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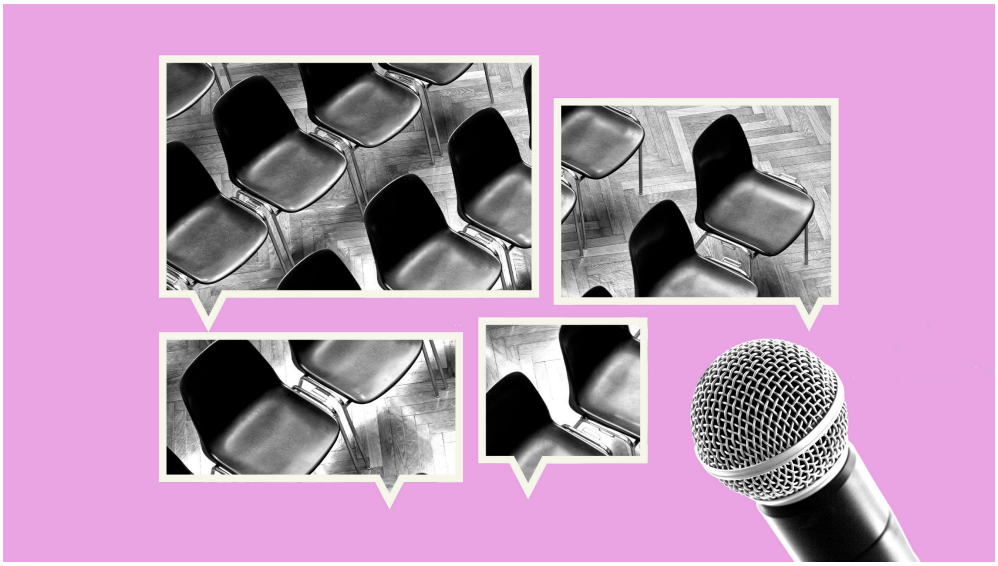

How to Nail the Q&A After Your Presentation

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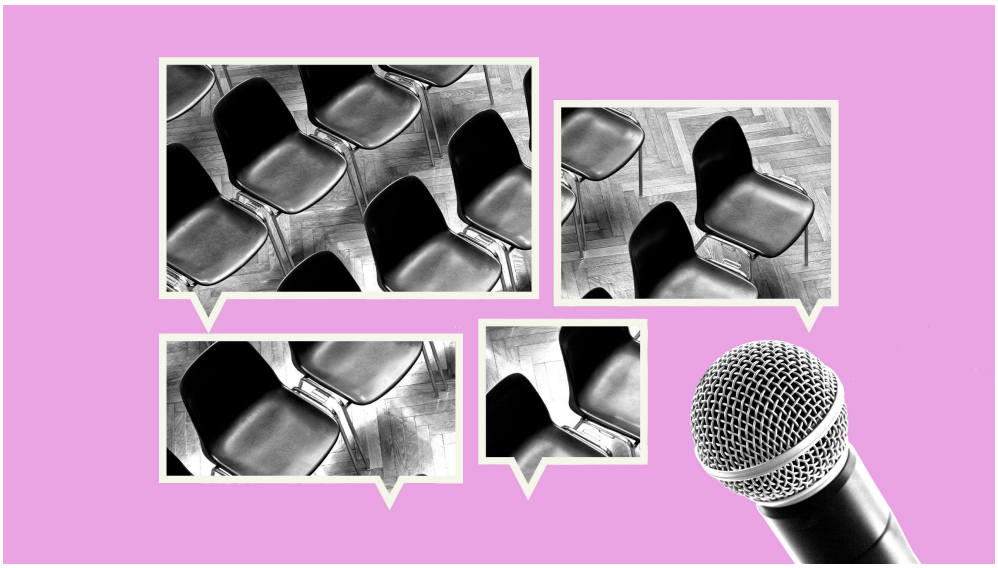

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If you're not a huge fan of public speaking, you're in good company. It's such a widely shared source of anxiety that when psychologists want to induce unpleasant stress in a person for experimental purposes, they often use a public speaking task called the Trier Social Stress Test. The test requires people to give a talk and do sums in front of a panel of impassive listeners, and it reliably generates stress markers such as a faster heart rate, raised cortisol levels, and "enhanced skin conductance," which is the polite way of saying sweaty palms.

Of course, we can reduce our nerves by preparing well for our presentations. But when I help professionals get ready for a big meeting, I often hear about a specific concern. One of my clients recently told me, "I know my slides. I'm on top of the numbers and I've practiced my anecdotes. But I don't look forward to the Q&A. I don't know what people are going to ask, so I worry I won't have a good answer for their questions. Or worse, that I'll say something dumb."

Unfortunately, research suggests they have a point. When we're asked a tough question and we're not sure how to respond, it can make us feel like we've lost control of the situation. That feeling gets coded as a potential threat by our brain, so it powers up a defensive fight-or-flight response while restricting activity in the parts of the brain associated with more complex reasoning. This redirection of mental resources makes perfect sense if the threat is a fire, and we simply need to run from a burning building as fast as possible. But it's also why our mind can go blank just as we need to muster a brilliant comeback under pressure.

