

Starting Your Presentations on a Positive Note

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Your first few minutes with a training group or audience can impact ultimate success later. Here are some ideas for getting your session off to a positive start.

Review notes. Before your participants arrive, review your session notes one more time. Even if you have done the program many times before, it is a good idea to refresh your mind and fix opening remarks into short-term memory.

Dress professionally. Appearances do count and impact participant impressions of you. Dress at the same level or higher than the way your participants are dressed. Set the example and look like a professional.

Greet each participant. Shake hands, smile and welcome everyone entering the room. This means that you must have adequately prepared and gotten to the training room at least an hour before the arrival of your learners. This will allow you to set up materials and equipment, make last minute adjustments and be ready when participants begin to arrive. Greeting people is important because the physical act of coming in contact with someone as you shake their hand, smile, make eye contact, and use their name forms a psychological bond. You become “friends” and friends do not normally attack or criticize one another. Thus, you can potentially reduce the chance of challenge or disagreement later in the program.

Gain attention. Use some creative technique to gain attention. You can use whatever you feel appropriate for getting the attention of your group. For example, flicker the lights, use a loud sound (e.g. whistle, music, or bell), or have someone else dramatically introduce you (e.g. Herrrrre's Johnny!).

Be personable. A technique used by experienced trainers and presenters for reducing their own nervousness, is to look into the eyes of participants in the front of the room and smile. Smiling nonverbally generates a reciprocal action. If someone smiles at you, you feel good and smile back. Then, you smile at someone else and they smile. The pattern continues until you feel relaxed among friends and they see you as warm and approachable. The reason for choosing people from the front of the room is that those are usually the people who want to be there and to learn. Thus, they are likely to be more receptive and friendly.

Provide an overview or update. In your opening remarks, you will generally cover session or program learning objectives, explain the AVARFM (Added Value And Results For Me) to learners, discuss what will be covered, and handle administrative details. If you are doing a multiple sessions or programs, starting with the objectives, a quick review and tie-in of material covered is always helpful. Doing these things allows participants to mentally tune in to you and the session.

Create an open learning environment. Ensure that you have planned and organized effectively. Once learners arrive, set the expectation of exchange, openness, fairness and an opportunity to share and learn.

Verify understanding. Before moving into your program content, I find it helpful to verify that learners understand any information I have explained. I also give them a chance to add objectives or things that they need from the session. These are written on a flip chart page and posted to ensure they are not overlooked and to demonstrate their importance. Posting them also allows me to review them at the end of the session to ensure that learners feel they were adequately addressed. During verification, I give participants a chance to ask any questions they might have about the schedule, session topics, or processes that will be used.

Do not apologize. If something goes wrong, does not work, or is not present, deal with it without telling participants. For example, if you were going to show a videotape, but the sponsor forgot to bring a VCR and monitor; improvise. It will do no good, and can actually do harm, if you try to blame others or elicit sympathy from participants. Your learners do not know what you have planned. If you do not tell them they are not going to see a planned video; they will never know. The result will be a seemingly well-planned and executed session by a professional. This is opposed to a non-professional cry-baby who points fingers at others and did not have a backup plan!

Listen actively. Pay attention to names, comments and questions at the beginning of the program and throughout the session.

Be politically correct. Avoid and prevent stereotypes, off-color humor and behavior considered offensive or unprofessional (e.g. an arm around the shoulder of a participant as you stand talking to him or her, or others). Even if you are good friends or related to a participant, maintain professional decorum. Remember that first impressions count and someone seeing you from across the room may not know of your relationship.

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