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MANAGING YOUR CAREER

Improv Troupe Teaches Managers How to Give Better Presentations

Chicago

STEVE BAILEY, a veteran project manager at an insurer, has given presentations for two decades. He figured he wouldn't learn much last month when he and 11 colleagues attended a presentation-skills workshop run by Second City, the famous improvisational theater troupe here.

He figured wrong.

During one exercise in front of 25 fellow participants, Mr. Bailey pretended he was a women's hair-fashion expert. But he clasped and unclasped his hands so often that he didn't sound authoritative. Excessive gestures "can be distracting," warned Robyn Scott, a workshop facilitator. "We have to be aware of the body so we can



By Joann S. Lublin

present well." Mr. Bailey now shuns superfluous hand motions while leading workplace meetings and says he has noticed that "the audience is a lot more confident about what I am saying."

Ambitious managers must be deft presenters these days—especially as high-tech innovations expand presentation venues. The skill "is really important for career success, promotions and professional credibility," observes Gail Golden, a consultant for RHR International, an executive-coaching firm in Wood Dale, Ill.

No wonder presentation-skills training is booming. Offerings run the gamut. You can buy "Knockout Presentations," a book by speech coach Diane DiResta, for \$19.95, or three CDs from hypnotist Tom Nicoli for \$59.77. At the other extreme, you can spend \$1,995 and three days on an American Management Association seminar or hire a coach who charges about \$9,000 for six months of personalized guidance. Employers often cover coaching costs.

Before you or your boss pays plenty for presentation training, however, make sure it will meet your job needs. You should also inquire whether you will glean tips about diction, breathing, relaxation, building audience rapport and other important techniques.

I OBSERVED Second City's recent session to gain insights into the pluses and minuses of a six-hour program. Its communications division used to offer this \$595 public workshop once or twice a year. However, demand is growing so fast that it will be given five times in 2007, says Tom Yorton, Second City president. The unit has also provided customized courses for employees of more than 50 businesses since 2003. "Presentation-skills training has become our most requested offering," he says.

Taught by Second City performers, the Jan. 22 workshop emphasized fun and feedback. Many participants said they came because they felt nervous, spoke too fast or sounded boring during presentations. "Um, I want to get rid of my 'ums,'" one man added.

"Skills, methods, philosophy and ideas we use to create successful scenes on stage...are the same skills required for successful communications in business," explained Ms. Scott, an actress and director. Improvisational comedy, for example, requires performing without scripts and reacting quickly. For their first activity, attendees stood in a circle tossing a growing number of imaginary colored balls and expressing thanks when they caught a particular color. Confusion reigned.

Ms. Scott drew a comparison to the multiple demands placed on presenters. "Eye contact is huge"—along with body language that shows you're focused, connected to the audience and not rattled by mistakes, she noted. Another exercise taught attendees to slow their delivery. Chatting in pairs, each person had to begin replies with the partner's last word. "When we're presenting, it's really, really important that we actively listen," Ms. Scott said.

DURING A role-playing activity, a make-believe executive struggled to lead a meeting as "colleagues" tapped their BlackBerrys, answered cellphones, dozed or threw things. Lay down ground rules immediately for how you will conduct your presentation, recommended Lillie Frances, the other facilitator.

She and Ms. Scott critiqued participants after each spoke extemporaneously on topics they knew nothing about. Like Mr. Bailey, most got gentle pointers to help them alter their nervous habits, poor posture or soft voice. A woman too tense to look into listeners' eyes was urged to gaze at foreheads. Enter a room with presence rather than glance down at notes, Ms. Frances told one man. Speak louder than normal initially because "it gets everyone revved up," she continued.

Several attendees besides Mr. Bailey found the workshop valuable. Robyn Waldman Borek, a Chicago accounting manager at Gensler, an architectural concern, believes she effectively led a finance class for graphic designers days later because she revamped her presentation to engage them better. "I was hitting the high points about what they needed to know," she recalls.

On the other hand, Ms. Borek was disappointed that Second City didn't videotape her mock presentations. Rival providers echo the criticism. "For presentation training, a five-minute video clip is worth a million words," contends Donna Schwarz, a New York career and communications coach.

Mr. Yorton disagrees. Videotaping focuses on mechanics, "which aren't usually the root problem for people. Fear and nervousness are," he insists. "Video often exacerbates the nervousness."