

**Why
are you telling them
this?
now?**

**Communicating your message in the Civil Service
– some lessons learned from 20 years at the front**

As a Civil Servant there are a number of occasions when you can truly make your name. When you are required to communicate complex, difficult or persuasive messages to senior staff or to groups of other Civil Servants then these will be occasions when you can 'win' or 'lose'. Given that reputations in the Civil Service tend to linger, are there any rules that will keep you on the straight and narrow?

Yes there are and point number one is that most people who fail are a victim of their own poor preparation. They are presenting the wrong message. When asked to tell a group of people about a particular topic – that is what they do. The talk is driven by the subject matter. So for example, asked to describe a new system they describe, in detail, the system. They fail to realise that the audience do not wish to know about the system. They are only interested in what they need to know about the system, how it will affect them, what they have to do to comply with the system. This will usually be far less than a summary of the whole story. So the talk should not be about the subject but about the subject in relation to the needs of the audience. Ask yourself **why** are you telling **them, this, now**? A former senior colleague, noted for her short fuse and candid expressions of disapproval would, as a matter of course, interrupt her interlocutor with the question "why are you telling me this?" within 60 seconds of the start of the session. It was wise to know the answer to that question and wiser still to have already raised the question yourself and offered a direct answer at the outset.

Point two is that you must decide, before you prepare material, what effect do you want it to have on the key members of the audience. Are you trying to persuade them of a proposition, worry them or what? You need to be clear about the verb that describes what you are trying to do to them. And you should beware the verb 'to inform' – there must be more to your communication than that.

Few people enjoy having information dumped on to them. They will be thinking why do I need to know this? and you must have anticipated the question and come up with a good answer.

Next we come to a question of safety. Communication can be an unfair and an unsafe business. Your audience may have an entirely different view of the issues, they may wish to avoid or ignore the issue or they may find it threatening. You must anticipate their most difficult questions, raise them yourself and deal with them. So, 'what will it cost?' 'will it work?' 'how do we sell this to Ministers?' 'what happens if we do nothing?' are all questions that you cannot allow the audience to raise. They will

think that you are either stupid (because you did not anticipate the question) or dishonest (because you did, but hoped to avoid it) – either way they gain the high ground and you are on the defensive.

Finally there is the question of visual aids. Many Civil Servants are suspicious of an overly glossy approach. They will feel either that you are trivialising the issue, or are trying to divert them' and anyway ... how much did all this cost?'

So simple visual aids, which are legible, preferably those especially constructed for the occasion (rather than someone else's visual aids that are mostly but not totally relevant) can be useful. Visual aids will remind you of content and keep it in order for you and they can compensate for you. If your style is discursive, they can be punchy and vice versa. They can also distance you from difficult issues and allow you to stand alongside the audience and not become too closely identified with the problem. One tip, never repeat the words on the visual aid, the audience will have already read them and will become irritated by the repetition.

Similarly, leave enough time for the audience to read the visual aid or understand its content. Put it up and watch the eyes of someone in the front row trying to read the slide – when the eyes flick back to you, you may start to speak.

Note

This note was prepared by John Clarke, David Hemmings and Richard Hillsdon of the McNeil Robertson partnership. There are many other tips and tricks of the trade and McNeil Robertson would be delighted to share them with you, and help you and colleagues develop first class communications and management skills. Their email address is namename@mcneilrobertson.co.uk .