
Developing Effective Communication Skills for Successful Report Writing

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication requires paying attention to an entire process, not just the content of the message. For a messenger in this process, consideration should be given to potential barriers at several stages that can keep intended audience from receiving the message. What limits messengers from communicating effectively? How do they handle differing or challenging perspectives? What impression does communication style make on the members of a team viz-a-viz the writing of a report thereafter? This article provides insights into communication challenges and advocates for the development of effective communication skills as a key to successful report writing.

Key words: - Communication, skills, report writing, team, and practicing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Conceptually, the Advance Learners Dictionary perceives a “Report” as:

“a statement; a detailed account after investigation; or a summary of activities within a fiscal year and those proposed for future periods given by a leader”.

Examined critically, these perceptions show that a report provides a basis for an account of a speech, event or activities within the society. For example, by tradition, the Nigerian successive government make a report on the state of the economy on periodic terms in the form of varying socio-economic development planning reports e.g. the perspective (long term), national development or rolling (medium term) and annual (short term) plans respectively.

In most cases, reports are supposed to be presented to a group of people – organization, board members, clubs, citizens in a country etc. In this regard, it is imperative that reports must be presented in such a way as to make them become understandable so as to allow for the commitment of the readers. Given this, this very short paper attempts to examine the contemporary issues in report writing. To this end, the paper is arranged as follows. Part II focuses on report types while part III is on the objective of writing a report. Other subsequent parts are on report content (method of presentation, structure/outline, length of report, language, illustration (appendix), writing the report and the conclusion respectively.

2. REPORT TYPES

It is important to recognize from the onset that there are varying forms of reports. The variation of the forms depends largely on some factors which relate to:

- i. the degree of the technicality/non-technicality of the report;
- ii. the theme and objective of the report;
- iii. the targeted audience of the report- professionals, military, civilians etc.
- iv. the period of reporting – boom or depression

In these regards, it is possible to identify the following types of reports;

- i. Technical and non-technical reports – Journals, Reading Books, Research Reports
- ii. Academic and non-academic reports – Thesis, Religious Reports
- iii. Development reports, etc – Vision 2010 Report, NEEDS, CBN Reports
- iv. Professional and non-Profession reports – Law Books, Non-legal Reports

Incidentally, the classification of reports into their varying categories subsequently determines the method, mode, language, length and the audience of report presentation.

2.1 Defining the Reports Objectives

At the initial stage of preparing a report of whatever form, it is necessary to effectively identify the specific purpose or objective of the report. This perhaps would lead to raising a number of questions such as:

Why is the report being written? What purpose is the report meant to serve? What exactly is the audience expected to do with the report? What will the reader gain for having read the report? What specific analytical tools would best present the goals of the report in an understandable way? How would the available information be arranged to allow for easy reading and understanding?

The extent to which these questions would be answered satisfactorily determines the depth of report analysis. However, in some cases it is necessary to answer these questions so as to show whether or not the report is meant to:

- i. develop decision-making skills;
- ii. acquire and apply analytical tools;
- iii. develop abilities to evaluate the level of development;
- iv. solve what type of problem;
- v. change people's attitudes;
- vi. analyze relationship and synthesis techniques
- vii. Investigate important academic/non-academic issues.

Once the report writer knows what he wants the audience to learn (objective of the report) he goes on to create the case for it accordingly. Thus, the failure to define the objectives of a report will result in preparing a report without a direction. This could make report analysis and evaluation difficult and subsequently allow for the failure of the report.

2.2 The Report Content

It is important to note that the audience (reader) constitutes the centre piece of the report that is being prepared. This suggests therefore that the report must be prepared in such a way that it will attract the readers involvement in order to stimulate them to grapple with the issues in the report. To allow the report to stimulate the interest of the readers, the report content must necessarily be considered along some factors for acceptability, easy analysis and evaluation. Such factors relate to the following:

(i) The Method of Presentation

Any report prepared is meant for human consumption. In this regard, the method of presentation should be such that relates the goal of the report to its instruments. For example, reports meant to:

- teach problem solving should solve problems;
- teach application of techniques should provide data in such a form that the readers could apply the technique;
- teach evaluation of data should provide data which is not in a readily usable form;
- Teach evaluation of documents should provide good or bad
- Documents for comments;
- Teach decision-making should present data or a problem requiring a decision-making.

(ii) The Report Structure (Outline)

It is important to prepare an outline showing the structure of the report before embarking on the preparation of the report. Outlines provide a guide to the report writer as they enable him to visualize alternative arrangement of the selected sub-theme and the sequence of the appropriate divisions and sub-divisions. This may allow the writer to determine if each section of the outline is likely to receive the attention it deserves.

