

## **Ethics In Public Speaking**

By: Stephen D. Boyd

Often managers have to deliver presentations with unpleasant content. The vice president has to announce that there is a hiring freeze or a downsizing. The human resource director speaks to the employees about a benefits package with fewer benefits. Because executives are often speaking in difficult situations, the more credibility they can develop, the more the content will be considered and accepted. Speakers will have little or no impact on audiences if audience members don't respect them and what they have to say.

What makes us trust a speaker or believe that he or she is a reliable source? Whom can we trust to have our best interests at heart? Let's look at some practical ways a speaker can maintain and enhance credibility.

**Act in ways consistent with the message of the presentation.** This can be as simple as showing concern in tone of voice and facial expression when talking about an issue that is facing the company. Acting disinterested or unconcerned when presenting bad news can offend your listeners. Showing enthusiasm in delivery by quicker movements, more variety, and a faster rate of speech when reading an exciting climax of a positive presentation can produce the same enthusiasm in your audience.

A student began a persuasive speech by spreading garbage out on a table. She said, "What do all of these pieces of trash have in common? They can all be recycled." She gave a good speech on the need for recycling and how to set up community recycling programs. She finished to a nice round of applause; then she gathered up all of the recyclables from the table--and threw them away in the wastebasket in the corner. She obviously didn't understand the need for speakers to act in ways consistent with their messages in order to maintain credibility.

**Good preparation is an ethical requirement as well as a practical one.** Your audience has given you time and an opportunity, and audience members deserve to hear your best effort. That only comes through careful preparation. If the audience can tell you didn't prepare for them specifically, they will feel betrayed and won't respond positively to your message. Thus the executive should start preparing several days or weeks before an important presentation is delivered. It is hard to cram for a speech, and the audience can tell when preparation has not been adequate.

**Show respect for your audience.** Don't insult your audience in any way. Racial slurs and profanity are obviously unethical, but in addition, don't show disrespect for people's gender, backgrounds, positions, appearances, or nationalities. Don't put people down because of their lack of knowledge of a topic; sometimes their lack of information is the very reason you have been asked to speak. Don't embarrass any member of your audience. Don't play a joke on anyone without seeking permission first. Even if you do receive permission, playing a joke on an audience member can backfire because the rest of your group might become fearful they will bear the brunt of your next joke, causing them to lose trust in you. Poke fun at yourself instead.

**Base your conclusions in your presentation on clear evidence.** Support your assertions with relevant facts, statistics, and testimony. Keep track of your sources and be ready to produce them

if an audience member has a question. Don't make assertions you can't support or justify. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca write in their book, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*, that whatever support you use should be able to satisfy the "universal audience" - that group of all reasonable, rational people. In your outline each major point should show a variety of evidence. If that is not the case, then eliminate the point or, if it fits, place the evidence with another point you are making.

**Choose topics that are consistent with your personal beliefs.** Pick topics important to you that you live out on a daily basis. You might be able to craft effective speeches advocating views you do not agree with, but you will be much more effective and ethical if you advocate opinions you actually hold. If you advocate a position which is not something you feel completely comfortable with, this will be communicated to your audience by your delivery style. In choosing material for your presentation, one major criterion is how strongly you feel about the point or support. This is an excellent way to cut out materials when you have more content than time allotted.

**Respect the time of your audience.** Know what time you are expected to finish - and finish at that time. It is an insult to your audience members and an abuse of your opportunity to speak to keep them ten, fifteen, or thirty minutes more than what is expected of you.

History gives us a good example of the power of an actual presentation to create credibility. The year was 1952, and Dwight Eisenhower was running for president with Richard Nixon as his vice-presidential candidate. Charges surfaced, however, that Nixon had illegally used some campaign contributions, and Eisenhower considered dropping Nixon from the ticket. In what became known as the "Checkers Speech," Nixon defended himself in a 30-minute, nationally televised speech. With his wife Pat sitting in the background, he defended his ethics, at one point holding up a piece of paper he claimed was the result of an audit of his books finding him blameless. Nixon did admit, however, that some supporters had given his children a dog. He said the kids had named the dog "Checkers," and no matter what anyone said, he wasn't going to let them take that dog away. He concluded by asking people to telegraph or mail to the Republican National Committee their opinion of whether or not he should continue to run with Eisenhower. The overwhelmingly positive response assured his place in the campaign. Who knows how much of American history for the next twenty years was changed because of a little dog and a presentation that convinced people of Richard M. Nixon's credibility.

All of these ethical principles can be condensed to one, a "golden rule" of speaking ethics: Treat each audience member as you would like to be treated if you were in your audience.

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