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Giving a good oral presentation **C34**

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Giving a good oral presentation

Introduction

As doctors we are also educators, and will be called upon to give oral presentations at many points during our career. This may be in the relatively informal setting of a local audit or grand round meeting, or in the presence of experts at an international conference. Whatever the situation, being able to give a good oral presentation is an important skill. This article discusses common pitfalls and suggests tips to giving a good oral presentation.

One should approach the oral presentation in a systematic fashion. You can consider the project as a series of steps which, if executed effectively, will result in a memorable presentation that will not only stimulate but also educate.

The authors' suggested approach involves laying the ground work, building content and visual presentation, and finally delivery.

Laying the ground work

Laying the ground work refers to areas one should have considered before researching the subject. You need to think about:

Your aim

What is the aim of this presentation? Is it to transfer knowledge? Is it to stimulate debate? Is it to generate interest in your research? If you are not certain of the purpose of your presentation, then you cannot expect your audience to be, and your presentation is unlikely to be an effective use of anyone's time.

Your audience

Who are you speaking to? What is their level of expertise on the subject? Do you need to address basic principles before discussing your key points? This is impor-

tant because if your talk does not go deeper than their existing knowledge then your presentation may fail to stimulate and your audience might lose interest. However, you can also alienate your audience by speaking in too much detail on a subject that they have yet to grasp.

You need to target your presentation to your audience, rather than reusing a previous presentation for a different group (Farrow, 2003). As a general rule, it is worth briefly addressing basic principles in relation to your talk, because often your audience will have a mixed level of expertise. Also bear in mind the numbers you are speaking to, as this will affect audience interaction. With smaller groups it may be easier to direct questions to the audience. In larger groups there are also ways to connect with the audience, such as using audience response systems (e.g. voting keypads) for the audience to type in responses to questions.

Your time

How much time do you have for preparation and gathering information? Being time aware, as with any project, is important. If the presentation is about a subject with which you are not familiar, you need to allow more time for research and reading. It is useful to allocate time to seek advice from more experienced colleagues and revise your presentation based on their feedback. You should aim to have your presentation ready in time to allow for a period of reflection and practice during which you can fine tune your delivery.

Also bear in mind the time you have been allocated to give the talk. Gauge how much content you will be able to comprehensively address within the time constraints of your talk, and resist the temptation to include everything you know about the subject.

Your skills

We all have varying abilities at presenting, depending on previous experience. Nevertheless, presenting is always going to be a part of our professional lives, and it is worth investing in building confi-

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dence and skills in it. There are several courses available, in particular aimed at health-care professionals. Consider attending these courses to get expert feedback, especially on how to conduct large group teaching.

Building content and visual presentation

An oral presentation can be regarded largely as two parts: content and visual presentation. Without content, a presentation may be aptly described as all beauty and no substance; without good visual presentation, you have a dry and uninspiring talk. Here are a few tips for both content and visual presentation.

Build content with your aim in mind

It is easy to get caught up with the details when you have several tasks to complete. However, remind yourself of your aim (which is generally to inform and provoke discussion). Having this in mind, you can then build up your content to achieve this.

Structure your talk

Make the structure of your talk clear to your audience at the start with a succinct introduction, and use headers throughout the talk to highlight when a new topic begins. This will ensure that if nothing else your audience will remember a few key points as reiterated by these headers. It has been suggested that people will generally not retain more than five key points (Collins, 2004a). Finish strongly with a clear conclusion and use this as an opportunity to remind the audience of all the key points discussed.

Your 'make or break' opening

The attention span of your audience is maximal at the beginning of your presentation. This is also when many of your audience will decide if your presentation is worth paying attention to. There are many distractions in a lecture theatre and you may just become one of them if you do not capitalize on this spurt of concentration. Worse, this may herald the beginning of your audience succumbing to the well-recognized phenomenon 'conference coma'. Try and think of an interesting opening sentence or anecdote that your audience can easily relate to.

Keeping the focus

Having captured the imagination of your audience at the beginning with a powerful anecdote, you need to maintain this level of concentration. There are a few ways to do this. Depending on the setting, it may be appropriate for the audience to be assigned tasks (such as small group discussions). This will give the audience time to reflect on what has already been presented and actively engage them. The natural attention span of any audience dips after around 10 minutes so it may be also worth consolidating key points at 10-minute intervals.

Use humour only if it suits you

The use of light humour to liven up the presentation can be good, but if it does not suit you do not force the issue. Remember that nobody expects you to be funny; after all it would be a tall order to expect you to be an expert on your subject as well as a stand-up comedian.

Pictures speak a thousand words

Rather than crowding a slide with a long series of sentences, use pictures wherever possible to communicate a point. People retain up to 50% of what they can both see and hear, and only 20% of what they hear (Collins, 2004b). Reading verbatim off a slide is a sure way to rapidly lose your audience. Graphs and diagrams are also useful but these must be clearly labelled for quick accessibility by the audience. All graphs should be one dimensional for clarity.

Be wary of using pictures just for the sake of making a presentation look good; never use generic clip art. You must be selective about the pictures you use as they serve as points of reference for the audience (Katchburian, 2003). Google images can be a good resource but be careful with copyright issues.