It is imperative that the outline should be designed to present the report as clearly and as briefly as possible under a properly organized sequence. There could be a need for occasional revision of the outline particularly when fresh information is required. However, in preparing the outline four factors must be given adequate consideration:

The focus of the report: This determines the type of information required for inclusion or exclusion in the report. For as long as the focus is properly made the report analysis would be easy and adequately made.

- a. The target audience: This will determine the nature, volume of information and the language to be used in the report.
- b. Organization of the available materials: Reports must be structured in such a way as to ensure realism in order to stimulate active discussion by the targeted audience. Available information must be arranged sequentially.
- c. Effective communication between the writer and the readers. This makes for thorough understanding of the content of the reports and future possible commitment of the reader.

(iii) The Length of the Report

Certainly, there is no rigid rule regarding the length of a report. On many occasions, people talk about their desire for brevity and also the desire for thoroughness. In spite of the need for these a report must be long enough to accomplish its purpose and yet short enough to be easily read by readers who may have some difficulty reading through lengthy reports. However, we may wish to recognize that, the more brief a report is, the better. Nonetheless, it is important to note that brevity must not be attained at the expense of excluding information critical to the report analysis.

The suggested guide on the volume of the report include:

- (a) Write only that which needs to be written
- (b) Clarify only that which needs to be clarified; and
- (c) Communicate in a style that facilitates rather than hinders comprehension.

All of these make for easy and fascinating report analysis and evaluation.

(iv) Language of the Report

Language used in preparing a report would be dependent on the type of report being prepared (technical/non-technical; professional/non-professional; ordinary/complex; the targeted audience and the period when the report is prepared and read). It is possible to use technical quantitative or qualitative languages. The most important thing is that of thorough understanding by the reader. This therefore suggests that appropriate language must be used for each type of report that is being prepared e.g. Professional languages for professional reports and non-technical languages for non-technical reports. Academic languages for academic reports and religious languages for religious reports.

(v) Illustrations and Appendix

In some cases illustrations and exhibits to reinforce the arguments in a report may be necessary. Such illustrations and exhibits could be placed either in the body of the text or separately as an appendix at the end of the report. There must be specific references on each of the illustrations or exhibits at the appropriate places in the text. Any material that is too long to be included in the text but cannot be ignored may be included as an appendix.

It is important to note that an appendix constitutes an effective and efficient means of presenting important data in a report. If well prepared it reduces the written length of a report although it is not a total substitute for the written text in general. It is necessary to prepare the appendix to reflect relevance, focus and clarity. There is no fixed rule on its number in a report.

3. WRITING THE REPORT

The report writing must be structured to capture in words, but without interpretation a decision-making situation or some similar experience. In order to allow for the preparation of a good text, the report has to be well organized, expressed in good and logical language (English) and free of errors of grammar, punctuation, or word choice. It must have the additional features of clarity of presentation, economy of words, completeness of coverage and consistency of data and other facts.

3.1 Communication Is a Process

Effective communication requires paying attention to an entire process, not just the content of the message. When you are the messenger in this process, you should consider potential barriers at several stages that can keep your intended audience from receiving your message. Be aware of how your own attitudes, emotions, knowledge, and credibility with the receiver might impede or later whether and how your message is received. Be aware of your own body language when speaking. Consider the attitudes and knowledge of your intended audience as well. Diversity in age, sex, and ethnicity or race adds to the communication challenges, as do different training backgrounds. Individuals from different cultures may assign very different meanings to facial expressions, use of space, and, especially, gestures. For example, in some Asian cultures women learn that it is disrespectful to look people in the eye and so they tend to have downcast eyes during a conversation.

But in the United States, this body language could be misinterpreted as a lack of interest or lacks of choose the right medium for the message you want to communicate. E-mail or phone call? Personal visit? Group discussion at a meeting? Notes in the margin or a typed review? Sometimes more than one medium is appropriate, such as when you give the patient written material to reinforce what you have said, or when you follow-up a telephone conversation with an e-mail beginning, “As we discussed....”

For one-on-one communication, the setting and timing can be critical to communicating effectively. Is a chat in the corridor OK, or should this be a closed-door discussion? In your office or over lunch? Consider the mindset and milieu of the communication receiver. Defer giving complex information on someone’s first day back from vacation or if you are aware of situations that may be anxiety-producing for that individual. Similarly, when calling someone on the phone, ask initially if this a convenient time to talk. Offer to set a specific time to call back later. Finally, organize content of the message you want to communicate. Make sure the information you are trying to convey is not too complex or lengthy for either the medium you are using or the audience. Use language appropriate for the audience. With patients, avoid medical jargon.

3.2 Be Attuned to Body Language – Your Own and Others

Many nonverbal cues such as laughing, gasping, shoulder shrugging, and scowling have meanings that are well understood in our culture. But the meaning of some of these other more subtle behaviors may not be as well known.

