

The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Evaluators - Adapted from article by *Dr. Dilip Abayasekara, Ph.D., A.S.*
<http://www.dr dilip.com/7habits.htm>

Great evaluators have seven “habits” in common - **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, i.e., 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 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 litmus test 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. Great evaluators are sensitive to a speaker’s apprehension and try to reassure the speaker that s/he need not feel threatened by the evaluation. One idea is to take a folded piece of paper to the lectern, rather than a large pad or a clipboard. 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. Great evaluators make speakers want to listen to even when they are afraid that they will be criticized – they always start off by recognizing what the speaker did well and make the person feel appreciated before you suggesting ways that he or she might improve! This creates psychological receptivity, a mental state that helps the speaker accepts what you say. Be specific in your praise. Don’t just praise the speaker for doing a “great job.” 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. 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 it eases the pressure and 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.

#5. It’s Just a Suggestion. The litmus test for 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. Effective evaluators always qualify their remarks by softening the tone of their recommendations, e.g., “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 uhm’s. 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...” 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. They demonstrate the improvements that they recommend to the speaker to increase clarity, understanding, and receptiveness. 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 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.”

#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.

When You’re Faced with a Challenge... Sometimes you will hear a presentation that is so excellent that you find it difficult to come up with any suggestion for improvement. In such a case, ask yourself “What is the one thing, that when properly done, would have the greatest positive effect on this speech?” Maybe the speaker did not relate the value of the talk to the interests of the audience. Maybe the speaker was so intent in delivering a “speech,” that he forgot to simply and conversationally talk with us. Looking at evaluation contests, sometimes 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.

The seven habits of highly effective evaluators are an artful blend of knowledge, communication, demonstration, and insight. When you use these skills every speaker you evaluate will get great value from your evaluation.