

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Evaluators *by Dr. Dilip Abayasekara, Ph.D., A.S.*

Stephen Covey said that highly effective people have seven habits in common. Interestingly, over a period of twenty years of receiving and giving speech evaluations, I have noticed that great evaluators also have seven “habits” in common. These “habits” are constituted of knowledge, communication, demonstration, and insight. When you put these seven habits into practice, you too can become a highly effective evaluator.

#1. Understand Why

Great evaluators understand why they are evaluating a speech. This understanding tells them what they should not do. They know that they should not upstage the speaker, make the speaker feel inadequate, give the speech, give a summary of the speech, overly praise the speaker without giving pointers for improvement, criticize the speaker and the speech, or otherwise create no value for the speaker.

The first “habit” is one of applied knowledge. This knowledge is that the evaluator has three objectives: (1) reinforce the strengths of the speaker; (2) suggest ways that the speech could be improved; (3) encourage the speaker. The measure of the evaluator’s skill is the value the speaker receives from the evaluation. Great evaluators are never self-centered; they focus their energy, on achieving the above three goals for the benefit of the speaker.

#2. Reassure

Just like good doctors have a good bedside manner, effective evaluators have a manner that reassures the speaker that he or she need not feel threatened by the evaluation. If you’ve ever had one of your speeches evaluated, you know the apprehensive feeling just before the evaluator begins his evaluation of your speech. Great evaluators are sensitive to this apprehension and try to reassure the speaker that there is nothing to fear.

Evaluators who do not understand the need for reassurance may undermine the relationship of trust they want to build between themselves and the speaker by doing something as simple as taking a large pad of paper or a clipboard with them to the lectern. That large pad of paper or clipboard may suggest to the speaker that you are going to elaborate on a large number of problems regarding the speech. I take only one piece of paper, sometimes folded in half, the smaller the better. Some evaluators eschew any notes and try to do the evaluation by memory. I think that is unnecessary and borders on showmanship. Effective evaluators use key words and phrases written in an orderly manner that allows them to keep on track while speaking conversationally.

Facial expressions that are reassuring (especially smiling), fluid body movements and gestures, open body positions (arms open, not crossed), well modulated voice volume and tone all create an atmosphere that makes it easy for the speaker to listen to the evaluator.

#3. Follow a Sequence for Psychological Receptivity

How do you make someone want to listen to you when they are afraid that you will criticize them? Here's a secret that highly effective evaluators know. Make the person feel appreciated before you suggest ways that he or she might improve!

A speaker feels appreciated by an evaluator when the evaluator notices and mentions the things that the speaker did well. Be specific in your praise. Don't just praise the speaker for doing a "great job." Tell the speaker what he or she specifically did and said that you thought was noteworthy. This recognition creates psychological receptivity, a mental state that accepts what you say. This is the reason why great evaluators always start off by recognizing what the speaker did well.

The sequence that you, the effective evaluator will follow is: recognize what the speaker did well; make suggestions for improving the speech; encourage the speaker and leave him wanting to return to the lectern. Like the meat in a sandwich, the suggestions for improvement are sandwiched between recognizing the speaker's strengths and encouraging the speaker.

#4. It's Just Your Opinion

Highly effective evaluators are humble enough to know that what they are sharing is just their individual opinion and is not necessarily the voice of the majority of the audience. So they sprinkle their comments with "I" statements. Examples are: "I thought that your opening was perfect for what you were trying to accomplish with your speech." "It seemed to me that your pauses were a little too short." "I felt a little disconnected with your speech because you didn't look at me."

One reason that you make it clear to the speaker that you are only giving your opinion is that the speaker will then feel free to accept or reject your comments without worrying whether every person in the audience felt the way you did. This eases the pressure and let's the speaker know that you are honestly sharing the way you felt about the speech.

Sometimes inexperienced speakers shy away from evaluating the speech of an experienced speaker. This is understandable if evaluations are supposed to reflect the mood of the audience. The truth is that evaluations can only reflect the response of the individual evaluator. Once new Toastmasters understand that, it is much easier for them to gather the courage to give a good evaluation.

#5. It's Just a Suggestion

"Where the rubber meets the road" in an evaluation is how well the evaluator's recommendations are received by the speaker. If the evaluator is too pushy, the speaker may mentally reject the evaluator's analysis of the speech. So, effective evaluators always qualify their remarks by softening the tone of their recommendations. Note the italicized words in the following examples:

"You may want to consider this method in order to establish good eye contact."

“When I was a beginning speaker, I too had a problem uttering too many uhms. Over the past few years, I’ve learned a way to overcome that. This approach may be helpful to you too; this is how it works.”

“Perhaps writing out your manuscript in outline form may help you get away from dependence on the text.”

When you phrase the recommendation like a suggestion, it will become easier for the speaker to be open minded about your suggestion.

#6. Don’t Just Talk, Demonstrate!

Highly effective evaluators believe that showing is more powerful than telling. This is why they demonstrate, as far as possible, the improvements that they recommend to the speaker. For example, instead of saying, “Jenny, consider trying harder to establish good eye contact,” you could say, “I have found that I can establish good eye contact with the members of my audience when I

-3-

think that they are not a mass, but a collection of individuals. I’m speaking to one person at a time! My experience is that if I hold my gaze with each person’s eyes for three to five seconds, (demonstrate this as you speak) audience members feel as if I’m directly taking with them. Try that and see if it works for you.”

Demonstrating is not always possible. But as far as possible, demonstrate the improvements you suggest. You will increase clarity, understanding, and receptiveness.

#7. Evaluate with Your Whole Self

Great evaluators use their eyes, ears, mind, and heart when evaluating a speech. The eyes observe the speaker’s body language, dress, movement, posture, facial expressions, gestures, and command of the speaking area. The ears listen for vocal quality and vocal variety, for diction and articulation, rate of speech, pitch, and volume modulation. The mind analyzes the speech structure, clarity, logic, transitions, and achievement of purpose. The heart analyzes the connection of the speaker and the message to the audience, the speaker’s presence and self-confidence, the flow and feeling OF the message.

The above is why an effective evaluation never sounds wooden or dull. A great evaluation has a life of its own because it is delivered from the whole self of the evaluator.

The Final Question

Sometimes you will hear a presentation that is so excellent that you find it difficult to come up with any suggestion for improvement. Ah! That is a test of your evaluation skills. In such a case, I have found this to be very helpful: ask yourself “What is the one thing, that when properly done, would have the greatest positive effect on this speech?”

The answer to the above question can take many forms. Applying it to an excellent

speech a few months ago, I realized that although excellent in many ways, the speaker did not relate the value of the talk to the interests of the audience. Another time, I felt that the speaker was so intent in delivering a “speech,” that he forgot to simply and conversationally talk with us. Having competed in as well as judged evaluation contests for many years, I find that all other things being equal, the person who wins a District level evaluation speech contest is one who is able to articulate the most significant way that the speaker could improve.

So there you have it. As I mentioned in the opening paragraph, the seven habits of highly effective evaluators are an amalgamation of knowledge, communication, demonstration, and insight. The only way to learn them is to purposely put them in to practice every time you evaluate a speaker. After a while, these skills will become part of you. What that means is that every speaker you evaluate will get great value from your evaluation. Even more important, you would have learned a skill that will help you in every form of human interaction. You will have in your grasp, the power to help another person grow

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