

FOUR

AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO PUBLIC SPEECHES: A NECESSITY FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Paper presented at the National Workshop on Speech and Address Writing, by Socio-Political Research and Development at the International Conference Centre, Abuja, 16 - 18 November, 1999.

Children ask challenging, probing questions about why things are the way they are. But when they become adults, they stop asking questions. So ask questions and always, always ask questions you do not know the answers to. Never be afraid to ask questions.

- Albert Einstein

Early in my public speaking career, I discovered that one of the best ways to improve my knowledge and speaking was to study speeches by outstanding speakers. As Adebayo Faleti once put it, "A book is not written, it is re-written." So I read, and I listened. I examined how speakers develop the subject of their talks with anecdotes, examples, quotations, appropriate styles, introductions, conclusions and other types of support. Soon, I realised that some speakers are able to get and retain the attention of their audiences in the course of their speeches with greater impact and interest than others. So, I explored what made these speakers superior, and I found that they developed a dimension ignored by most — they used language with precision and power. They ensured effective communication.

It is a tribute to our nascent democracy that all of you have gathered here today to discuss the vital issue of speech making, and rather unusually, the need for the audience to put the speaker on the spot. It would no longer be a case of sermonising a penitent and hapless audience, the speaker would now have to be doubly prepared for a

rejuvenated and participatory audience. When I was told to speak on 'Preparing Public Officers to Accommodate Audience Response and Feedback during the Delivery of Speeches', my first reaction was to check my library and see if this issue had been discussed by anybody in a conference situation. I did not find any, in sharp contrast to the extensive materials that are available on several aspects of speech writing and delivery. I did not even come across one from the foreign experts whose works I consulted. What could be responsible for this? Though I recognise that my search may not have been exhaustive, it is most likely that most public speakers, in this part of the world have been engaged in talking to their audiences rather than speaking with them — in other words, they have always engaged in asymmetrical communication. The speakers more often than not assume the status of knowing everything whereas management teaches us that 'Nobody Knows Everything and Everybody Knows Something.' [NKE/EKS].

At the end of this discussion on speaker-audience interaction during public speeches, each participant should be able to appreciate and utilise such opportunities better. The objectives of this paper are summarised below:

- i. To facilitate a better understanding of the critical need for the speaker as well as the listeners to use questions as a pointer to show their understanding of the message;
- ii. To recognise the limitations of the speaker and the audience to warrant the interaction and complimentary nature of asking questions; and
- iii. To make participants serve as protagonists of effective communication by encouraging a two-way symmetrical communication as a standard of operation in their workplaces.

Basic Definitions and Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, there would be need for an explanation of some of the basic concepts that would guide the discussion. Besides, the topic rightly or wrongly assumes some facts. A look at the issues would put the subject in its proper perspective.

Communication

Communication is a process of transmitting thought; the sharing and

imparting of information; the giving of understandable information and receiving and understanding of the message; the transmitting of messages and the linking of people; the conveying of ideas, attitudes and feelings; the creating, exchanging of messages within a network of interdependent relationships.

James, Ode and Soola, 1990.

Speech

Speech is a specialised essay written for oral delivery to a specified audience.

Audience

The unknown individuals and groups to whom mass communication is addressed.

Feedback

The process by which the decoder's reaction to the message is transmitted back to the encoder. It then becomes the encoder's means of knowing how the message has been received. Thus, it allows for changes in transmission, encoding or medium to achieve the audience's desired reaction.

The topic we are discussing assumes a lot of things. It naturally assumes that the people being addressed are all literate, bound by the same code of ethics, cultural affinity, common work experiences, same social class and environment. Furthermore, the discussion being premised on the need for audience participation is indicative of the fact that the practice has not become a norm in the arena of public speaking. Also, it is assumed that the people being addressed have a special interest in the speech or address: in other words, what would be beneficial to them. Reward is a very strong motivation for attendance, listening and participation. These assumptions are to guide the speaker on the best ways to approach his topic and make sure it satisfies the needs of the target audience.

The Act of Writing and Speech Making

Since this workshop is specifically on making speeches and addresses (written and spoken), it is apparent that several experts would have

been invited to deal with various aspects of the subjects. However, I would still have to situate my paper in some of the basic tenets in order to ensure complete communication. In doing this, I shall endeavour to highlight the aspects I suspect may not have been treated in any great detail but are germane to my topic. In the main, I would be discussing the need to listen, the act of “imagineering”, and the use of audio-visuals and style.

Speech writing is a very technical function for public relations practitioners or any officer who may be so designated. Good speeches are mostly written by more than one person, chiefly because there is always a need for cross-fertilisation of ideas through research and resort to practical experience. Organisations have so many issues to write and talk about and it is not possible for one person to specialise in writing on policies, employee relations, administrative procedures, organisational behaviour, socio-economic programmes and political decisions.

