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Question-and-Answer Sessions

**What to say during question-and-answer sessions**

Most presentations involve interaction between the speaker and the audience in the form of questions and answers (Q&A). Dealing effectively with questions involves the following decisions, preparation, and skills.

**Deciding when to take questions**

Well before the presentation, think about when you want to take questions. Then, be sure to inform your audience at the beginning of the presentation. Say, for example, "Please feel free to ask questions as they come up," or "Please hold all your questions until the end of the presentation," or "Feel free to interrupt with questions of understanding or clarification, but since we have only an hour together, please hold questions of debate or discussion until the end."

Usually, audience and cultural expectations are fairly clear: the current trend in most Anglo-American business presentations is to include questions during the presentation; sometimes, however, the norm is a Q&A period at the end of the presentation. If the choice is up to you, think about the following advantages and disadvantages.

* ***Questions after the presentation:***If you take questions after the presentation, you will maintain control of the schedule and the flow of information. However, you risk

(1) losing your audience's attention and perhaps even comprehension if they cannot ask their questions as they occur, and

(2) placing yourself in an awkward position if important audience members interrupt with questions after you've asked them not to. Since audiences tend to remember more material from the beginning and end of a presentation, having Q&A at the end of your talk places undue emphasis on the question period. To alleviate this problem, leave time for a final closing after taking questions.

* ***Questions during the presentation:***If you take questions during the presentation, the questions will be more meaningful to the questioner, the feedback will be more immediate, and your audience may listen more actively. However, questions during the presentation can upset your schedule and waste time. To alleviate these problems,

(1) allow enough time for questions, and

(2) control digressions.

**Preparing for questions**

From the time you begin your audience analysis, think about possible questions.

* ***Anticipate what the questions will be.***Bring along extra information, perhaps even extra visual aids, to answer such questions if they come up. Another way to anticipate questions is to ask a colleague to play devil's advocate during your rehearsal.
* ***Prepare for frequently asked questions***relating to

(1) value ("Are you sure we really need this?"),

(2) cost ("Can't we do it for less?"),

(3) alternatives ("What happens if we don't do anything?"),

(4) action ("How will you implement it?"),

(5) details ("Are those the most recent numbers?"),

(6) obstacles ("How will you motivate them to accept this change?"),

(7) risk ("So what's the downside?"), and

(8) timing ("Can't we put it off until next quarter?")

* ***Develop a positive attitude.***Avoid a defensive attitude; instead, think of it as a compliment if your listeners are interested enough to ask questions for clarification, amplification, or justification.

**Using effective listening skills**

Author Robert Bolton breaks listening skills into clusters of behaviors that can be termed "attending," "encouraging," and "following" skills.

* ***Attending skills:***Together, these nonverbal skills create the look of good listening.

(1) Maintain a posture of involvement by directly facing the audience, keeping your arms and hands out of the way, looking toward the questioner, and avoiding distracting gestures, (such as picking up your notes, rubbing your shoulder, or clicking a pen). Let your posture and stillness signal that you want to hear the question.

(2) Use effective eye contact. Observe the questioner's whole face to pick up the nonverbal cues that may be part of the question.

(3) Create an environment suitable for listening. Move to the side of the podium or the front of the table, closing the distance between you and your audience; ask everyone to direct their attention to the questioner so side conversations don't distract; and turn off projectors and noisy fans.

* ***Encouraging skills:***These skills set the tone, encouraging people to make comments and share their views.

(1) Wait for their questions. After asking for questions, give people at least 10 to 15 seconds to think. Don't say anything while you wait.

(2) Ask open-ended questions that cannot be easily answered "yes" or "no." If your question starts with the words "Can you" or "Do you," then it can be answered with a single word such as "Yes." On the other hand, if you begin by saying "What do you. . ." or "Tell me about. . ." then your opening is more likely to yield real responses instead of just head nods.

(3) Be silent while listening. When someone is asking a question-even a very long question – keep your mouth closed; don't interrupt. Keep your mind silent, too; don't respond until you've heard the whole question.

(4) Use natural "minimal encouragers" such as nodding or tilting your head, smiling, widening your eyes, or even softly saying "uh huh."

* ***Following skills:***Following skills ensure understanding between listener and questioner.

(1) Make sure the audience understands the question by recapping it briefly in your own words if the questioner is hard to hear or by beginning your response in such a way that everyone in the audience knows what question you are answering.

(2) Make sure you understand the question by paraphrasing it if it was asked in a confusing fashion or with an angry tone, or by asking the person to restate his question if it was unclear. When a question is unclear, use an *I* response rather than a *you* response, such as *"I'm* not sure *I* understand" rather than “*Your* questions is confusing.”

**Dealing with difficult questions**

Some questions are especially challenging because of their structure or word choice. Other questions cause problems because you don't know the answer. And finally, some questions are difficult because of the person who asked them.

* ***Unclear questions:***These questions are confusing because of their structure, length, or word choice.

