Empathy and Communication Strategies for More Effective Presentations

Preamble:

IntelliBoard's big theme this year is communication – between each other, between teams, and when speaking with clients. I wrote this from an instructional design standpoint of someone creating a training, but I think these concepts extend to other areas and can help us in many scenarios. Communication is always about trying to reach understanding, and maybe even educate others - regardless of whether it's a TED talk or a sales pitch. You want a person to know something when they leave that they didn't know when they came in. And you want it to stick, be memorable, hopefully in a good way. And all those things become much easier when you think of your audience first and empathize with their needs.

1. Intro
    a. Everyone loves a narrative. They're easy to follow. So today we're going to follow Ibby on a journey to making a better presentation.
    b. **Slide Change** Ibby has to give a presentation about a new feature in a software platform. His audience is, to put it nicely, a bunch of Luddites! They don't know much about tech. They'd sooner touch an electric fence instead of a computer. But they need to know how to use this if they want to log their hours and get paid.
    c. Ibby isn't used to this, so they look up some resources, but these resources seem vague and contradictory.
    d. **Slide Change** Can't Ibby just put some text and screenshots in a powerpoint and talk over it?
    e. Or just walk through things with a screenshare?
    f. **Slide Change** How Do I reach these kids?
    g. Well, one thing Ibby kept seeing is that people don't learn effectively that way! Ibby found 5 areas in particular that were helpful to keep in mind:
        i. Know Your Audience
        ii. Make Memories
        iii. Tell Stories
        iv. Encourage Learning
        v. Follow Up & Feedback
    h. So let's see what Ibby learned!

2. Audience:
    a. Ibby thought it was silly they had to consider the audience first
    b. **Change** They are a passive group, a captive audience – they're there to learn whatever you tell them
    c. **Change** Unfortunately, we can't assume that everyone in the audience feels that way
    d. **Change** Unless you're Taylor Swift, you won't win them all over, they will not remember everything you say or put on screen.
    e. So Ibby needs to step into the learner's shoes
        i. **Change** Why is the audience here? You guys are here because you're a captive audience, but ostensibly because you're interested in learning about presentations. What I'm doing here isn't a required training for you. But a lot of training and indeed education too is performed against the will of the learner.
        ii. **Change** Which brings us to number 2: respect your audience.
            1. **Change** That could mean the amount of time it takes – shorter the better!
            2. It could mean things like language, and I don't just mean potential translation barriers, but the vocabulary you use.
            3. Which also relates to understanding the backgrounds or prior knowledge that your learners may bring in.
    f. **Change** So Ibby's presentation needs to fit into a 30 minute window in the middle of a busy workday for a group of learners that don't speak tech, don't like tech, must use tech, and have some knowledge of how it works already. Wait, they have some knowledge of how it works already…that could help us out.
3. Make Memories
    a. Ibby stumbled onto cognitive load theory which describes how people process information.
    b. Cognitive load is the amount of information your working memory can process at a given time. There's 3 types of cognitive load:
        i. Intrinsic
        ii. Extraneous
        iii. Germane
        iv. Intrinsic: inherent difficulty in learning – complex instructions

v. Extraneous is the way information is presented – so the words, the deck, the environment – how information is passing through someone's brain
vi. Germane is the effort needed to remember – which is unique to everyone. It's the process of creating schemas – yes, just like we do with databases – in one's memory.

c. An effective presentation minimizes the cognitive load on the learner
d. So in Ibby's case he wants:
    i. To manage intrinsic load by only covering what the learners need to know
    ii. reduce the extraneous load by avoiding tech jargon and using simple graphics, and finding a quiet room for the presentation
    iii. And support germane load by building off the prior knowledge the learners have and providing follow-up

