CREATIVITY SKILLS

Transcript
LESSON 1:
ENHANCING YOUR CREATIVITY
The ability to be creative, and to think creatively, is an invaluable skill in today’s workplace. It can lead to the development of new products and services, and optimizing business processes. It can lead to marketing campaigns that stand out and really catch the customer’s attention. And, down the line, it can lead to business growth and increased revenues.

Anyone can be creative. However, it’s important to remember that creative thinking doesn’t happen by accident, and it doesn’t occur in a vacuum. It’s a skill that needs to be consciously applied, honed, and practiced. When practiced successfully, it can reveal effective and innovative solutions to various types of problems, from marketing communications to operational roadblocks, and it can generate new ideas.

The good news is, you can use a five-stage creative process to enhance your creative thinking skills.

The first stage is ‘Prepare’. In this stage, you research whatever problem you are faced with. Say, for example, you are tasked with promoting a new product line, but aren’t sure what direction to take. Researching this problem might involve doing a factory tour, and reading as much as you can about the product, audience, market, and competitors.

Further your research by reviewing solutions to similar problems. These could be case studies, advertising tag lines, or campaigns. Try to learn and understand as much as you can about the audience, the product, or the problem you are trying to solve. Observe how and why a product is used or might be used. Ask, who are the people who might use it, what are their motivations for using it, why is it useful to them? Find out as much as you can. Immerse yourself in the details.

Now you can move to the second stage, which is ‘Incubate’. In this stage, you incubate the findings of your research and let them simmer. Start by taking some time to write down exactly what you are trying to achieve and everything you discovered from your research. Read it, then leave it for a while. When you go back, try writing it another way. Then let go again, and let your mind wander: take a walk, take a bath, read, daydream. In short, do something else.

The next stage is ‘Illuminate’. This is the ‘eureka’ stage when all the elements you’ve been mulling over in the previous stage connect together in your subconscious, and an idea forms in your conscious mind. Write your idea down. Remember the mantra, ‘write it straight, then write it great’. Just concentrate on getting the idea down on paper so you don’t forget it. Once you’ve safely written it down, leave it alone.

Now you move on to the fourth stage, ‘Verify’. At this stage, go back to your idea and sense check it against the original problem and verify that it is the correct approach. Critically assess whether it satisfies all elements of the problem you are solving. Ask, will it solve the problem in such a way to give me the result I need? For example, will this slogan drive awareness of my brand? Is the tone right for the audience or market? Will team operations work more efficiently if this solution is introduced? Ask, what are the various outcomes we could expect if we went ahead with this idea? How might the audience engage with the campaign or how would the team adopt this new process?

If, after asking yourself these types of questions, you find that your idea doesn’t solve the original problem, put it aside. Holding on to it could take you down the wrong path and stop you from finding other, possibly better, ideas. It’s better to work on your next idea instead.
Once you've settled on an idea, consider: you've written it straight, now it's time to write it great. So take some time to craft and refine the idea, so it can be effectively understood and internalized by your stakeholders – or whoever has the final say on your idea.

Now it's time for the final stage, 'Practice', where you practice generating ideas using the five-stage process. The more ideas you generate using this process, the faster you get at coming up with better solutions. This, in turn, can help you discount poor ideas early on and reduce the amount of time that's wasted in following paths of enquiry that lead to dead ends, or are likely to drive less effective ideas. Practice also helps to focus the way you approach problems. As the process gets more familiar, it can help to naturalize creativity in your thinking.

**Removing Barriers to Creativity**

Successful creative thinking requires you to be aware of the barriers which may weaken your creativity, and prevent you from coming up with innovative ideas and finding great new solutions to problems. One of the most common barriers to creativity is fear of failure. This barrier might stop you putting ideas out there, in case someone laughs at them or even ridicules you for coming up with such crazy thoughts.

Another common barrier to creativity is relying too much on old ideas and established ways of thinking. This might be due to simple laziness on your part, or it could be that you are operating in an environment that puts too much emphasis on maintaining the status quo. To overcome these kinds of barriers, it is essential that you begin to ‘think outside the box’, travel down roads you are not used to, move out of your comfort zone, and abandon familiar practices. Luckily, there are tactics you can use to help you eliminate the typical barriers to creativity you may encounter.

One tactic you can consider using is to challenge your biases and preconceptions. A bias is an inclination towards one way of thinking. Having a bias means you lean in a certain direction from the outset. You tend to believe what you want to believe, and are reluctant to take other people’s opinions into consideration. This can obviously have a negative impact on your creative thinking.

To overcome this barrier, it is important to examine any problems you are faced with from many angles. To begin, assume your understanding of the problem is correct. Now, assume your understanding is incorrect – what does this mean? Then, view the problem from the perspective of a third party; how would someone else view the problem? When you do this, you may find that the nature of the problem you are trying to solve has changed – opening up the possibility of many different solutions.

