



Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond Blog: Preparing for a Presentation

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This is part of a series of posts on the topic of leadership as applied to community and economic development, authored by UNC School of Government faculty member Willow Jacobson.

We find ourselves in many situations in which we need to make a convincing argument — sometimes as part of a public presentation to a large group and other times to just a few people. For example, you might find yourself talking to a group about the possibility of using a Community Development Block Grant for revitalization efforts or the potential benefits of building a minor league baseball stadium. I was recently talking with a professor of Communications at UNC-CH and he shared that when preparing for any of these situations that one needs to keep in mind that they will need to make some key strategic choices. They need to think through: “who you are and what you represent”. First, one must recognize that people will first start to listen based on assumptions and expectations about the speaker. As the speaker you need to think through these and recognize if you need to address any of these issues upfront. Next, it is critical to “define why the audience should listen to you by invoking an emotional tie” and finally, consider “how you make a point”.

As you prepare for a presentation consider how you frame the issue. Framing puts an issue in a larger context that helps your audience make sense of it. For example, does the debate about the use of Municipal Service District (MSD) taxation revenue focus on how the funds can be used for downtown revitalization district or the potential negative sentiments for citizens that will have to pay more taxes. In this process, think about what values and perspectives you want to present in the presentations. Picking the frame well controls how the audience will think about the question. Establishing and sticking to a consistent narrative is about providing your audience the ability to resolve a conflict. A good description of a problem often implies a persuasive solution.

Wise use of structure and vivid language are persuasive—increasing likability, memorability, and the perception of your competence. A clearly defined introduction to what you are going to cover as well as a focused conclusion that reaffirms the purpose of the speech provides clarity for the listener. It has been found that when you give a preview of what you are going to talk about you establish “memory architecture” for the listener which helps them follow the presentation and also often results in the listener believing the speaker to be more credible. An order of arguments that enhances the flow of your narrative, and concludes by emphasizing your main point enhances the presentation. Once you have decided on the overall structure of the presentation think about how you can create a compact and sharp claim, provide explicit reference to supporting evidence, and be sure to include an “Implication” statement. There are a number of ways to do this, for example the use of metaphors and vivid descriptions (ex. Imagine walking down Main Street after the MSD funds have been used to provide for street cleaning and landscaping. Rather than the trash you see now you see flowers, art, and people gathering.)

Another way to think about this preparation is to ask yourself a series of questions about the challenge (or opportunity- in other words what is the issue in front of us today), next why should someone care to listen, where are we going with this discussion, who do you need to be talking to about it and how will you get them engaged?

Here are some helpful questions to consider when starting to prepare to have an important conversation or presentation about an issue:

Challenge/Problem: What is a challenge you are facing? Describe what is happening now that is not working. What's not going well?

Values: What values do you want to be sure to connect to? Think about making the connection between your values, your teams' values, organization, and/or community values. How do your values inform your understanding of the



challenge and the desired change you want to see made? What are a few values you think are foundational to the challenge and/or the change?

Change: What change would you like to see? You have a clear picture of what it is. What would need to be different (you, your organization, your staff, or process) to achieve the end state you want to accomplish?

Audience: Who is the audience to whom you are presenting and what support or concerns can you anticipate? Who supports you? What are the potential points of resistance?

Vision/Issue presentation: Make us as passionate about the vision or topic as you are. The questions above will provide you with a good sense of what you are addressing. Now, think creatively about how you will draw people in. Use images and word pictures, metaphors, examples, stories, references to history, emotions, and symbols).

Through taking the time to think through these aspects of your presentation it will better prepare you to connect with your audience, anticipate points of possible disagreement, and shape a presentation that provides clear logic, flow, and impact. Often such presentations can include visuals, and while these can be vitally important- especially as you may want to show a new streetscapes or building projects- remember that you and your words should still take center stage.