To allow yourself to think more clearly and creatively when faced with questions that aren't easy to answer, you need to reduce the sense of threat and give yourself back a sense of control. Here are four approaches to practice.

Appreciate the conversation

Dead silence after you finish speaking is not what you want, unless you're delivering a sermon in a monastery. Remind yourself that questions are good. They are a sign of an interesting talk, since they mean that your audience has paid attention to what you've said and is now actively reflecting on your content. Reframe the Q&A as a rewarding conversation that signals healthy engagement, and your brain is less likely to be on the defensive — which means you'll be more likely to bring your best self to bear. Two specific things to try:

- In the moment after you finish speaking, as the first person puts their hand up or opens their mouth to speak, tell yourself silently: "Aha, good — they're interested!"
- Start your answer by appreciating the question. Try something like "I appreciate you raising that," or "Thank you, that's an important topic."

The second of those approaches delivers the additional benefits of giving yourself an extra moment to think about your reply and of making your audience feel valued. While recording a podcast recently, I was asked a question by the host that I didn't immediately know how to answer so I told him that he had asked a good question before I began my response. Later, he admitted "I know it's silly, but I couldn't help but feel good when you praised the quality of my question, even though I knew you were giving yourself a moment to think."

Channel your empathy

Usually people ask questions not because they're trying to trip you up, but because they want to understand the practical impact your ideas may have on their own job — their workload, their priorities, and their chances of success. So as you prepare the content of your presentation, make sure to also spend time seeing the content through the eyes of your audience. Consider what you would ask at the end of your talk if you were in their shoes. Think about three common themes that come up in the Q&A:

- **What's the downside for them?** What would your audience see as the biggest obstacles to doing or acting on what you've talked about? Be ready to show you recognize their concerns, even if you don't have a simple answer to the problem.
- **What else do they care about right now?** Perhaps they're trying to implement a new strategic plan, or they're busy building relationships with external stakeholders. Think ahead about how your material might link to those broader issues.

- **What happens next?** People have a built-in desire for clarity about certainties in a changing situation. You might not have a crystal ball but you can probably say something about the next step that flows from your presentation.

Considering your audience's perspective helps you stay calm by reminding you that you're dealing with human beings, not enemy combatants. It also makes it more likely that you'll have impact with your ideas.

I remember some years ago sitting with my team before a meeting with the board of a nonprofit, where we had helped build a new strategy for the organization. As we huddled around the flip chart ahead of the presentation and thought about the perspective of each person on the board, it dawned on us that the CEO might have particular reasons to feel wistful about letting go of past priorities. Thanks to this small amount of empathetic forethought, we were less unsettled by the questions he asked in the meeting and better able to emphasize ways that the new proposal built on his past successes, which helped the whole board enthusiastically endorse the new plan.

Start with agreement

Sometimes someone asks a question because they disagree with you. This can be a particularly delicate moment to handle, because disagreement all too easily puts people's brains into defensive fight-or-flight mode. To help both of you think clearly and constructively, start your answer by focusing on where you agree. This helps create what psychologists call "in-group" — a sense of being on the same team and sharing common ground. It roots the exchange in the kind of mutual respect that helps to reduce the sense of threat in the situation.

Follow these steps (adapted from game theorist Anatol Rapaport) to defuse tension:

- Briefly play back your understanding of their view. "If I understand you right, you feel…"
- Outline where you agree. "We're aligned on much of this. We both think that… and…"
- Home in on where your real disagreement lies. "The one place we differ is…"
- Explain what's shaped your point of view. "The reason for my perspective is that…"

I saw this done well by a senior manager in a tech company who was being challenged by a colleague on her ambitious timeline for a new product launch. Her response ran something like this: "If I understand you right, you feel it isn't realistic to try to launch in three months. I think we all want to make sure the product is rock solid when it goes to market, and I agree timing is tight. I'm more optimistic than you about our chances of making this a success, though, because we've found a way to double the staff working on the project. I can tell you more about this offline." By showing that she truly acknowledged and even agreed with some of her colleague's perspective, her response was accepted more fully than if she had simply tried to reassure her colleague that all was going to be fine. She made him feel heard rather than dismissed.

Parry with curiosity

Sometimes the question you're asked feels truly out of left-field, and it can make even the savviest presenter scramble for a response. This can happen when an audience member is trying to be entertaining or informative ("Isn't this just like the Japanese knotweed problem?") or, more commonly, when someone wants to shine a light on a very specific situation that they're personally dealing with. ("What are you going to do about the data on page 16 about the outages last month? It's killing us.")

You can't prepare an answer for this sort of unpredictable question. But you can be ready with a helpful state of mind: curiosity. Learning has been found to be inherently rewarding to our brains, which is one reason that asking a question of your own can be just enough to get you off the defensive. For example, you might say:

- "Can you tell me more about what's driving your question?"
- "That's intriguing — is this something you've experienced yourself?"
- "Is there a specific reason for your concern on this?"

And if you're still left scratching your head after that gambit, go back to the first strategy above and appreciate the horizon-broadening input. "I'm not sure about that, but thank you — I'll look into it and get back to you." After all, you never know when you might need to know about knotweed.

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