Another tactic you can consider is to use different thought processes to generate ideas and solutions – and avoid over-using the same old thought process you have always used. A thought process is the way ideas suggest other ideas to you in a sequence. First, get familiar with the thought process you typically use yourself. It may be that you are a highly analytical thinker, or perhaps you are more instinctual or intuitive.

When you have figured out how you naturally tend to think, start to observe how other people think. Choose a suitable third party whose thinking you are familiar with, and apply their thought process to your task or problem. Ask how would that person tackle this problem or what would they do in this situation? This frees you up to think like someone else, which can help you explore new lines of enquiry on a particular problem and come up with innovative solutions. Using this approach, you can also develop scenarios for how your idea might be received by different stakeholders down the line, and prepare responses that drive towards a suitable solution.
A third tactic you can use is to try to avoid what’s called ‘Functional Fixity’. ‘Functional Fixity’ is the inability to look beyond how an object works or is designed to function. With this way of thinking, spoons can only be used to stir or drink liquids – but never to spread butter; or paperclips can only be used to fix sheets of paper together – but not to collect magnets or open locks. By being aware of ‘Functional Fixity’, and the danger this approach holds for creative thinkers, it can open your mind to new ways of looking at, and using, objects. This can have a positive impact on your creative mind, and can drive you further in your quest for creative solutions.

Another tactic you can use is to change your daily routine. Doing the same thing every day, over and over again, can have a detrimental effect on your creativity. The changes you make don’t have to be dramatic, as even small changes can shake things up and lead to a burst of creativity. For example, try changing where you work a couple of times each week. This might mean working in a conference room instead of at your desk, or in a coffee shop around the corner. Even if you are doing the same work, doing it in new surroundings can help you discover things you may have overlooked, or see problems in a different light.

You could also try changing the order in which you tackle your work every day. So if you usually leave your most important tasks until the afternoon, try doing them in the morning instead. Alternatively, try working at a different time of day, if that’s possible, or even changing the agenda or format of regular meetings. Once you have tried out a few new routines, maintain the ones that are working for you. But remember to change things up again when your creativity next takes a dip.

A final tactic that is worth considering is to take creative risks. It takes courage to be the first person to think of an idea or a new solution. You can’t be sure if it will work, or be accepted, or even if people will find it ridiculous. Nevertheless, the ability to take risks goes hand in hand with innovation and problem solving. So be brave, put your ideas out there, and keep looking at new ways of doing things and of overcoming barriers to creativity.

**Persevering When Your Ideas Fail**

Sometimes an idea just isn’t as good as you think it is. It may fail when you put it into practice, or it might be rejected before you have even finished presenting it. If your idea is rejected by your boss or by other stakeholders, it can be embarrassing. However, it is important not to get disheartened or to give up. Instead, you need to be resilient, persevere, and bounce right back. You can do this by shifting your focus and coming up with another solution that is acceptable to all involved and minimizes the risk of straining relationships.

Remember, rejection is never easy. So when an idea is rejected, the first thing you should do is stop and pause. Don’t react rashly or quickly. Don’t run from the room. And don’t sigh audibly. Instead, compose yourself by lightly exhaling. Take a drink of water to help reduce stress and defensiveness. Above all, remain calm.

As well as giving you time to compose yourself, pausing in this way also gives space to the person who rejected your idea to offer more information or explain why they don’t want to proceed with your idea. As the focus now moves away from you and towards the rejector, they may feel obliged to justify their scepticism. This can help you refocus your thinking and come up with alternative solutions.

Try to see the objections as requests for clarity or for more information. So, for example, if someone says, “I don’t like that advertising tag line you’ve come up with”, you could reframe this objection as, “Can you help me see how our audience might connect with this phrase?” By reframing the objection
in this way, you may find that you are able to offer additional information and clarifications that satisfy the concerns raised.

It is also a good idea to try to empathize with the person who rejected your idea. Try saying something like, “I understand why you might feel that way.” This allows you to put yourself in the rejector’s place and see your idea as they do. This approach also has the added benefit of helping to ease any strain that the rejection may have wrought on your relationship with that person. Moreover, you can then adapt your idea to their viewpoint, if the viewpoint is valid.

Listen to any objection that is raised and verify the objector’s expertise on the subject by inquiring about their assumptions. When you respond to the objection, use facts and hard data, but don’t rely on emotion. Avoid using unfounded opinions to verify your position. As Jim Barksdale, CEO of Netscape once said, "If we have data, let’s look at data. If all we have are opinions, let’s go with mine.”

If you feel the expertise of the objector is questionable, or that they are not seeing the full picture, explain your reasoning using the word ‘because’. For example, you could say, “I believe this campaign will engage our audience and drive sales because...” or, “Team efficiency and job satisfaction will improve with these changes because...” By providing valid reasons and sound arguments for your approach, you may find that you are able to win the objector over to your way of thinking.