Careful with multimedia

When used well video and sound can help bring a subject to life. However, be certain that they will help you make your point and that you are not just using them for their own sake. Keep them short – we have all sat through overly long videos which do not add much to a presentation. If you are using video and/or sound try and make sure beforehand that it will work on the

computer you will be using on the day and have a backup plan if it does not.

Consistency between slides

Decide on a common design for all your slides so that colours and fonts are consistent throughout your presentation. If you are representing your hospital or department, there may well be template slides available to use as standard, with the relevant department information and logos on. PowerPoint and other programs have lots to choose from but not all will be suitable. It is best to stick to a plain background with contrasting text. Avoid fancy fonts, or the use of dramatic slide transitions or animations. Keep things subtle – less is definitely more here.

Delivery

For all the preparation you have done, good delivery is the final step that does justice to your hard work. Although some people may be naturally more confident than others, everyone is capable of effective delivery with practice.

Practice, practice, practice

As with most things, few are born orators. What appears to be an off the cuff remark is more likely to be perfect delivery well practiced. Some suggest video-recording yourself so that you can play the recording back and then identify bad habits or areas where delivery was not as smooth as it could have been (Bourne, 2007). Practice also ensures that there is less deviation from the script on the day, which can be disastrous in terms of time keeping, as well as venturing into an area that one knows less about. A dress rehearsal to a friendly audience can also be invaluable. This is particularly helpful if there is to be a question and answer session after your talk, as you may be able to anticipate some of the questions that may be asked, allowing you to prepare answers.

Keep to time

Your audience will appreciate it if you keep to time, and so will your fellow speakers scheduled after you. Most moderators will stop you if you exceed your time limit, and this may prevent you from making an effective conclusion. If you do find that for some reason you have to cut down your talk (e.g. you overestimated

the time you had or you were allocated a shortened time because previous participants spent too long on their talks), rather than rushing through your talk, try and consider beforehand what you could safely leave out without losing the element of the talk.

Vary your tone and speed

Talking in a monotone will not endear you to your audience and, more importantly, you will not adequately emphasize key points. For example, by slowing down when discussing a key point, you are signalling to your audience that what you are saying is of importance. This will help your audience create a mental register of all the main points discussed. Pacing yourself is important (Lashford, 1995), as far too many speakers speed through their talk, and this makes it much harder for the audience to follow.

Body language

It is impossible to discuss delivery of an oral presentation without considering the importance of body language. Reading off the slides or off your script will limit your ability to express yourself. Try and keep eye contact with several members of the audience while talking. Remember that if you are genuinely enthused about your subject, it is likely that your body language will follow. However, too much body language (such as excessive shuffling or overly effusive hand movements) is equally distracting.

Using a laser pointer is becoming increasingly popular, but remember that this may restrict natural body movements. If using a laser pointer it should be held steady over a point rather than circling or underlining, and should not be flicked too quickly across a slide. Also,

check that the pointer is actually visible from the back of the lecture theatre.

When it is all over

Having concluded your presentation and come off the podium, what's next?

Get feedback

Feedback is still very relevant at this stage. Although preparation does increase the likelihood of a good oral presentation, it does not guarantee one. Open the floor to questions, which in themselves are a form of feedback. If you get a stunned silence, which sometimes happens, ask the audience a question relevant to the subject. If this triggers a debate or lively discussion, you know that you have connected well with your audience. Particularly at teaching presentations, it is becoming common practice to give the audience a feedback form to fill out, so you can review these later and analyse how your presentation went.

For junior doctors, the teaching session is an opportunity to discuss suggestions for improvement with your trainer. This can then be evidenced as a work-based assessment and added to the e-Portfolio as an observation of teaching assessment. Alternatively, the experience can be drawn upon and written as a reflective log on the e-Portfolio. When meeting with your educational supervisor, these can then be highlighted as areas of focus on your personal development plan.

An unexpected question?

Even though presenters are often keen to clarify points and address queries from the audience, it is safe to say that the unexpected question is the most dreaded part of any presentation. There are many ways to approach this uncomfortable situation but here is one option.

First, make sure you listen carefully to the whole question without interrupting, so that you answer the actual question that is being asked. Then pause, and repeat the question back. Doing this not only gives you time to assimilate the answer, it also serves to highlight the question to the rest of the audience. This is useful as you may find that some members of the audience will have an opinion on the subject. Having done that, try your best to answer the question. It is fully acceptable to be honest and admit that you will have to do more research to address the question adequately. Finally, turn this into a springboard for discussion with the audience. You may do this by bridging this with another question for the audience.

Present at every opportunity

However well or badly you think your presentation went, your presenting skills can only get better with more practice. Even the simplest of presentations, such as a small group teaching session, can be used as an opportunity to improve your skills. Getting feedback from different groups of people will give you several perspectives and may bring up things that you had not previously noticed.

Conclusions

This article has discussed how to approach the oral presentation using a basic framework. This is not an exhaustive guide. As with most skills a good mentor will be your best asset. If possible, approach a senior colleague experienced in presenting for advice, as well as observing good speakers present for inspiration. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

KEY POINTS

- Laying the ground work is vital to giving a good oral presentation.
- Build both content and the visual aspects of your presentation to keep your audience engaged.
- Delivery is the final step in communicating well, so practice, practice, practice.
- It's not over, even when you've finished. Ask for feedback and keep on presenting.

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