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The Business Edge

COMMUNICATIONS

A CPA's Guide to Mastering Writing and Speaking Skills

By Jack E. Appleman and Jayne Latz

When you chose your career as a CPA, you might not have thought about how well you communicate with others. But poor communication can hurt the bottom line and short-circuit your career. That's why the accounting profession has identified oral and written communications as two critical skills that CPAs lack most often. So if you can master these skills, you can become more confident, increase productivity and achieve greater financial success.

Below are some key writing and speaking skills to master.

Tap the power of simplicity. Sometimes it's hard to be simple — as crazy as that sounds! As an example, I recently received this computer error message: "The exception unknown software (OXc0000017) occurred in the application at location Ox7c964ed." Yeah, I always seem to have trouble with that "exception unknown software." Whoever wrote this didn't consider the audience — lay people who don't work in IT departments. Apply the simplicity principle when writing documents, such as responses to IRS notices, replies to clients' inquiries, audit reports and anything else requiring clearly expressed language.

Use straightforward language. Language can be stuffy, such as "Our capabilities revolve around incorporating a process that allows tax managers to enhance workplace efficiencies, resulting in maximum gains in the team's overall productivity." However, you can make it clear by writing, "We help tax managers work more efficiently so the team maximizes productivity."

Delete unnecessary words. Don't use extra words if your point can be clearly made with fewer words. Consider this wordy approach requiring two sentences: "We conducted an audit of AB Industries on Nov. 18. In this audit, it was determined that there was \$500,000 of unpaid back taxes." You can be concise in one sentence: "In our Nov. 18 audit of AB Industries, we identified \$500,000 in unpaid back taxes."

Speak up for success. The spoken word is as important as clearly written language, regardless if you are seeking to explain, direct, persuade, comfort, or any other reason.

Be clear and articulate. People form impressions from your speaking style, whether in presentations, phone conversation or meetings. If you mumble and swallow your words, others may not value what you're saying, even if you're an expert on the subject. And if listeners continuously ask you to repeat yourself because of your accent—regional or foreign—they may not be focusing on your message. So speak in a clear and articulate manner to boost your confidence.

Control your rate of speech. By speaking at a steady pace, you'll convey your message without running out of breath. Listeners need time to process what's being said. When you speak too quickly, people may not be able to absorb key information. Always take a breath. Speak in sound bites. And use strategic pausing to help you slow down and eliminate those unprofessional "filler words," such as "um," "uh," "so" and "basically."

Power up your voice. The volume of your voice speaks volumes about you. It can allow you to exude self-confidence, even if you don't feel that way at that moment. To give your voice more power, exercise your vocal cords. First, take a deep breath, inhale and then exhale. That should feel good. If not, take another deep breath—making sure to breathe from your diaphragm—and exhale slowly. When you are able to easily count to 15 on the exhalation, go to 20. You can also warm up your voice by singing up the musical scale, even if you're tone deaf!

Master nonverbal communication. More than 90 percent of communication is nonverbal. Think about your tone during that last meeting. Did you convey trust and authority, or uncertainty? Did you greet someone with a warm smile, good eye contact and a firm handshake? When you greet someone, stretch out your hand with a warm smile and maintain good eye contact. If you shake someone's hand and give a warm smile, but look out the window, he or she may question your sincerity.

Determine the Best Options for Communication Training. If your company is committed to helping employees improve their writing and speaking skills, consider group workshops, possibly combined with one-on-one consultations so each participant can address personal issues. Start by identifying those who need the most help. Then see if someone on your staff, maybe from HR, training or communication can lead the sessions. You can also retain outside instructors, preferably those with experience in the accounting profession.

The good news is that writing and speaking are learned skills, which everyone can dramatically improve. And that can mean greater productivity — and higher revenues.

About the Authors

Jack E. Appleman, MS, CBC, author of the top-selling 10 Steps to Successful Business Writing (2008 ASTD Press), has presented writing workshops and coaching sessions to state CPA societies, CPA firms and companies in a wide array of other fields. The president of the Monroe, New York-based Successful Business Writing, Jack brings more than 20 years' experience as a writing instructor, professor and PR specialist. He can be reached at jack@successfulbusinesswriting.com.

Jayne Latz, MA, CCC-SLP, is a licensed speech-language pathologist who has been a featured speaker before CPA societies, CPA firms and other corporations. As president of the New York City-based Corporate Speech Solutions, Jayne has provided speech therapy for more than 20 years, and is certified as an Accent Reduction Specialist with Compton P-ESL and an LDS Preferred Trainer. She can be reached at jayne@corporatespeechsolutions.com.