

Communication by the Numbers

by Roly Grimshaw

For a complete list of Harvard Business
School Publishing newsletters:
<http://newsletters.harvardbusinessonline.org>

For reprint and subscription information
for *Harvard Management Communication Letter*:
Call 800-988-0866 or 617-783-7500
<http://hmcl.harvardbusinessonline.org>

For customized and quantity orders of reprints:
Call 617-783-7626 Fax 617-783-7658
For permission to copy or republish:
Call 617-783-7587

Communication by the Numbers

Don't drown your audience in data. Give them only the numbers they need.

by Roly Grimshaw

UNDERSTANDING WHAT NUMBERS SAY is a core competency for senior managers. Communicating what they say should be as well. Unfortunately, this is a task that few do well. Time and again, leaders fail at conveying to employees just what the latest quarterly update, competitive analysis, or division report really means in terms of the work they'll do today and the challenges that await them tomorrow. Rather than motivating and inspiring employees with data, leaders end up boring and confusing them instead. (For more on presentations that inspire, see the accompanying story, "Aesop Inc.: Using Stories to Persuade.")

What causes the trip-up? From years of working with executives on their communication skills, my colleagues and I have identified a fundamental mistake they make: confusing the messages they want to deliver with the evidence that supports those messages. As a result, many put the cart before the horse by presenting the evidence before they present their messages or, worse, by presenting the evidence alone.

You wouldn't call up a friend, spew out a load of data about the weather forecast, and then suggest going for a walk, would you? No, you'd suggest going for a walk, mentioning that the weather promises to be fine. In other words, you would deliver your message—"Let's go for a walk"—before you'd offer evidence for why doing so would be a good idea. Despite how obvious this point is, we have all heard project managers, for instance, start a presentation with "a bit of background" or "an overview of the scope of the project." Such an opening hardly encourages the audience to stay tuned in!

Get it right, right from the start

Taking a backward approach to communication is never more harmful than when a leader is trying to start off on the right foot in a new job. Recognizing this, an incoming CFO for a major international company asked me to work with him on his presentation and other communication skills. To give me a better understanding of the organiza-

tion, he invited me to its annual results presentation. The new CFO was not performing this time but, like me, would be there to observe. We agreed to meet up afterward to discuss the impressions and messages we picked up and review what he should do in the first days of taking up his new appointment so that he would be able to, in his words, "get the figures across."

The current CFO started off by saying, "I'm going to go through the numbers and then hand over to the chief executive." Painfully true to his word, he spent the next half-hour taking the audience through two or three dozen slides, each dense with numbers. Then he handed the presentation over to the chief executive, who took us through a review of last year, division by division, slide by slide.

When the question period finally arrived, it was clear that the audience hadn't listened to either speaker: not one of the questions related to anything in the presentations! Yet, as the new CFO noted, by conventional standards, the presenters had performed well. They had plenty to say and delivered in a nice professional style with no "ums" or "ers." So why hadn't the audience paid attention? What could he do to ensure that he did a better job of communicating when he took over? What follows is the advice I gave him.

1. Identify the key points you want to make.

Any communication can be divided into key points and evidence. Distinguishing between them is not difficult, you might think, but it is surprising how many presentations are designed around PowerPoint slides packed with an overabundance of evidence. Our consultancy has developed software, KeyPrep, that takes people through a methodical preparation process that helps them focus on addressing all the points they want to make, supported by slides only where they add value.

My client and I had listened to both presenters give the audience a lot of evidence. But after each section of the presentation was over, we found ourselves asking, "So what?" And when we sat down afterward to compare what

Taking a backward approach to communication is never more harmful than when a leader is trying to start off on the right foot in a new job.

we had gleaned from the talks, we couldn't even agree on what the key points had been. Both speakers failed to make any substantive points. As a result, all the numbers they trotted out had no effect on the audience.

A strong opening statement captures the audience's attention and sets a theme for what will be said. It doesn't need to be really grand or dramatic. A leader in a new role could open with something as simple as "I'd like to tell you why I am delighted to be here and what I intend to do as I take up this new challenge."

Of course, this advice doesn't apply only to executives in new roles. A division head might open a presentation to his marketing and sales team by saying:

Thank you for coming here this afternoon. I'm afraid the news isn't particularly good—our performance this quarter was weaker than expected. The numbers I'm going to put before you say one thing loud and clear: We need to redouble our efforts to identify and serve our core clients' needs.

By giving his audience a very clear context in which to view the data, the division head will guide their thoughts and ensure that his key messages get through.

2. Muster supporting evidence—and be selective.

We often give the executives we're coaching on their presentation skills this piece of advice: the chances are good that you love numbers a lot more than most of your audience members do. As a senior manager, you "live" in them in ways most of your employees don't. So to choose the right evidence to present in support of your message, you're going to need to take a few paces back to look at things from your audience's perspective.

What tells a more compelling story? Two pie charts side by side, one showing market share a year ago and one showing market share today? Or a dense spreadsheet showing monthly sales broken out by product line and region? *You* may find the latter more compelling, but overloading your audience members with data is a sure way to guarantee they'll forget almost everything you say.

In most presentations, you don't need reams of data as backup, so choose as little as you need to make a compelling case.

While we more often see numbers-savvy executives make the mistake of presenting evidence before—or instead of—clear, specific messages, we sometimes see the opposite problem: delivering key points and then not substantiating them. In the absence of evidence, statements devolve into platitudes, and platitudes won't inspire anyone into action. People need proof.

3. Be consistent.

Achieving consistency does not mean saying the same thing, the same way, over and over. If you're a new CEO introducing yourself to various constituencies, your messages should remain consistent from speech to speech, but your supporting evidence and illustrations should change to suit the audience. Your fellow board members, for instance, may not be impressed by the same examples that you might elect to use talking to the staff on reception.

Your choice of supporting evidence and illustrations should be informed by culture as well as rank. One new CEO at a large company went on a worldwide road show, repeating his presentation word for word wherever he went. His key point about service excellence was relevant to his listeners everywhere he spoke. However, he soon found that the chewing-gum example he had used to illustrate his point, though well received in the United States, wasn't well received in Singapore!

4. Follow up.

The old story of the message "send reinforcements, we are going to advance" being passed down the line until it became "send three- and fourpence, we are going to a dance" is all too relevant to leadership communications.

My final piece of advice to the new CFO was to follow up. It's great that people walk away from a presentation with a clear recollection of its three or four central points, but will they remember them a month or two down the line? Unlikely. And if they don't remember them, those points will not be communicated throughout the organization.

This doesn't mean that your presentation should be transcribed and e-mailed to everyone or recorded and put on the company intranet; in fact, this would likely be a waste of time and money, as few would read it or listen to it. But it does mean using subsequent presentations to reinforce your key points. For instance, you might start a presentation by saying, "I told you six months ago that we would respond more quickly to customer requests, and this is the progress that we have made toward that goal."

Make your message heard

Whether you're an incoming CEO or a veteran team leader, whether you're addressing an audience of hundreds or a group sitting around a conference table, your presentation will be effective if you remember to put your key points out front and center—and let your supporting evidence be just that. ✱

Roly Grimshaw is the director of the Kingstree Group, a London-based communications consultancy. He can be reached at hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu.