

MONDAY MORNING MANAGER

Harvey Schachter's guide on how to handle everything from overflowing e-mail to meeting overload

How to think on your feet

Excellent verbal and written communication is still important to employers, but increasing value is now being set on the ability to think and act quickly and well

Some 20 years ago, most career ads required candidates to demonstrate "excellent verbal and written communication skills." They still do, but now take it further by highlighting the skill of "thinking on your feet," according to Roger Davies, chief executive officer of Toronto-based communication consultants McLuhan & Davies.

Employers are advertising for team members who respond well under pressure. That means being organized in their thinking, as well as being able to respond quickly. Research by Mr. Davies' company shows that roughly 90 per cent of all verbal communication in business is impromptu, rather than formal presentation. A two-day Think On Your Feet® workshop by his firm includes the following tips:

DON'T WAFFLE

Get to the point. No one has time for a lengthy presentation of any kind. If you know the answer, answer the question promptly, don't beat around the bush. A direct and quick response rarely harms the cause.

IT'S OKAY TO SAY YOU DON'T KNOW

But promise to promptly get back with the answer. And deliver on that promise. Fast! Don't bombard the audience with too many verbal details. Focus on the big picture. Then offer the details in writing. Don't assume your audience processes your verbal messages well - many still prefer to see key messages in writing.

USE STRUCTURE

If you're analytically inclined, structure your response into two or three items. Then walk the audience through the items succinctly. Clearly enunciate each item, stating No. 1, No. 2, No. 3 (or first, second, third), providing audible signposts so your listener can follow you.

If you tend to talk fast, structure your ideas into two or three items - to slow you down and increase the chances of your message being retained. Don't count on your listener absorbing every point first time.

BRIDGE THE GAP

Master the art of "bridging" from question to answer. Techniques include rephrasing the question to give yourself time to think, as well as to ensure you understand the question. You can also compliment the question and the questioner. But don't overdo this technique - the "Oh What A Great Question!" response - since it's the most common bridging tactic, and can get overused.

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