Finally, be sure to wrap up the discussion with a motivated response to find a solution. Try asking a question like, “How do you think this idea could be improved?” Or say, “Thanks for your time and the feedback. I’ll see what else I can come up with”. In this way, you are ending the discussion on a positive note, and are in the right frame of mind to refine your original idea or come up with a new solution that is acceptable to all stakeholders.

When an idea is rejected, you may find that you just need to make a couple of small tweaks to your original solution to get back on track; or it might mean going back to the drawing board and starting over. Either way, by using all your powers of creative thinking, it should be possible to find a great solution that solves your original problem and is acceptable to everyone – and to come out of the whole process with your working relationships still intact.
LESSON 2: ENHANCING YOUR PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS
Many different types of problems can arise in the workplace. It’s extremely useful to have strong problem-solving skills so that you are prepared to solve them in the most efficient way possible when they arise, saving you time and money.

It’s important to be able to identify the full extent and cause of a problem before you begin to think about implementing a solution strategy. Workplace problems arise for various reasons. For example, interpersonal conflict, not having enough time to complete tasks, lack of self-belief, a shortage of tools or resources, poor communications, undue competitiveness within the workplace, conflicting job priorities, malicious gossip, culture clash, lack of opportunity, poor incentives, disconnection from company culture, lack of training, and so on.

Taking a problem-solving approach means viewing the issue at hand from different viewpoints – that is, objectively and subjectively – to allow you to implement the most suitable solutions.

Describing a problem objectively involves outlining it in a fact-based way that is observable, counted, quantifiable, provable, and impossible to deny. It presents complete truth, and is free from individual influences, so it proves helpful in rational decision-making.

If there is a lack of facts, then the problem becomes subjective, as you are describing the problem from a biased point of view or expression of opinion. Your point of view is based on your experiences, assumptions, beliefs, and opinions; and is influenced by emotions and personal feelings. The difference between viewing a problem objectively or subjectively depends on whether the evidence available is fact or opinion.

When considering a problem, subjective information is influenced by the personability of the person providing it. It is an interpretation or analysis of the facts based on personal beliefs, opinions, perspectives, feelings, and so on. In comparison, objective information produces the complete truth, as it presents a story from all angles in a systematic way. It describes the facts, which can be proven to be true.

The following methods for viewing and describing problems in the workplace can help you to improve your approach to problem solving:

First, consider your approach to the problem. Is it objective or subjective? Since an objective approach is best for allowing problem-solving, what do you need to do to gather facts? Be sure you have gathered all of the information available to you before making a decision.

Next, make sure you are as well informed as you can be about the problem. Consider what it is that you do not know about a specific subject, issue, area, or skill. Then consider how to equip yourself to attain this shortfall in knowledge.

And finally, take a moment to pause and reflect on the reasons why the problem arose in the first place. A little introspection is useful to help you to recognize if you have deviated from the plan and whether or not you need to re-align your focus.

Consider this scenario:
You drop a jar of pickles onto the floor and it smashes. Obviously, action needs to be taken. So, you pause for a moment and consider what your immediate responses should be, and in what order you are going to carry them out.

Your responses could include: Cordoning off the area, telling everyone not to step in the mess, grabbing a dust-pan and brush, grabbing a floor-mop and a bucket of soapy warm water, and reminding people that the floor is now wet.

Or, instead of taking any of those actions, you might view the situation objectively, and decide to investigate what caused you to drop the jar in the first place. You may realize that the jar is simply covered in something oily and this caused you to lose your grip. Or you might suspect you were affected by a gas leak in your kitchen and decide to investigate and fix this potentially dangerous leak first, and then attend to the mess on the floor later.

When in the workplace, consider your held knowledge and ability to subjectively and objectively view an arising problem, before considering how you should go about solving it.

The Stages of Problem Solving

A methodical approach should be taken to solving problems. Here is a six-step method you can use:

- Identify the problem
- Analyze the problem
- Look for solutions
- Make a decision
- Implement the solution, and
- Get feedback

In order to identify the problem, you need to ask: “Is the problem arising from a person, team, department, company, system, process, or malicious act?”, or, “Is the cause known yet?”

Once you have identified the problem, it’s time to analyze it. Where is your information coming from? Are the facts on which you are basing your decision coming from an objective or subjective viewpoint? And are you able to accurately base your decision on facts vs. opinion?

Next, you’ll need to look for solutions.

