

How to Succeed When Your Conversations Move from the Water Cooler to the Boardroom

We say it often: the principles of communication, once learned, work for anyone – in any situation and at any time.

It makes sense, it sounds good, and, best of all, it's true. But in spite of those things, it can be difficult to put that truth into practice, especially when the communication contexts you find yourself in change drastically.

When you've been promoted from a department-facing position to a board-facing position, things are undeniably different. The ease you feel during a casual conversation around the water cooler can quickly turn to intense pressure when you're presenting to a room full of suit-clad board members, especially when those board members are seemingly intent on evaluating your project, your strategy, and your competence.

Don't worry, though. The principles of communication are equally true in both circumstances; what changes is their application.

Have you been called to a board-facing position? Let's take a look at what stays the same, what changes, and what you can do to succeed when your conversations move from the water cooler to the boardroom.

What Stays the Same?

The good news is that our statement is still true: the principles of communication remain the same. Accordingly, board communication, like communication in any other context, will be more successful if the following questions are considered and addressed in advance:

1. **Who is my audience and what matters to them?**
2. **What is my goal in speaking with this audience?**
3. **Based on the above, what message will have impact?**
4. **How much time do I have?**

These questions should [shape your presentation](#), just as they should shape every piece of communication you create and deliver.

Another piece of good news: your personality should remain the same, too. Yes, the context is different, but take heart: you've been selected to communicate with the board based on qualities you've displayed in your previous role. Don't seek to be someone you aren't, and don't let your personality be smothered by the change in context.

You are called to be the best board-facing version of yourself – but you should still be yourself.

What Changes?

While principles and your personality should remain constant, the application of those things will change a good deal in a board-facing context. Put another way, the questions remain the same; it's the answers that are new.

With that in mind, let's review the four essential communication questions with an eye toward the context of board communication.

1. Who is my audience and what matters to them?

Your audience is composed of board members – that much is obvious. The things that matter to those board members, however, may not appear quite as obvious. This is why board presentations can feel so intimidating.

As a newly appointed presenter, you likely haven't interacted with board members on a regular basis. You may be familiar with the things people care about in your department, but you may not be as familiar with how board members view those things.

Don't panic.

While there is certainly a culture and common way of thinking held by many board members, they are also just people. They still, as the saying goes, put their pants on one leg at a time.

The biggest difference is that board members usually see things from a high-level view. They're unlikely to have detailed expertise in your department, but that doesn't mean you're speaking down to them – they tend to be very intelligent people. What it does mean is that you're speaking at their level, and, generally, that level is at 30,000 feet.

Board members are big-picture thinkers who care about the bottom-line success of the company. They want to understand how the cause you're representing will impact their big picture; that's what matters to them.

2. What is my goal in speaking with this audience?

This second question is just as vital, but there are more answers than can be thoroughly addressed here. That's because your goal in communicating with the board will vary depending on the project or cause you're representing. Often, your goal will be to secure funding for your department or project; at other times, your goal may be to deliver a status update.

Regardless, this is the thing to keep in mind: a clear understanding of your goal is essential to your success. Take the time ensure you know exactly what you want your communication to accomplish.

3. Based on the above, what message will have impact?

With an understanding of your audience and goals, you can begin shaping your message for optimum impact.

While your goals may vary, there are a few messaging tactics that tend to be helpful when you communicate with the board:

Prepare for formality

Generally, board presentations are formal affairs. This doesn't mean that you need to check your personality at the door; when you dress up, you're still the same person, after all. What it does mean is that you'll want to look and speak in ways that are appropriate to the situation. Find out what's expected, and prepare yourself and your message accordingly.

Focus on impact instead of intricate detail

Remember, board members care about the big picture. Don't bore them with intricate details; focus on end results. Instead of telling them about the eighteen different types of bolts that will be needed to finish construction, take a step back and communicate how the finished project will serve to bolster the company's service offering and bottom line.

Offer an opinion

You were not called to speak to the board for your ability to read the data off of a slide. You're presenting because you've been identified as an expert in your area – and board members want to hear an expert's opinion. Don't be afraid to offer yours. Tell the board the facts, and then tell them what you'd recommend they do.

The more clearly you can paint big-picture impact, the more likely your presentation will be a success.

How much time do I have?

The final consideration to take into account is the time you're allotted to present. This may vary, depending on your situation, but it's likely that you'll have between 10 or 15 minutes to capture the board's attention and present your message. Again, this should be cause to shape your message around high-impact, big picture messages.

What to Do

So, you've been chosen to communicate with the board. You've acknowledged the new communication context; you've prepared answers to the four communication questions; you've shaped your message for maximum impact.

Are you ready?

If you're still not completely confident that the answer is yes, don't worry. The truth is that, for individuals who have been called to a board-facing role, requiring help is not unusual. In fact, it's typical.

We've taught communication principles for decades, and we can confirm that nearly everyone can benefit from communications training. And, over time, we've found that the most effective way to improve as a communicator is through coaching.

That's why our Strategic Communications Coaching is designed to train you or your employees in the areas where improvement will be most beneficial. Have you been called to a board-facing position? We can work with you to prepare for your unique boardroom context, and help you to hone in on the messaging tactics you'll need to succeed.

Don't let moving your conversation from the water cooler to the boardroom put a damper on your ability to communicate well. [Get in touch with us](#), and get the coaching you need to communicate with confidence.

The principles of communication, once learned, work for anyone, in any situation and at any time – but they're most effective when they're applied to your unique context.