There are many speech types, ranging from those that are intended to entertain, inform, make news, position statements, value-laden reports and for special occasions. Each of these speech types requires a different technique for its packaging, content, language and occasion.

In writing a speech, it is important to indicate to the audience if there are things they would need to pay particular attention to. An example is to mark the speech with a warning that the speaker may interject his speech with anecdotes and illustrations. Such papers are usually marked at the right hand corner “Check Against Delivery” This certainly helps as what is not contained in the paper may generate heated and lively arguments laced with very interesting questions. Of course, the audience become more attentive so as not to miss out anything.

Speech making has its own set of rules of observance. The speaker goes through a process of self-examination, and asks a few self-probing questions to determine his speaking mannerisms, speed, stage comportment, audibility and appearance. He asks questions to reveal his possible audience mix with varying educational, cultural, social and political backgrounds. He also tasks himself on determining how versed the audience are in the issue being discussed, audience composition, and the occasion type — workshop, lecture, seminar,

conference or round-table discussion.

After going through all these thought processes to writing the speech and preparing to make the presentation, it is very important to pose this question: Will there be a follow-up questions and answers session during the programme? The response to this question will form the main listening thrust of this paper.

Audience Response/Participation

Public speakers in Nigeria tend to assume a super-being status speaking to lesser mortals. The speakers believe they are very important and the listeners also accept that they are subjects to the speakers. This is why public officers invited to deliver papers, addresses or contribution to issues are treated, *ab initio*, as the ultimate contributors whose statements are infallible and must be accepted as the gospel truth. Such speakers as public officers have important messages on government policy to disseminate to the public. It should therefore be of interest to them that they communicate effectively. Such speakers are almost not asked any question at numerous occasions. Were the audience to recognise public officers as being responsible to them, the interest of the larger public would have been better protected by the two parties.

Apart from the fact of deifying the speakers, the members of the audience are usually constrained to be listeners only. Most structures of the programme do not allow for question time. The listeners are not able to follow the speakers because they are not provided with the text of the speech and the presentations are usually without the visual aids that would have aided comprehension. Thus, if the speaker has panache and is entertaining, the audience will have a good time but may not have benefited significantly at the end of it all. On the other hand, if the speaker did not do his home work on both the subject as well as the audience, he may end up making a drab presentation with most of the people dozing; of course there would be no questions.

Listening, on the part of both the speaker and the audience, will offer us an opportunity to probe deeply into the act of speech making. It would be discussed in some detail as it is very strategic to getting meaningful message delivered and feedback received in speech situation. The speaker needs to develop the habit of listening to his

audience to recognise approval and comprehension in order to establish a trusting relationship necessary for effective communication. When a speaker masters the art of active listening (even while speaking), then style, polish, witty delivery, oratory skill and other attributes of great public speaking would be well complimented. As Jack Zufelt puts it, "I strain during my talk to hear what individuals in my audience are thinking."

A listening audience is a rarity in most public speaking occasions. The reasons for this are many. Here, Chester Krass' eight-point constraints to listening by people is worth noting.

1. We often have a lot on our minds, and it is not easy to switch back quickly to fully absorb and participate in what is being said overtly or covertly.
2. We have adopted the habit of talking and interrupting so much that we do not let the other party continue even when it may be to our benefit.
3. We are anxious to rebut what the other person has said, and if we do not do so readily, we are afraid we may forget our point.
4. We allow ourselves to be easily distracted by the setting or environment in which the meeting takes place.
5. We jump into conclusions before all the evidence has been presented or is available.
6. We disregard some statements because we do not place importance on the person presenting them.
7. We tend to discard information that does not match what we want to hear or that we do not like.
8. We can simply be selfish or undisciplined and thus not listen.

These are some of the limitations that are being experienced by speakers and listeners at most public forums. If these factors are known to the two parties and efforts are made to reduce their negative impacts, then effective and participatory communication will take place. Indeed, what is the use of Public Officers and Captains of Industries addressing several groups of people without having the benefit of a feedback from the audience?

Speaker/Audience Response Constraints

As stated earlier, the speaker-audience relationship during public

activities is strangely patronising and does not engender any response from the alienated audience. The reasons for this are many. Some of the identified constraints include:

- a. Most speakers are usually representing their superior offices. Sometimes, the speech is delivered by a third party i.e. the job is passed down two or more steps down the ladder.
- b. Arising from 'a' above, the presenter would be ill-prepared for the assignment. He may not even be on a familiar turf. He gets the prepared speech thrust into his hands 30 minutes into the programme. Apart from being a poor presenter, he is mentally and psychologically not prepared to tackle the issues that may be raised.
- c. The general penchant to invite the Head of State and his Vice, Governors and their Deputies and Ministers to deliver addresses (even when they are technical and specialised), creates a lot of problems. Apart from the fact that their programmes are too crammed, they often disrupt the programme because of their habitual late coming, poor delivery, inadequate knowledge of the subject, early departure and impatience to take questions.
- d. Most public ceremonies are poorly planned to the extent that the speeches/addresses to be used are not prepared in advance. The papers are usually brought to the venue for the first time. The audience are shut off because they cannot follow the speaker.
- e. Most programmes do not leave room for ideas exchanges. The format is one-way communication. The speeches are delivered and there is no time slot for the audience to make observations and ask questions.

