

So Does Communication Training Really Work?

Is there not need for patient, scientific research in voice?

No field has suffered more from quacks. . . .

— J.A. WINANS, 1915

In a 2006 university study, 39 speakers completed a five-hour training session. After the session, independent raters evaluated speakers significantly higher on 10 vital criteria (credibility, confidence, control, unflusteredness, organization, intelligence, knowledgeableness, communicativeness, good spokesman-ship and showing effort to work with the media). Speakers were also rated significantly higher overall, and this data on overall improvement is graphed below:

A poll by the Agos Group in January 2006 reported that almost 90% of business professionals would invest time in communications training if they knew they'd get results. (www.Agosnet.com) So do you? Does communication training really work?

There has been surprisingly little research on the effectiveness of communication training. A series of excellent studies was published from 1939 - 1942 that examined communications training as part of university curriculum. Since then, though, few studies have attempted to measure whether public speaking training actually improves presentations — especially at the workplace. And of these limited studies, researchers have focused almost exclusively on whether or not speakers improve, without investigating what it was about the training that helped.

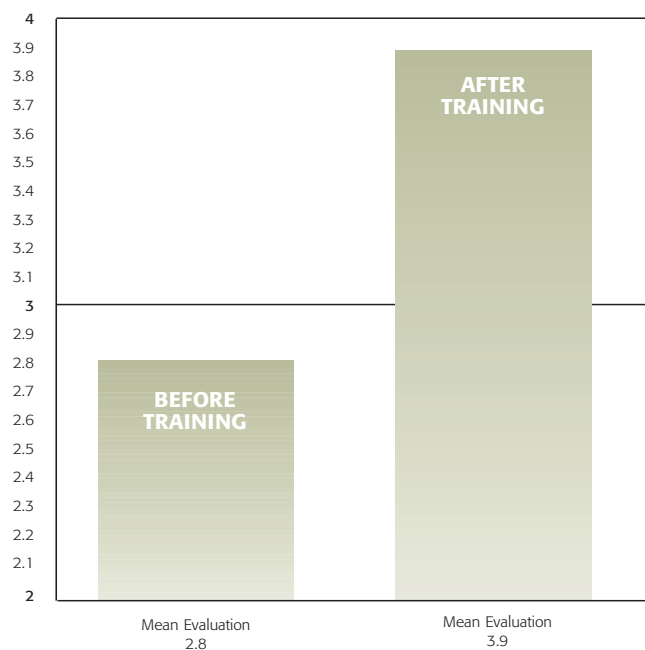
Measuring the effectiveness of communication training became very interesting to me as I was finishing a Ph.D. program at the University of Texas. Before returning to graduate school, I had been an attorney. Over time, I developed a thriving specialty in teaching workplace legal issues to non-lawyer managers inside of organizations — what is now, in the post-Enron environment, the sophisticated world of “compliance training.” (more information about my legal compliance work is available on my website www.WordOfLaw.com).

Related to my compliance work, I was often called upon to advise lawyers and others about their communications: how to explain a piece of litigation to the newspaper, what to say to TV reporters when an industrial accident injured employees, or just how to explain a business decision to a webjournalist. Other times, I was asked to teach persuasion strategy, gendered communication or simply basic presentation skills. Like Dale Carnegie, Zig Ziglar, and so many others who came before me, I developed what I believed to be a few sound seminars on these communication topics. My clients were certainly pleased, but I wanted to know if my students were really communicating any more effectively after the training. I developed a plan to find out . . .

In 2001, I launched a comprehensive field study to determine if communication training really worked and, if so, how. I was lucky enough to enlist support from two major energy companies, an agency of the federal government, and a nationally-respected law firm. Each agreed to supply me with lawyers from their legal departments and communication pros from their public relations departments who would be my guinea pigs.

Over several years I conducted 23 separate training programs at these four institutions, teaching potential spokespeople how to address the media on behalf of their organization. I videotaped participants both before the sessions and afterwards. Then I turned these tapes over to an able team of university speech instructors for independent evaluation. In addition, I enlisted junior journalists to prepare hypothetical newspaper stories based on the videotaped statements.

Altogether, these data from the speech instructors and journalists provided me a thorough picture of (1) whether my communication training was working, (2) under what circumstances, and (3) to what



effect. Here is a sneak peak: not only can training significantly improve your communication skills, it can generate demonstratively better practical results, as well. I found, for example, that trained media spokespeople generate significantly better news coverage for their organizations than those without training. Take a look at the graphic above which depicts one of my overall findings.

In addition to these primary findings about training effectiveness, I also learned some pretty interesting things about how lawyers communicate, as well. Because lawyers were a specific professional cohort in my study, I was able to benchmark their language strategies and styles. Indeed, lawyers have a specific, identifiable list of distinguishing communication traits. Moreover, these markers of lawyer-language generate specific responses by those who listen to them. Would you have ever guessed, for example, that the lawyers would be appraised as strikingly honest?

In any event, at bottom, I learned an awful lot about how to make communication training most effective and, in particular, how it specifically impacts lawyer communicators. All of this is deeply interesting to me, and, of course, I hope some of it interests you, too. Over the coming year, I will be delighted to tell you much more about what I learned. Every two weeks, we'll be updating the article on this site to reflect another piece of the study. By subscribing to these newsletters on the website's “contact us” page, you will be notified by email every time a new article is posted.

So does communication training work? You bet — and especially when the training is conducted in some specific ways. I sure hope you'll join us July 1 to learn a little more . . .

Erika Tyner Allen, J.D., Ph.D.