

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

Are Your Skills Up to the Challenge?

Competitive Strategy by Richard MacLean

Although it did not seem so at the time, communicating with business managers was relatively easy during the 1970s and 1980s. The regulations dictated what was needed to modify manufacturing operations and companies spent billions to build pollution control systems. But that was then; the challenge is much different now.

One could also argue that the stakes now are much higher. Environmental concerns have shifted from inside the fence line to global issues such as climate change. Opportunities have shifted from cost savings through recycling and reuse to competitive positioning through green product marketing. While in the past the requirements were narrowly defined, today there are broad voluntary guidelines on how to create a “sustainable company.”

Communicating a coherent strategy and guiding business management through this maze requires excellent communication and persuasion skills. Some are born with these requisite talents, and others must painstakingly learn them. If you are like most people, myself included, and have not been gifted with the talents of a communications master, you need to arm yourself with all of the fundamentals and best practices and then hone your skills through practice. I first covered some of the basics of communicating and educating adults in an earlier column (see “Moving Beyond Talking Heads Education,” *EM* February 2001, pp 8–10). This month’s column outlines the essential best practices for facilitating communication sessions with groups of business managers.

Design Considerations

Airtime

U.S. business managers have a willingness to take the time to participate in environmental sessions that vary by their level within the organization. In the absence of some major crisis, top executives can be engaged for up to half a day if the issue is considered immediately relevant. Middle managers can be engaged for one or two days. Front-line individuals, such as those assigned environmental responsibilities, can be engaged as long as necessary to accomplish whatever specific goal is needed, since these sessions often involve skills training.

The caveat is that the need to meet face-to-face may first have to be established in a much more limited and constrained environment (i.e., the typical briefing). In very large corporations, environmental managers may never even speak to their CEOs other than at the annual awards ceremony, let alone spend hours discussing strategies. However, due to all the

environmental dynamics going on today, the opportunity for airtime has never been better.

Structure

For formal workshops, you should create a detailed lesson plan that lists each segment, its purpose, who will be presenting, and what supporting audio visuals will be used. Essentially, you want to create a roadmap that anyone familiar with the subject matter can use to deliver the session. Strategy sessions can be less structured, but only to a point. The worst case is when the audience veers off on a totally separate and nonproductive tangent. The individuals organizing the event should be, at a minimum, crystal clear on what is to be accomplished and have present someone with the facilitation skills required to keep the discussions on track.

The issue with the design of most workshops is that the objectives are stated in the form of what information or message the environmental staff wants to deliver to the participants. This approach is understandable since classroom lectures are the foundation of our educational system from kindergarten through college. The focus in workshops, instead, should be on the behavioral changes that need to be accomplished. It’s not just about getting participants to know about X, Y, or Z, but having them assimilate that knowledge and act on it.

Strategy sessions take a carefully crafted blend of conveying information followed by group analysis and consensus over business direction. The overall flow is also critical. For example, the ratio of prepared lecture to open discussion and other activities must be cautiously controlled. Even gifted communicators have a tough time engaging an audience for more than an hour without some break in the flow. Attendees typically have a lot to contribute to the



discussion and really enjoy activities such as breakout and feedback sessions, role-play exercises, and other class participation exercises. I have found that a 50/50 ratio of session participation to “talking heads” works well. Again, environmental professionals have a tendency to jam sessions with information. Seemingly necessary, yes, but will they absorb it? Probably not.

Pre-session assignments can be problematic. Rarely will managers take the time to review material distributed in advance, at least in the United States. One technique that I have frequently used is to distribute very concise surveys (e.g., 10 simple, check-the-box-style questions). These can be collected, analyzed, and discussed at the session. After all, this helps make at least a portion of the session all about the participants and their opinions. Deftly handling egos is always a key factor.

Size Matters

For workshops, the ideal session size is 20–30 individuals. This allows for good group participation and the formation of breakout sessions. A breakout takes a minimum of 45 minutes, of which only about 20 minutes will be used productively. It takes time for the group to settle down and go through the “forming – storming – norming – performing” model of group dynamics. You must also allow approximately 15 minutes for every group to report back. Small group breakouts ideally consist of 7–10 individuals. A single group exercise can easily consume one-and-one-half hours.

As soon as the audience approaches 50 or more, the entire design must shift. In this case, it is necessary to use a lecture-type structure and class participation is much more restricted: the session becomes more like a conference. And similar to a typical symposium, the individual segments need to be rotated through 30- to 60-minute sessions of various speakers and content. If the objective is to shift behavior, the likelihood of successful outcomes is limited. Participants may pick a few “nuggets,” but may remain mostly disengaged.

Strategy sessions require an even smaller audience—less than a dozen. If the group has very powerful authority figures who might dominate the group, special precautions need to be taken. For example, one effective technique is to create a list of ground rules for the session (e.g., “one person talks at a time”). I once facilitated a strategy session where the president of the company attended and then later apologized to the group for bullying and dominating the discussion. He probably would not have acted contrite if these rules had not been laid out in advance; after all, he was just behaving as his normal self. At other sessions, I have used the ground rules to instantly cut off dysfunctional group behavior without coming across as a bully myself.

Physical Setup

The layout for conference-style sessions is universally recognized (i.e., seats, podium, screen, etc.—basic and boring). Nonetheless, there are many nuances that a good meeting planner should be aware of to ensure the session is successful. For example, they should be skeptical of reported maximum hotel conference room seating capacities. No one



Richard MacLean is president of Competitive Environment Inc., a management consulting firm in Scottsdale, AZ, and the executive director of the Center for Environmental Innovation (CEI), a university-based nonprofit research organization. E-mail: maclean@competitive-e.com.

For electronic files of this and his other writings, visit his Web site at www.competitive-e.com.

likes to be crammed into a room. They should also understand technical details such as the proper relationship between the screen dimensions and the height of the room for a particular group size.

Small groups are best hosted away from the worksite and with a U-shaped open seating arrangement and adjacent quiet areas for breakouts. With business managers in particular, it is necessary to remove them from the normal work environment with all its distractions and place them in a setting that will stimulate thinking outside the box. Again, there are scores of minor details that need attending to, especially for top executives who are used to first-class treatment.

Cultural Factors

It would be very easy to replicate material used in U.S. business management sessions and take it on the road internationally. One could adapt it on the fly through trial and error. Indeed, it may work well within some countries, especially English-speaking, but it would be the wrong approach. In a number of cultures, the preceding considerations may or may not hold true. For example, the influence of authority figures may be substantially different in strategy sessions. Additionally, class participation and feedback sessions may not be as effective.

Handout material and key presentation slides, of course, can be translated into the local language, even if the presenter is speaking English. Obviously, presenters would have to speak very clearly and slowly and watch for signs that they are moving too quickly through the material. My philosophy is that it is best to design sessions that make it easiest for the participants and not necessarily the presenters. That might mean facilitators are used to translate key points to the presenters as the participants speak in their local dialect.

There is a wealth of resources available at universities in the form of visiting graduate students and professors who would know the most effective approach. And, of course, employees in affiliated branches are the best resource of all to help structure the session design.

Conclusions

Workshops and strategy sessions are extremely expensive to organize and run. If you think that this is due to the cost of presenters, meeting planners, facilitators, conference rooms, and food charges, or even the airfare of the participants, you are mistaken. Although these costs can easily run into hundreds of thousands of dollars for a major annual environmental meeting, the really big bucks are almost always associated with the salaries paid to the individuals attending, especially if they are top executives making seven figures. Keep this in mind when designing your next session with business management. em