4. Story:
    a. **Slide Change** Now Ibby's cooking. He knows what his learners are like. He knows how much time he has. He has an idea of how to streamline the training so it shouldn't be too difficult to absorb. But how's he actually going to present this?
    b. **Slide Change** A script seems like overkill, he doesn't want to be a robot up there…surely no one will pay attention to him if he is.
    c. Here's where a narrative comes in!
        i. People learn better through stories
        ii. Stories and narratives create context for why the instruction is important
        iii. It helps people place themselves into a situation
        iv. **Slide Change** Facts alone tax working memory and increase cognitive load – people get caught on memorizing instead of learning
        v. Stories allow learners to take a schema they may already have, and fill in the blanks with the new info!
        vi. Can we think of some examples for where we see this? Predicting the twist in a movie?
    d. So Ibby comes up with a story. He writes a script. He creates a slide deck and bases the slide progression off the script, with fun animation changes to keep people engaged.
    e. As he writes, he speaks the lines out loud and revises them. He changes things to sound more natural

f. **Slide Change** And this is good – conversational tone helps learners remember more
g. If you speak to someone rather than at them, they're typically more receptive
h. Eventually, he practices enough that despite being entirely scripted he barely has to read it! (aside on practice, perfect pitch?)
i. But after a few hours of tweaking Ibby stops himself. He's got this fun deck and an engaging script. He's certain if the learners are paying attention, they'll pick up this new feature with no problem.
j. **Slide Change** But what happens after? When they leave the room? And they get distracted by some emergency at work or at home? If that Germane part of cognitive load isn't happening when it needs to?

5. Learning Styles
    a. **Slide Change** Well this is where Ibby's newfound knowledge of learning styles comes in handy. He found that different people learn in different ways, typically sorted into 4 major categories:
    b. Auditory
    c. Visual
    d. Read/Write
    e. Tactile (also known as Kinesthetic, but like I mentioned earlier, we're not using jargon so tactile works for our purposes)
    f. Each of these are just as it appears:
        i. Do you have a good ear for melody or pitch or remember quotes? You might be auditory
        ii. Do you remember landmarks instead of directions? Or maybe remember exactly what someone was wearing on a particular day? You might be visual
        iii. If you remember all the things you write down, well, read/write seems to be your style
        iv. But if you're the type of person that likes to do something to get the hang of it, well, you might be tactile
    g. **Slide Change** Now all of these overlap, to the point where 66% of respondents in a 2020 poll were classified as "multi-modal" learners, meaning they had traits of more than one style.
    h. So pick your battles and cover what you can!

i. Now the script and the presentation cover the auditory and visual learning styles. The learners can take notes if they're read/write types. But Ibby knows these aren't the kind of people that can or will bring laptops to a training, so tactile is out – they can't log in and try it there.

j. Which brings us to the final point…

6. Follow Up & Feedback:
    a. Ibby needs to support those two learning styles, but also wants to know he's done a good job creating this presentation. That learners know how to use this new platform feature. That they can put it in practice quickly.
    b. He needs some ways that learners who didn't get 100% out of his presentation can still interact with and absorb the material.
    c. Any Ideas what he can do?
    d. Answers: allow notes, handouts etc
    e. **Slide Change** So he could provide a handout or two – one for feedback, one with instructions, also known as a Job Aid.
    f. **Slide Change** And/or he can post the training and additional resources online
    g. **Slide Change** And he could also monitor metrics in the platform to make sure it's being used the correct way, and identify areas to improve based on common mistakes. Or check support tickets, or other methods of compliance
    h. **Slide Change** There's no one correct way, and not all of these are feasible for him or for us, so figure out what your number one outcomes are and create an environment that supports it.
    i. **Slide Change** Just try to keep in mind what you want your outcome to be and create resources to support that.
    j. So Ibby decides to make some printouts, since that will reach most of his audience, and it will be immediate. He's nervous about what people might say for feedback, but knows he'll never improve without it!
7. **Slide Change** Ibby gives his presentation, it goes well. Some people are attentive. They ask questions. Others appear to be asleep. But he hands out resources, checks IntelliBoard to make sure people are visiting and completing the online modules that support his course…
8. Within a couple weeks, there are few questions or problems about the new feature. Everyone seems to be using it the right way!

So Those are some instructional strategies for improving communication, presentations, workplace empathy – whatever the case, know your audience, be memorable, tell stories, encourage them to learn, and follow up!