A problem-solving solutions strategy can help you to come up with workable solutions for your problems. Solution strategies include:

- Trial and Error
- Using an algorithm, and
- Applying a heuristic technique

The old adage, ‘If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again’ describes the trial and error strategy. For example, if your printer is broken, you could try checking the ink levels, and if that doesn’t work, you could check to make sure the paper tray isn’t jammed. Or perhaps the printer isn’t actually connected to your laptop – check your connecting cables and power outlets. When using the trial and error strategy, you would continue to try different solutions until you have figured out an appropriate solution to your problem. Although trial and error is not typically one of the most time-efficient strategies, it is a commonly used one, and very effective.
An algorithm is a problem-solving formula that provides you with step-by-step instructions to help you achieve a desired outcome. You can think of an algorithm as a recipe with highly detailed instructions that produce the same result every time they are performed. Algorithms are used frequently in our everyday lives, offline as well as online. When you run a search on the Internet, search engines like Google use algorithms to decide which entries will appear first in your list of results. Facebook uses algorithms to decide which posts to display on your newsfeed. You can design your own algorithm as a solution to a problem and repeat the process as necessary.

A heuristic is another type of problem-solving strategy. While an algorithm must be followed exactly to produce a correct result, a heuristic is a general problem-solving framework. You can think of heuristics as mental shortcuts that are used to solve problems. A ‘rule of thumb’ is an example of a heuristic. Such a rule saves the person time and energy when making a decision, but despite its time-saving characteristics, it is not always the best method for making a rational decision. Working backwards is a useful heuristic in which you begin solving the problem by focusing on the end result. Another useful heuristic is the practice of accomplishing a large goal or task by breaking it into a series of smaller steps.

Once you have found a solution, the next step is to make a decision. These days it is relatively easy to make an informed decision with the amount of information freely available on the internet. Take the appropriate time to research the problem and potential solutions so that you have all of the information you need to make a decision and find the best solution to your problem.

Research has found that most people fall into four decision-making styles: Directive, Conceptual, Consultative, or Consensus.

Directive is an autocratic model where the decision-maker uses their own knowledge and experience to select the best course of action. The decision-maker that uses a directive style practices rationality and displays a low tolerance for ambiguity.

Conceptual decision-makers approach problems in a more relaxed way. They are not averse to high-risk decisions and are comfortable without a full knowledge of all of the facts. They thrive on considering and analyzing different alternatives without singling out any one particular idea.

Consultative decision-making allows for input from others, while you are still in charge of the final outcome of the decision-making process. While you don’t bargain agreement within the group, you seek the knowledge and expertise of others and everyone is aware that the final decision rests with you.

Consensus decision-making is where there is no single person responsible for the decision-making. The problem is challenged, debated, and concluded together. Everyone who is present can voice their opinion and have input into the course of action they believe will work. Personal views need to be set aside to support and action a team decision.

Once you have made a decision, you can then implement it. To implement the decision, action needs to be taken. It’s important to keep on track throughout the process and to review your performance. Use the 3 As to do this: Action, Affirmation, and Assessment. Act on the decision you have made, affirm that it is the correct action to take, and then assess the effect it has had – that is, did it solve the problem?

When your solution has been implemented, it’s important to ask for feedback to ensure that it has been successful. Encourage a culture of open and honest opinions, and make sure that all of your
team members are aware that their feedback will be considered carefully - this is an important part of motivation and confidence-building for future problem-solving tasks. When requesting feedback, be specific. The more specific your feedback request is in terms of context and detail, the more specific the answer you receive will be. Honestly and openly recognizing shortfalls in your own knowledge will help bring different opinions to the table. The encouragement of team discussion ensures that everyone’s voice is heard and understood. And finally, remember to offer thanks to your team for their input and commitment and where possible, show them the positive impact their feedback has had. This will in turn empower them to look for solutions more proactively, and for future involvement in the decision-making process.

A useful and simple tip for problem-solving is to use a pen and paper when brainstorming solutions for your problem. Using pen and paper, rather than an app or online tool, to map out your potential problem-solving solutions can enable you to draw out the blockers from your subconscious and to gain a more objective overview. Now, different methods will suit different people but the main goal is to find a method that works best for you and allows you to gather and organize your thoughts in the easiest way possible. Once you have clearly identified the potential solutions, it is easier to compare them and choose the most effective solution.

**Skills for Effective Problem Solving**

An effective problem-solver uses many skills to devise and implement solutions including:

- Creative skills
- Research skills
- Team-working skills
- Decision-making skills, and
- Risk-taking skills

Creative skills allow big and boundless thinking. They involve the consideration and analysis of ideas, concepts, and solutions that no one else has considered before. Thinking creatively requires you to set aside any biases or assumptions that you may hold and to take a different look at things. By approaching a problem with an open mind, you allow yourself the chance to think creatively. Often, a problem may seem to be insurmountable and it is only by practicing creativity and innovation that a workable solution can be found. Considering a problem from different viewpoints and being open to a change in perspective is key.

