathizes with you. They see themselves in you, and your honesty makes them quietly cheer for you.

Can you overshare? Yes. Can you under-share? Absolutely.

How do you know where the line is? If you're not sure, I [wrote this post on how to be an appropriately transparent leader without oversharing](#).

The bottom line, though, is this: people may admire your strengths, but they resonate with your weaknesses.

4. Pay Attention To The Logical Flow Of Your Talk

Every talk should take people on a logical journey. Even our stories are sequenced logically, with a beginning, middle and end. If you don't believe it, try watching a movie with the scenes in random order. It will drive you crazy and the story, of course, will make no sense.

Our brains are hardwired to search for meaning, and logic brings order out of the chaos around us.

Your talk should have a beginning, middle and end, and each section should be logically and sequentially related.

For example, if you start your talk by describing a problem, then your talk should also offer the solution or at least a response to that problem. If it doesn't, you'll just annoy people.

Similarly, move the different sections of your talk through a logical grid. It should look something like this: If A, then B, then C and then, finally, D.

Here's the logical flow of a [recent message I gave](#).

- Some of you don't like Christians because you think most Christians are hypocrites.
- In fact, aren't some non-Christians actually better moral people than the Christians you know?
- Well, you're right. Most of us are hypocrites. You have a moral standard. The question is: have you kept it?
- But what if our personal morality isn't the basis of Christian salvation? Christianity doesn't make moral people better. It makes dead people live.
- God is actually more critical of hypocrites than you are.
- Fortunately he forgives, and challenges those ready to throw stones at others to drop them.
- In light of God's incredible mercy, it's time to drop the stone.

Most messages typically have 3 to 7 key logical moves in them. This one had seven. Whatever it is, understanding the logical flow of your argument will help you understand your talk, which as we saw in Point 1 above, eliminates the need for memorization.

If you can't figure out the logical flow of your talk as a communicator, your audience never will.

5. Speak With Double Your Normal Energy During Delivery

One final quick tip: whenever you're communicating, speak with double your normal energy.

It's going to feel weird at first, but it's vital.

Speaking in normal conversational tones when you have a microphone in your hand actually makes you sound boring. So double your energy.

Start by doubling your normal volume. I'm not talking about yelling. I'm talking about speaking more loudly and passionately.

Many speakers get freaked out by the microphone. Don't. The sound person will turn you down when you project your voice.

A quick hack? Pretend you have no mic on and you're speaking to the person at the back of the room. That will automatically make you a more compelling speaker.

Energetic speakers are always more compelling.

Want to learn more about becoming a better communicator? [Connect with an Auxano Navigator.](#)

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