

Why Communication Skills Training Fails When You Over-Prepare at Work

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Many companies invest heavily in preparing their people to strengthen communication skills. In 2024, U.S. companies spent approximately \$98 billion on employee training. And preparation does matter. But whether it is in sales, leadership, or public speaking, there is a point where too much preparation starts to backfire. It can become so rigid that it shuts down adaptability. The words may be perfect, but the connection disappears. I have

seen organizations train people out of their natural strengths. That happened to me.



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When Communication Training Goes Too Far

When I worked in pharmaceutical sales, my company put us through some of the most intense sales and communication training I had ever experienced. They did not just want us to know the material. They wanted every word to be exact. We were videotaped, evaluated, and coached until every syllable matched the approved script. Any deviation was unacceptable.

I even witnessed some coworkers getting called out in front of the group and even belittled by managers for going off message. The pressure to be perfect was intense. They videotaped us and made us watch and critique each other's performances. I practiced my delivery for hours every week, trying to make sure I would not get it wrong.

So, when it came time for me to present to a busy doctor, I was ready. I had everything memorized. I knew exactly how I wanted to say it. We had been warned that doctors would likely be in a hurry and might even walk away mid-sentence, so I was prepared to talk fast and get through all three of my products.

To my surprise, the doctor invited me into his office and asked me to sit down across from him at his desk. He did not seem rushed. He gave me his full attention. And I did exactly what I had been trained to do. I gave my complete, polished presentation. I went through all three products without missing a beat.

As I walked out of his office, I was mentally patting myself on the back the entire way to the elevator to go down to my car to get him samples. I thought I had nailed it. I had said everything I was supposed to say exactly the way I had been told.

Then I got on the elevator. Just as the doors were closing, another man stepped in with me. And because I am an extrovert who cannot go two floors without talking to someone, I turned to him and asked if he worked in the building.

He looked at me with the most incredulous expression and said, "I am the doctor you just presented to."

I was mortified.

It hit me right then. I had not looked at him. I had not asked him a single question. I did not pause. I did not connect. I delivered a pitch. A well-rehearsed, technically perfect pitch. But it was not a conversation. It did not build a relationship. And it definitely was not what he needed.

That moment stayed with me. I often wonder how long I would have kept presenting like that if he had not stepped onto that elevator. How many other doctors sat through that same presentation, thinking the same thing, but never said a word? Who has not gotten on the elevator with you to tell you that what you think you are communicating is not coming across the way you think it is? We do not know what we do not know until someone points it out to us.

That experience was a turning point. It taught me that being polished is not the same as being present. That following the rules can sometimes mean missing the moment. And that communication should be more focused on making a connection.



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Why Over-Preparing Hurts Real Communication

In sales, public speaking, and leadership, over-preparing can make your message sound robotic. When you rehearse something so many times that it becomes automatic, you lose your ability to notice what is happening in the moment. You stop reading the room. You miss cues. You might say all the

right things, but you might be answering questions no one is asking. People do not want a script. They want a sense that you are talking to them, not at them.

I have seen leaders give town halls where everything is polished but nothing resonates. I have seen conference speakers fly through slides with flawless timing and no energy. I have watched panelists stick to their talking points so tightly that they miss opportunities to respond to what the audience actually cares about. That is what happens when preparation overshadows presence. I've been guilty of it and I imagine many of you reading this have as well.



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What Effective Communication Actually Looks Like

Real communication includes adaptability. You need to know your material, but you also need the flexibility to shift, pause, or ask a question if the moment calls for it.

That is why some of the best speakers, leaders, and coaches do not sound rehearsed. Don't get me wrong, the best speakers have practiced for more hours than they probably want to count, but they have learned to be flexible and

responsive. They stay tuned in. They ask questions, listen, and adjust based on the conversation unfolding in front of them.

The more dynamic the environment, the more curiosity matters. You have to be willing to throw out your mental script if the people you are speaking with need something different.



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How To Prepare For Effective Communication In Interviews

When I hosted my nationally syndicated radio show, I learned this lesson all over again. At first, I thought I needed to prepare everything. I would ask guests to meet with me beforehand, send over talking points, and outline the flow of the conversation.

But what I found was that the best part of the conversation happened before we hit the record button. That initial spark and discovery had already occurred in our preparation meeting. What was left on the show often felt flat.

So, I stopped over-preparing. I started letting the conversation happen naturally. I would do background research and write up a list of potential questions just in case, but mostly, I let the conversation flow. That led to far more interesting and memorable interviews.

To this day, when someone invites me to be a guest on their show and insists on sending a script or meeting in advance, I tell them I would prefer not to do that. Those conversations almost always feel forced and the serendipity of where things might go gets lost.



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How To Prepare For Effective Communication Without Over-Preparing

Preparation still matters, but so does permission to go off script. Things might go in a direction that feels uncomfortable. Sometimes you might forget your place or what you wanted to say. Call out the elephant in the room. Just be honest and say that you forgot what you were going to say or lost your place in the presentation, and people understand.

Instead of memorizing a presentation word for word, anchor yourself in the key ideas you want to communicate. Know your content deeply, but give yourself room to be flexible. If you are giving a talk, practice the opening and closing, then allow the middle to be more conversational. If you are leading a meeting, go in with questions, not just statements.

Build space for curiosity. Ask what people think. Pause after you speak to see how your message lands. Look for opportunities to learn instead of just instruct.



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How To Build Connection Through Communication

The real goal of communication is meaningful connection. That happens when people feel seen and understood, not when they are impressed by how prepared you are. Letting go of perfection gives you room to show up as a human being. And that, more than any polished line or flawless close, is what people remember.

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Why Communication Fails When We Forget To Listen

Over-preparing gives us control. But great communication requires presence. If we become too focused on getting it right, we lose the chance to be real. That elevator ride changed how I think about every time I experience a professional interaction. I still believe in preparation. But I believe more in connection. You can rehearse your words, but never forget to make eye contact. You can practice your pitch, but leave room for a question. And you can follow a

plan, but stay open to the moment, because that changes everything. Because the truth is, someone may not always get on the elevator to tell you what you have communicated is not what you hoped to communicate. And without that moment, you may never know.