For example, the US Air Force Research Laboratory required an update for their supercomputer but the cost was well over their budget. So, by thinking creatively and looking for alternative solutions, they realized that they could purchase 300 PlayStation 3s that would fulfill their computing needs instead. To quote their creative decision: “The processors in the Sony PlayStation 3 are the only brand on the market that utilizes the specific cell processor characteristics needed for this program at an acceptable cost.”

Another example of creative problem-solving is from the inventor and founder of Dyson® vacuum cleaners, James Dyson. While his competitors were focused on how to design a better filter for the paper bags in their vacuum cleaners, he came to the realization that he had to approach the problem from a more creative direction. The result was that he created a ‘cyclone’ vacuum cleaner which could separate dust from air, and brought the world’s first bagless vacuum cleaner to the market.

Another important set of skills for problem solving are research skills. How can you find out what you don’t know? By doing research.
Being able to demonstrate the following competencies is key to ensuring your research is effective:

- Attention to detail
- Critical thinking
- Planning and scheduling
- Technical skills
- Statistical and Graphical Analysis of Data, and
- Interviewing

Because data is so easily accessible these days, it is important to check that the data you are relying on has come from a trusted source.

Team-working skills are also very useful when it comes to problem solving. If you lead a team, you can help your team or colleagues to solve problems in many ways.

Create easy wins to begin with. Pick the ‘low-hanging fruit’ for the team to practice upon, that is, the tasks that are easiest to achieve, or the problems that are easiest to solve. Resist the temptation to offer a solution to hurry the process along; act as a facilitator instead and guide your team toward the answers. The greatest impact can come from giving the accountability of owning both the solution and the implementation of the solution, to the team. By delegating the problem, you reinforce your confidence and trust in the work of the team.

You can also use the ‘framing effect’. The ‘framing effect’ is a cognitive bias, whereby people decide on options based on whether the options are presented with positive or negative connotations; for example, as a loss or as a gain. Show your team or colleagues how to practice the skill of framing an issue from differing perspectives, for example, positive, negative, or neutral, and how to devise specific solutions for each frame.

Another method is to remove yourself from the team problem-solving equation. Consider the unintentional influence you may have that might lead to potential biasing of the group with your views. In addition, be understanding and willing to support the team by working across the organization to acquire resources and budgets.

Avoid getting angry at a failure by the team as this is almost always destructive. Instead, instruct the team to take a step back and pause to consider the situation and analyze what did and did not work. Give them time to consider how to respond, learn, and move on.

Be sure to avoid group-think by drawing in individuals with areas of expertise and knowledge not currently held by the team. A common pitfall of group-think is that the team narrowly focuses on their own held-knowledge and plays down any outside or differing viewpoints, limiting the possibility of the most effective solution as an outcome.

Decision-making skills are another key component of problem solving. According to the economist Evan Davis, “If you are not making mistakes, you are not trying hard.” This is true of many people, because due to their lack of experience, confidence, or authority, they resist the taking and making of decisions. The more decisions you make, the stronger your decision-making skills become. As long as you learn from your decisions and mistakes, then the more mistakes you make, the better it is for your decision-making ability!

Having the ability to take risks is an important skill for effective problem solving. It is usually better to take determined risks rather than undetermined risks. Being able to distinguish between the two takes experience, skill, and knowledge.
An undetermined risk is a risk that is taken without performing due diligence or accounting for possible negative outcomes; that is, you may have found a positive solution, but you don’t know what the final cost will be or what the ‘knock-on’ effects are.

A determined risk requires detailed research, and while you may not actually achieve success, you know that enough research has been carried out to ensure that there is a high likelihood of success.

Many people become risk-averse from building pros and cons into every single decision they make. We tend to avoid taking risks for the following reasons:

- A fear of failure
- A fear of the inflated consequences of failure, and
- A fear of handling the consequences of risk

However, a certain amount of risk-taking is necessary for every new solution, particularly in the beginning. Aiming to take calculated and well-informed risks only is a healthy and effective approach to problem solving.
LESSON 3: IMPROVING YOUR PRESENTATION SKILLS
Communication media are constantly changing. Despite this, some guidelines for good communication are timeless. Consider Aristotle’s book Rhetoric, for example. He outlined the essential parts of a speech as the introduction, the statement, the argument, and the epilogue. That structure is as sound today as it was in Aristotle’s time!

Aristotle further elaborated on how to develop a speech. First, you should make the audience well-disposed towards yourself and ill-disposed towards your opponent. Then you need to magnify or maximize the leading facts. Next, you excite the required state of emotion in your audience. And finally, you refresh their memories.

In modern times, Aristotle’s structures have been further refined, mostly by clergymen in their sermons! It can be summarized as reminding your audience of something at least three times before it sinks in. In other words, tell them, tell them what you told them, and then remind them by telling them again.

When preparing a presentation, it is worthwhile to remember these classic guidelines. A well-structured, impactful presentation should have three parts. First is the beginning, or what Aristotle called the introduction. Then you have the middle, or the statement and argument, to put it into Aristotelian terms. And finally, you have the end, or Aristotle’s epilogue.

