



Digital Article / Presentation Skills

Presenting to Management? Be Prepared for the Tough Questions.

Take your time, and make every word count. *by Sabina Nawaz*

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I don't understand. How can your numbers be so off?

What would you do if faced with a question like this from upper management at a review meeting? If you're like most of the executives I coach, you're likely to be coated with an unattractive layer of sweat and dealing with a dry throat and a desiccated brain, leave you staring back blankly without any signs of intelligent life behind your eyes. You might

think, “This is it. They’re finally going to say I’m no good. My career is over!”

We’ve often spent hours rehearsing before presenting to upper management, only to freeze when confronted with a tough question from our bosses. All our preparation and carefully curated slides go unacknowledged. It’s our botched responses in the moment that stick.

If you’re presenting to an executive audience, you clearly have credibility, expertise, and a successful track record. You know how to tackle live questions because you can fall back on your knowledge and experience. But how do you field the tough questions from management — the ones you don’t have an answer to?

Here are four ways to handle what you don’t know:

Take your time

Don’t be too quick to respond after an executive grills you. Be sure you understand the question. Pause to consider your first words. If they’re strong, you and your questioners will both feel more confident as you continue. There’s a range of ways to buy time, from taking a sip of water, to paraphrasing the question, to holding silence. Executives feel heard when you take time to be thoughtful. You can say, “Am I understanding you correctly — you want to know more about the target setting process that has gotten us to this point?” Or give them a choice, “What would be most helpful to you right now? Understanding the target setting process or exploring what we can do to make up our numbers?” The next time you’re in a meeting, notice how the people who appear the most confident treat time. They discuss items with efficiency and impact without appearing rushed.

Pausing before you speak will also allow for better verbal “posture.” You may be aware of some of your verbal tics and be pretty good at curbing

them most of the time. However, under stress, “um,” “er,” “you know” and other crutch words tend to creep out from your carefully groomed mannerisms and unconsciously proliferate. Take a deep breath (or that sip of water) and remain silent until you can start with a real word instead of filler. Picture your phrases ending in commas and periods, and accentuate the punctuation by breathing instead of defaulting to your favorite filler word. Avoiding tentative words transmits greater confidence in your abilities, and pauses offer the bonus of additional time to think.

Have an abundance mindset

If you're like most people, being questioned when you don't know the answers likely makes you think that your bosses find you inept, incapable of doing your job, or that you're about to be publicly humiliated or fired. These common thinking traps stem from anxiety, and we trip into them when under pressure. They erupt from a fear of scarcity; our end result is not enough or, worse, *we* are not enough. Flip to an abundance mindset instead. Construct sentences to tell yourself the opposite of the fear-based ones flooding your mind. Remind yourself, “There's no one who knows more than me about process X.” Add additional sentences of plenitude rather than scraping the bottom of the performance barrel. For example, “My senior vice president really wants this project to do better than any other because no one has ever done this before.” Or, “My general manager wants me to succeed and is asking the tough questions now, so I shine when presenting to our CEO.” An abundance mindset can calm you to maintain analytical thinking and presence of mind.

Provide the bottom line first

Unlike a murder mystery, start with the end when you're ready to respond. Your management likely wants to know the current status, not all the steps you took to arrive at it. Provide the bottom line and only provide more details if asked. Try, “I don't have all the data to

answer your question and will get back to you by X time/date.” Or, “We are at risk of underachieving our target. The variance is higher than we feared. We’re working on the exact number.” Or show that you’re already on to next steps: “We’re taking this very seriously and have already started examining our process and communications to ensure we’re in better shape before next quarter. We will come back to you with recommendations. In the meantime, our immediate focus is first on finding ways to address the shortfall.”

Adhere to a word diet

In charged meetings, be up front but say less. If you tend to ramble when anxious, discipline yourself to stick to three to five sentences — and I don’t mean 30 sentences that are linked with liberal use of conjunctions to disguise them as three. Here’s an example, “I share your concern. We’re taking this seriously. Early indications are that the situation might be redeemable with some creative brainstorming. We’ll have more data by 7 am tomorrow.” Budgeting your words forces you to be clear and direct, respects your audience’s time, keeps you out of the weeds or unexplored territory, and deters micromanagement. Say enough to show you get it, share what you know with your questioners, and specify when you’ll provide additional information.

No matter your level of smarts and preparation, it’s unlikely you’ll escape executive presentations without a few stumping questions. These steps can help you react calmly and professionally in the moment. While you can’t anticipate exactly what you won’t know during a meeting, you will know what to do when you confront it.

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