The above are by no means exhaustive but they clearly indicate the problem areas where professional communicators should pay attention. Once this is done, then there would be sufficient understanding and respect between the speakers and their listeners.

Recommendations

Speeches would continue to be a very important factor in human societies, particularly in the new communication-controlled world. They are used to set the pace for public discussions on issues of national importance, scientific breakthrough, cultural renaissance, government policies, international relations, and economic and political matters.

Furthermore, government leaders and captains of industries are under pressure to interpret their organisations' corporate objectives to the usually skeptical public. This has resulted in taking the issue of handling their communication strategies more seriously. If this would continue to be so, may I make the following recommendations to this gathering such that we can now begin to pay attention to the need for providing for questions any time that people are gathered to share information.

1. Communication

Effective communication is a two-way street. Whenever messages go one-way and there is no feedback, then the audience is alienated and nothing positive is expected. Effective communication involves giving information, getting feedbacks and evaluating the responses. It is dangerous to assume what the audience is thinking or feeling, allow them to express themselves.

2. Emphasise Speaker-Audience Interaction

In all public speaking occasions, particularly when corresponding actions are expected from the audience, it is important to provide for a question and answer session. This presupposes that the audience would be provided with audio-visual aids, language translators, and the text of the speech/address to ensure proper understanding of the message. The audience from the beginning of the programme should know that they would be given the opportunity to seek clarifications.

3. Anticipate Questions

The speaker should expect and actually make time for questions and answers. When the audience know that they can ask questions, they are better prepared to ask sensible, inspiring and related questions.

4. Know your Audience

Audiences differ from one organisation to the other and from place to place. They are not homogeneous. Once this is clear to the speaker, it will help his delivery. The speaker should note that the general tendency of the audience is to exhibit "a universal indifference to almost any message as a slide". Before you can achieve good communication therefore, you must first know and tune into your audience.

5. **Criticise Your Style**

Do not be taken in by your words. Listeners are out to get the message, not your cleverness and gait. Be conscious of the tone of your speech so as not to send the wrong signal of being stuffy and boring rather than being warm and lively.

6. **Give Value**

From the onset, highlight the reward for your audience. Make the message easy to understand by increasing the numerator while decreasing the denominator. Audiences are often preoccupied with a silent demand 'What's in it for me?' [WII-FM].

7. **Adequate Time for Writing**

Quality speeches take time and cannot be rushed. It is unfair to expect speech writers to prepare a good speech within 24 hours of presentation time. Time should be made by the Chief Executive Officer for research, exchange of ideas, creative process, checking of facts and rehearsals. Otherwise, the exercise would be like tailoring a suit in the absence of the customer.

8. **Training**

Public speaking is a skill that cannot be solely attributed to heritage or raw talent. It can be learned and mastered. Even with the gift of oratory, there is need for training so as to help the speaker appreciate the complexity of audiences and the skills of delivering technical and specialised speeches. Certainly, there would be need for training in the areas of language use, diction, composure, body language and personal style. Untrained speakers always suffer audience-behaviour shocks in poor response, the audience at times simply do not follow the speech so that the issue of asking questions becomes a tall order.

9. **The Message**

The central focus of speeches/addresses is the message — the substance or content. No matter how excellent the writing and presentation of a speech is, the handling of the message would determine its success. The message must be appropriate, organised and succinctly presented. A speaker that comes across to the audience as a time-waster cannot win today's complex audience that is used to ideas competing for public acceptance in the market place of public opinion.

10. **Be Prepared**

It is important to note that the present methods of planning, executing and evaluating public speaking activities are very poor. Invitations should be sent out early to the right people, materials for the audience (copies of the speech etc) should be ready ahead of time and the programmes should provide in specific terms, a question and answer session.

Conclusion

In Nigeria's nascent democratic experiment, the command and control style of governance that has been the vogue for over three decades is now yielding ground to the inspire and communicate methods. This disposition has led to an array of media programmes on the radio, television and in newspapers that exhibit the best attributes of a free society. People now express their views on any issue without any fear and the society is the better for it. Information sharing has improved and people no longer feel enslaved. The lessons to learn from this are many. Suffice to say that this new-found freedom will rub on government and public figures in the way they perceive and relate to their audiences as the art of public speaking would now require more attention and better packaging.

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