Let’s dig into these three parts in a bit more detail. The beginning is a good place to start! When preparing your presentation, use a ‘grab’ opening for maximum impact. In other words, grab your audience’s attention and hook them into your story.

And what about the middle? Here’s where the ‘three times’ rule come into place. You first preview what the presentation contains – tell them what you will be telling them. Then you deliver the core of the presentation, telling them your message in one to five items. And next you review the main points of your presentation. In other words, tell them again. This brings you nicely to the end of the presentation. End with a ‘grab’ close and a clear call to action.

Within these general guidelines for structuring a presentation, you should also bear in mind a number of key pointers. First, include a memorable introduction. Now, there’s nothing wrong with beginning by simply introducing yourself. “Hello, my name is….” However, it’s not very exciting, is it? A high-energy, maximum-impact presentation begins with a ‘grab’ opening. For example, “Beginning today, this team is going to learn how to double its social media following within a month!”

Having hooked the audience, you can then deliver your presentation. Remember to apply the KISS principle: keep it short and simple. Less is more. Design your presentation to be as visual as possible, with very little on-screen text. Tell your story visually with images. If your audience has to squint to read large, dense blocks on text on screen, they’re not going to be listening fully to you.

Also, ensure your content is supported by facts, figures, and evidence. This lends your presentation an essential air of authority. Research your content well. If you are unsure about the accuracy of information, don’t include it!

But don’t bury your audience in dry, dusty statistics. Use eye-catching graphs and tables. And animate them so they build up in a compelling way. Make sure you don’t overload the audience with information. Ideally, the core middle section of your presentation should focus on one to five items only.
The golden rule in all communications is to correctly target and deliver a message to your audience. In other words, pitch your message correctly. Find out how much your audience already knows about the subject. What is important to them? How can you deliver value to them? If you present at the value level of your audience, you’ll ensure not only that your message is understood, but also that it is pitched correctly.

For example, a presentation on a simple technical process will be vastly different if the audience consists of new-hires or the Senior Management Team. In advance of your presentation, research or contact audience members to ascertain their level of knowledge. If you have no alternative, stand at the door and greet your audience on arrival and question their level of knowledge. And then adjust your presentation accordingly. And as you deliver your presentation, check that your audience is still with you and understanding what you say.

Facts and statistics, as I said, make your presentation sound more authoritative. However, try to bring the facts to life. Show them in action. To do this, try to include stories and anecdotes. After all, your presentation is a story by another name. So, if you can tell a story, you can make a presentation and vice-versa.

Presentations and stories contain a beginning, a middle, and an end. Does your presentation-story make sense? Is it logical and relevant to the audience? Are you so close to the design and preparation of the content, that you may have lost sight of the narrative? Try a practice presentation with an impartial colleague and ask for feedback.

Tell stories to illustrate your points and make them more ‘human’. When we make a personal connection with information, we remember it better. Anecdotes are best, as they can be molded to fit your story. People may not remember the specifics of the item you are presenting on, but they will retain for a very long time the anecdotal story you told in support of your item.

For example, you could tell the story of a CEO who was cynical about the impact of social media marketing. In time, he saw his company’s profits skyrocket after deploying an effective social media strategy. As a result, he was able to retire early and devote his time to his passion for sailing. By engaging with the potential of social media, he was able to change his life.

Finally, include a memorable ending. Link your grab close back to your grab opening. You do this by reminding the audience of the same sentence or near enough, that you used at the beginning and close out with it. You might open with a question and end with the answer to that question. Or you might return to a character you introduced in the opening. Or present the solution to a problem you raised in the introduction. This enables you to finish your presentation story and connect the start and finish neatly for your audience. Remember that the last thing you do or say is what the audience will take away with them, so make it a call to action.

For example, suppose your opening statement was: “Why does social media matter?” Your closing statement could then be: “And that’s how social media changes people’s lives.”

Prepared to Make a Presentation

So you have created a well-structured presentation. You are almost ready to deliver it! But you have some important preparations to make, and things to think about – and get right – before you start talking.
First, arrive early and practice. You must practice giving your presentation! Arrive early into the room where the presentation is to be held. Have a run-through and practice where you are going to stand and what level of volume and voice projection will be necessary for you to be heard in the room. Practice using your visuals. Ensure that your remote control works in all parts of the room. And have a backup plan in case of some technical glitches!

Ideally, you should do the practice session the day before, to ensure you have plenty of time to deal with anything that goes wrong.

Next, take control of the room. Don’t be afraid to move the furniture to meet the requirements of your presentation.

For example, are the tables laid out in school-room style, cabaret style, boardroom style, or horse-shoe style? Which works best for you? Will everyone be able to see and hear? Is the sun shining on your projection screen? And what about the seating? Is there enough, and is it suitable? You don’t want your voice to be drowned out by the squeaking and groaning of old chairs!

