
Secrets to Communicating Technical Topics to Non-Technical Audiences

— BY SHELLEY ROW, P.E., PTOE, MBA —

You're ready. You collected the data, did the analysis, interpreted the results, and have a sound, well thought-through recommendation—but it does not go as you expect. The public is disgruntled and won't listen to you; the boss makes a politically-driven decision that runs counter to your analysis. How do you make them listen? How do you make them understand logic?



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You don't. The secret to communicating technical topics to non-technical audiences is for *you* to understand *them*. I've seen this so many times. We spend time understanding the material but spend little if any time understanding *them*.

You get one chance, and it needs to go well. To prepare, you can examine the four Cs of communicating technical topics:

- Clarity of purpose
- Customer's context
- Concise content
- Communicate with...

Below are a few highlights of each C.

Clarity of Purpose

Briefings come in many forms. You may be there to inform a group or seek specific action. Perhaps there is a decision to be made. Or, maybe, you are there to listen. Whatever it is, be clear on your purpose. It seems obvious, but I've seen it happen too frequently. The meeting ends and the key players are left wondering, "What was the point?" Next time, *before* you walk in the door, know why you are there. What is your ideal outcome? What does success look like? What is the "ask?"

Customer's Context

It is easy to focus on the material, the facts, and the analysis. But, for an important meeting with a non-technical audience, you should spend half as much time understanding the audience and *their* needs. Know their context, their concerns, and their comfort levels. Put yourself in their shoes and ask, "What's in it for me? (WIIFM)" Force yourself to spend time thinking about it. It is essential. What do you know about the group's interests, fears, and history? What do you know about the political climate, career trajectory, and risk profile of the decision-maker? What are the consequences of the decision? Is credibility, embarrassment, power, or an election at stake? When

we walk in the meeting *only* armed with facts and figures, we come across as tone-deaf. Decision-makers shake their heads thinking, "They just don't get it." And unless we know as much about the people as we do about the topic, they are right.

Try it. If you were *them*, what would you fear and what would you want? Know before you go and adjust accordingly.

Concise Content

Benjamin Franklin said, "I have already made this paper too long, for which I must crave pardon, not having now time to make it shorter." Ben was right. It takes time and effort to whittle a topic down to its essence, but that is exactly what you have to do. In my career, I did a lot of briefings including to Congressional staff and the Secretary of Transportation. *If we were lucky*, we had a half hour. Period. And they frequently ran late. It is absolutely essential to be crystal clear on the "ask," understand *their* context (WIIFM) and be concise. What is the *one* thing you want them to remember? Just One. Can your "one thing" be easily and simply explained to a "regular" person? If not, try again. Really. Try again. You also need to know how they best consume information. You may love a great graph, but do they?

Communicate with...

You are not presenting *to* them, you are communicating *with* them. Communication is a two-way process. You must focus as much energy on understanding their concerns, questions, and reactions as you spend trying to get your point across. It is good to hone your presentation skills, but how are your listening skills?

Learn More

These secrets are only the start.

The Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) is presenting a half-day seminar and a webinar on **Communicating Technical Topics to Non-Technical Audiences. [itej](#)**

Communicating Technical Topics to Non-Technical Audiences

Face-to-Face Seminar

Date: Wednesday, March 26, 2014

Time: 1:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m. Eastern

Location: ITE Headquarters,
1627 Eye Street NW, Suite 600,
Washington, DC, USA

Site Fee: \$150 per person

Instructor: Shelley Row, P.E., PTOE, MBA

Course Credit: 4 PDH/ 4 IACET CEU

Webinar

Date: Thursday, May 1, 2014

Time: 12 noon – 1:30 p.m. Eastern

Fee: \$75 ITE Individual Member/\$100
Non-member Individual Fee (per person
rate) or \$125 ITE Member Group/\$150
Non-member Group Fee (Per site fee for
training of four or more people at one site)

Instructor: Shelley Row, P.E., PTOE, MBA

Credits: 1.5 PDH/ 2 IACET CEU

For more information and to register, visit www.ite.org/education.



Shelley Row, P.E., PTOE, MBA works with top managers and leaders in data-driven fields who must make fast, insightful decisions in the face of uncertainty, rapid change, and ambiguity when data and facts alone are not enough. Shelley is the former director of the ITS Joint Program Office at the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT).

She is currently president of Shelley Row Associates LLC, a two-part company focused on transportation consulting in ITS and leadership development. Shelley is widely-known within the transportation community for her leadership, vision, and organizational skills, which she developed during a distinguished 30-year transportation career that included service with the Texas Department of Transportation, the Institute of Transportation Engineers, and 21 years with USDOT. Shelley can be reached at shelley@shelleyrow.com.