Hand Movements: Our hands are our most expressive body parts, conveying even more than our faces. In a conversation, moving your hand behind your head usually reflects negative thoughts, feelings, and moods. It may be a sign of uncertainty, conflict, disagreement, frustration, anger, or dislike. Leaning back and clasping both hands behind the neck is often a sign of dominance.

Blank face: Though theoretically expressionless, a blank face sends a strong do not disturb message and is a subtle sign to others to keep a distance. Moreover, many faces have naturally down turned lips and creases of frown lines, making an otherwise blank face appear angry or disapproving.

Smiling: Although a smile may show happiness, it is subject to conscious control. In the United States and other societies, for example, we are taught to smile whether or not we actually feel happy, such as in giving a courteous greeting.

Tilting the Head Back: Lifting the chin and looking down the nose are used throughout the world as nonverbal signs of superiority, arrogance, and disdain.

Parting the Lips: Suddenly parting one’s lips signals mild surprise, uncertainty, or unvoiced disagreement.

Lip compression: Pressing the lips together into a thin line may signal the onset of anger, dislike, grief, sadness, or uncertainty.

Build a Team Culture

In oncology, as in most medical practices, much of the work is done by teams. Communication within a team calls for clarifying goals, structuring responsibilities, and giving and receiving credible feedback.

“Physicians in general are at a disadvantage because we haven’t been trained in team communication,” says Cohn. He point out that when he was in business school, as much as 30% to 50% of a grade came from team projects. “But how much of my grade in medical school was from team projects? Zero”

The lack of systematic education about how teams work is the biggest hurdle for physicians in building a team culture, according to Cohn. “We’ve learned team behaviors from our clinical mentors, who also had no formal team training. The styles we learn most in residency training are ‘command and control’ and the ‘pace setting approach,’ in which the leader doesn’t specify what the expectations are, but just expects people to follow his or her example”.

Cohn says that both of those styles limit team cohesion. “Recognizing one’s lack of training is the first step[in overcoming the hurdle], then understanding that one can learn these skills. Listening, showing sincere empathy, and being willing to experiment with new leadership styles, such as coaching and developing a shared vision for the future are key.”

Stated goals and team values: An effective team is one in which everyone works toward a common goal. This goal should be clearly articulated. In patient care, of course, the goal is the best patient outcomes. But a team approach is also highly effective in reaching other goals in a physician practice, such as decreasing patient waiting times, recruiting patients for a clinical trial, or developing a community education program. Every member of the team must be committed to the team’s goal and objectives. Effective teams have explicit and appropriate norms, such as when meetings will be held and keeping information confidential. Keep in mind that it takes time for teams to mature and develop a climate of trust and mutual respect. Groups do not progress from foaming to performing without going through a storming phase in which team members negotiate assumptions and expectations for behavior.

Clear individual expectations: All the team members must be clear about what is expected of them individually and accept their responsibility for achieving the goal. They should also understand the roles of others. Some expectations may relate to their regular job duties; others may be one-time assignments specific to the team goal. Leadership of the team may rotate on the basis of expertise.

Members must have resources available to accomplish their tasks, including time, education and equipment needed to reach the goal. Openly discuss what is required to get the job done and find solutions together as a team.

Empowerment: Everyone on the team should be empowered to work toward the goal in his or her own job, in addition to contributing ideas for the team as a whole. Physicians’ instinct and training have geared them to solve problems and give orders – so they often try to have all the answers. But in an effective team, each team member feels ownership in the outcome and has a sense of shared accountability. Cohn notes, “You get a tremendous amount of energy and buy-in when you ask” ‘What do you think?’ Team members must trust each other with important tasks. This requires accepting others for who they are, being creative, and taking prudent risks. Invite team members to indicates areas in which they would like to take initiative. Empower them by giving them the freedom to exercise their own discretion.

Feedback: providing feedback on performance is a basic tenet of motivation. For some goals, daily or weekly result are wanted, while for others, such as a report of the number of medical records converted to a new system or the average patient waiting times, a monthly report might be appropriate. Decide together as a team what outcomes should be reported and how often.

Positive reinforcement: Team members should encourage one another. Take the lead and set an example by encouraging others when they are down and praising them when they do well. Thank individuals for their contributions, both one on one and with the team as a whole. Celebrate milestones as a way to sustain team communication and cohesion.

4. CONCLUSION

Given the foregoing analysis, to develop and prepare an effective report entails a lot of hard work, exertion of energy, commitment and discipline. The value of a good report is usually reflected daily in the activities and decisions of the public servants who would have read the report. The reader (audience) is the most important figure in the development process of a report. This is because he constitutes the market for the report. The report must therefore be well structured and written for effective analysis to attract the reader's interest. We also need to bear in mind that the starting place for effective communication is effective listening. As rightly observed by **Kenneth H. Cohn**, that Active listening is listening with all one's senses i.e. it is listening with one's eyes as well as one's ears to essentially balance the mutual relationship between effective communication skills and successful report writing at any given time or over a period of time.

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