Don’t forget the technical considerations. Are there power sockets close by the podium? Is your laptop compatible with the in-room audio-visual system? Do you have your presentation on a back-up memory stick? If people are dialing in remotely, will they be doing so from the start of your presentation or at a defined time?

Also think about how you’ll be delivering. Do you need a whiteboard? Do you need pens and flip chart paper? Is there a stylus for the electronic whiteboard?

Next, consider your audience carefully. Are there VIPs or senior executives coming to your presentation? You will want them to be in your direct line of sight at all times and seated in a cluster directly in front of you.

If they decide to spread themselves about the room, then you may make unintentional ‘orphans’ out of some of them, as you forget to look in their direction during your presentation. A solution is to print out name cards with the name of the VIP printed on both sides of the card, and then stick them onto the seats you have chosen for them. Then, when the VIPs arrive, they know exactly where it is that they have to sit and you know their names. If a VIP does comment on the name cards, you can honestly respond that you like to ensure that all of your VIPs are sitting in your direct line of sight. Don’t underestmate people’s fondness for a little bit of flattery!

Finally, don’t forget to have a back-up plan. Make sure you’ll be able to respond to the worst-case scenario by considering in advance what is the worst thing that can happen and prepare accordingly. What if the room is double booked? What if you cannot connect to or use your presentation? What if there is a power cut? Suppose a VIP is going to be late. Do you wait for them to arrive before beginning? Or do you start anyway and recap – or not – when they arrive?

Consider this real-life example of someone taking control of the layout of the room and ensuring a presentation is delivered to best effect.

A multinational client was holding their annual conference in a 20,000-seat arena in Amsterdam. The conference was to be attended by up to 4,000 people and to last for three days. My role was to train and coach the Senior Management Team (or SMT), who were to open each day of the conference with their own presentations.
The SMT were concerned that when they stood to present, the audience would gravitate towards the rear of the arena and leave the seats nearest the stage empty. Obviously, this would be very off-putting, especially in such a large space. From my viewpoint, I could also see that the audience would gravitate towards the more popular members of the SMT and away from the less popular. This would be very embarrassing for the company!

With taking control of the presentation space in mind, I suggested that I could ensure that everyone sat in the first few tiers of seating and ignored the seating at the rear of the arena, but there would be an extra cost incurred of €2.50! I bought a roll of wide masking tape and arrived in the arena early in the morning. Using the tape, I cordoned off the rear of the arena, causing the audience to fill up the front tiers of seating. Only when there was the possibility of overflow, did I open up additional seating. It was a good result as the arena appeared full and the audience was closer to the presenters and enjoyed greater interaction.

**Delivering a Presentation**

You’ve done all your preparation. You’ve checked out the venue. And it’s now time to deliver your presentation!

The old adage is still true that ‘people buy people.’ If you can positively influence your audience and win them over, then they will buy you and your message, product or concept – even if you have to deliver a negative message or bad news.

So how can you best deliver your presentation? Here are some guidelines to consider.

First make a good first impression. Become mindful of the communication messages you are sending. As first impressions are lasting, you have 5 to 10 seconds to make a good first impression! Those first impressions are usually based on a number of factors. Consider your attire. Is it formal or informal, as appropriate for the presentation and audience? Your stance should convey confidence by standing alone in the middle of the room. Keep your gestures open and welcoming. If you need to shake hands, use a firm, dry, warm handshake.

After you’ve given your grab opening, introduce yourself. Give your first name and surname, title and company. Interestingly, did you notice that this is the first time we’ve mentioned what you say when creating a first impression? First impressions are based on so much more than what you say!

The second guideline is to smile and make eye contact. This helps to build trust with your audience. Now, as strange as it sounds, you may need to practice your smile! Most of us only smile when we hear something funny. Being able to smile on demand as a reassuring gesture is a very powerful communication action to your audience. When smiling, tilt your head to the right, as this gesture shows a willingness on your part to adopt a more vulnerable position, and it makes you appear more trustworthy.

Eye contact also plays a role when cultivating trust. If we don’t trust the speaker, we’re not going to listen to their words. Gentle eye contact of 2 to 3 seconds on your part increases trustworthiness and encourages future cooperation. If an audience member unnerves you and you feel you cannot make direct eye contact, give them ‘face’ contact instead and look at them between the eyebrows. This will serve to relax you in their company until you feel you are confident or relaxed enough to make direct eye contact.
However, if your audience sees the slightest trace of fear or uncertainty on your face, an instant disconnect is created. Then the trust you have built up is rapidly reduced! You can't fake trustworthiness, because the muscles around your mouth and eyes that reflect contentment and sincerity are involuntary.