(1) *Broad questions* about wide-ranging issues that could never be addressed in a limited time: either point out which part of the topic you'll discuss or offer to discuss the topic with the questioner at a later time.

(2) *Vague questions* using terms like "this," "that notion," or "it": paraphrase the question in a way that defines your understanding of the term "this" or "it."

(3) *Long multi-questions* stringing multiple questions together: either synthesize the many questions and offer a single response, start with the question you like best and avoid ones you don't want to address, or answer one part and then ask the questioner to remind you of the other questions depending on the situation and the role of the questioner.

* ***Questions framed in a limiting way:*** Questioners knowingly or unknowingly sometimes frame questions in ways that can trap or at least restrict you. These questions need to be paraphrased to recast them for your own purpose.

(1) *Forced-choice questions,* which use "either/or": remember that you can answer "both."

(2) *Hypothetical questions* about future possibilities or the opinion of someone who is not in the room: either refuse to speculate or begin your response by noting that you are "not the CEO of Firestone," but from your vantage point, there are several issues to consider.

(3) *Leading questions* that begin with a false premise, such as "When did you start manipulating the data?": recast the question: "If you are asking whether the data is accurate, yes, it is."

(4) *Loaded questions* that use negative or emotionally charged language: don't repeat the negative words or get pulled into a question that you don't want to answer.

* ***"Don't know" questions:***Sometimes, you absolutely don't know the answer. In such cases, say "I don't know." Even better, suggest where the person might find the answer. Better still, offer to get the answer yourself. For example, "Off the top of my head, I don't know the sales figures for that region, but I'll look them up and get them on your desk by tomorrow morning." Then be sure you follow up. Never hazard a guess unless you make it extremely clear that it is only a guess. In other cases, you may just need time to gather your thoughts. Here are a few stalling options:

(1) *Repeat or paraphrase the question:*

"You're wondering how to deal with the situation in the Ohio office";

*(2) Turn the question around:* "How do you think we should handle the situation in the Ohio office, Amy?";

(3) *Turn the question outward:* "What ideas do you all have about the Ohio situation?";

(4) *Reflect:* "Good question, Bill, let me think about it for a moment"; or

*(5) Write:* If using a suitable visual aid, write down the main points of the question as you think.

**Dealing with difficult questioners**

Sometimes, questions may be difficult because of the person asking the question, rather than just the content itself. People may be difficult questioners because they are overly emotional, because of their tendency to pontificate, or because of their position (e.g., your boss or your client). Here are some tips for dealing with such questioners:

* ***Be polite****,* even to hostile questioners. Don't lower yourself to their level or snap at someone, saying "So, exactly what's your point? I didn't hear a question in there."
* ***Lessen hostility***by pointing to common ground, in essence agreeing to disagree, for example, "We don't seem to agree on how to handle the customer service problem, but I hope we can at least agree that we both want to do what's best for most of our customers."
* ***Paraphrase the feelings behind questions****.* For example, you might paraphrase an emotional or sarcastic questioner by saying "You seem angry that you were not consulted about the new policy."
* ***Interrupt repeat offenders.***If someone is a difficult questioner repeatedly, try a nonverbal interruption, such as putting up your hands, along with a verbal interruption such as "I'm sorry to interrupt, Lisa, but since time is limited, I want to make a brief comment about the important subject you've brought up, before we wrap up Q&A."
* ***Look elsewhere afterwards****.* After you answer a question, do not return your eye contact to the difficult questioner. If you look at a difficult audience member at the end of your response, you are just inviting him or her to ask yet another difficult question.

**Delivering effective responses**

Ideally, your responses will be easy to understand, interesting, and brief enough to maintain the interactive nature of a question-and-answer session.

* *Stick to your objective and your organization.* Answer the question, but always keep your presentation objective in mind. Even if you have lots of information for your answer, limit yourself to whatever advances your objective. Don't go off on rambling tangents. If necessary, divert the question back to your main ideas. If someone asks a question that you plan to cover later in your talk, try to answer it in a nutshell and then make it clear you'll cover the point in more detail later in your talk.
* ***Provide a preview***if you have a long answer. For instance, you might say, "Yes, I do have several concerns about the new orientation program. Some of them deal with how the program is structured and others deal with logistical problems. In terms of structure. . ."
* ***Make your responses interesting***by including brief examples or "sound bites"-colorful words or phrases that make your statements memorable. On the other hand, using abstract words or stringing several numbers together in a single sentence could make your response hard to follow. Find the balance between enough detail to be interesting and not so much that you ramble.
* ***Keep the entire audience involved***in the Q&A session by calling on people from various locations in the room and by avoiding a one-to-one conversation with a single member of the audience. When you are responding, make eye contact with several people, not just the person who asked the question.
* ***End with a summative statement****.* If you opted to take questions at the end of your presentation, never let someone's tangential question close your presentation. Instead, end with a summative statement that synthesizes key messages from the Q&A session and connects them to your main message and your closing.