As an exercise, look in a mirror and think about someone you love, or an event that brought you deep joy and satisfaction. An involuntary 'Mona Lisa' type smile will appear on your face and the muscles around your eyes will then soften.

A third guideline is to adopt a warm, supportive voice. Researchers at the University of Amsterdam found that in a business presentation, a warm supportive voice is a sign of leadership. It generates more satisfaction, commitment, and buy-in to your message from the various members of your audience.

So, be very mindful of the impact that your voice can have. A simple variation in tone can alter the intended meaning. Your tone of voice can also be a very accurate indicator of your personality.

Take a simple word such as ‘Hello’. You are going to use differing tones when greeting different people. Someone you like will receive a high-pitched cheerful greeting. And someone you despise will hear the word ‘Hello’ as a barely audible grunt. You can affect the meaning of that single word by just changing your tone! Also think of how you say the word ‘Yes’ in different situations. Your tone gives away how genuinely willing you are to agree.

The fourth guideline is to be aware of your body language. Did you know that body language makes up the majority of your interpersonal communications? Next comes the sound of your voice and finally the words themselves.

Keeping in mind the importance of body language, you need to be aware of the signals that you are sending while delivering a presentation. Gestures can be very deceiving when compared to the actual message you think you are sending. For example, suppose you are using nervous body language, such as fidgeting or swinging a foot. This unsettles or even irritates your audience. It also damages your credibility and distracts from your message.

Using positive self-assured body language, such as varying where you stand in the room, has the opposite effect. It enhances your message, adds authority, and encourages participation. It also increases drama and humor, and ultimately makes your presentation more enjoyable for everyone.

It is equally important to recognize the signals you are receiving from the body language of the audience. A group of people sitting completely still are listening to you in somewhat of a mini-trance state. When they start to fidget, you have just said something that has caused them to ‘disconnect’ from their trance. Think back to what it was that you said to cause this disconnect. Then pause, and go back to address that point in a more positive way before moving on with your presentation.

The final guideline is to maintain interest and attention. You need to engage your audience throughout the presentation. If using PowerPoint, turn your PowerPoint on and off at intervals. By pressing the ‘B’ button the screen will go blank. Depressing any keyboard button turns the presentation back on. When you blank your presentation, all eyes will turn towards you. When you turn PowerPoint back on, all eyes will move away from you.

In addition, move away from the screen or podium at times.
And, when you display an image or text, wait a second or two, to allow the audience to read it and turn their attention back towards you. After you do this a couple of times, the audience will become ‘conditioned’ to respond in this way, which will in turn increase the impact of information transfer and speed up the presentation.

**Concluding a Presentation**

You’ve delivered the grab close for your presentation. However, you’re not finished yet! You should conclude the presentation by taking questions from the audience. Most audiences will want to have a Q&A session with you. A general aim is for your Q&A session to be at least the same length as your presentation.

So once you have made your closing, simply ask: “Does anyone have any questions?”

But what happens if you are then met with polite silence? Obviously, you need to trigger your audience to begin asking questions. There are several options open to you.

You could ask a question yourself out loud. For example, “Who is going to spearhead the new Instagram campaign?”

Or maybe have a colleague in the audience ask the first question. You may even need a second colleague to ask the next question, but usually one question is enough to ‘trigger’ the audience that it is safe to begin to ask questions. For this to work, you will obviously need to prepare your colleagues in the audience to pose questions. Arrange a signal. For example, when you look in their direction, it is their cue to ask questions. If you want a specific question asked, this is a good way of ensuring it gets asked.

Bear in mind that you may be asked a question to which you either have not prepared an answer or have not the authority to answer. Never, ever attempt to ‘wing it’! If you are challenged and proven to be telling a mistruth in front of the audience, then you and the content of your entire presentation will be called into question. Better instead to say that you cannot answer the question. However, ask for their contact details at the end of the presentation and contact them the next day with an answer. This response will ensure your professional credibility remains intact.

Ideally, the Q&A is unscripted and of no set duration. It needs to be a robust exchange of free-flowing views. In the Q&A, you could ask the audience questions such as: “Why are we not...?” “Why don’t we just do it anyway?” Or “What is really stopping us?” These questions should generate a free-flow of ideas and some interesting responses.

To finish the Q&A, simply state, while smiling at everyone, “We will take two more questions and then finish up.” When the final question has been answered, thank everyone for their participation and for good measure repeat your closing statement: “And don’t forget. Social media can change lives!”

Your final act is to display an oversized ‘Thank you’ centered on the screen, along with your company logo and your email address. Unless you are being pressured to pack up, stay standing and smile at your audience as you may attract people who want to have a follow-on side conversation with you. And have your business cards ready.

Always tidy up the room after you have finished. Leave it as you found it! If you leave a messy room and someone else has to clean up after you, this just might be the person you have to turn to for help if you have a technical or facility issue at some point in the future.