



tips&tools

Handling challenging questions

The 'Any questions?' moment in a presentation can be the most difficult. For as long as you are delivering your piece, at least you are in control. The moment you ask your audience if they have questions, you lay yourself open to any one of a number of tricky situations. In this article, we set some common challenges and some useful strategies for handling them.

Handling challenging questions

So there you are, standing in front of a group of people, and you're drawing to the end of your presentation. Maybe they're the board; maybe they're a residents' association; maybe they're just a group of colleagues from your office. No matter. The fact is that you were incredibly nervous before you started. That was bad enough. But now it starts to dawn on you that the worst is yet to come. There will be no 'thank you and good night' followed by rapturous applause. Instead, there will be one anxiety-ridden person standing at the front asking: "Any questions..?"

This moment in a presentation can be the most challenging. For as long as you are delivering your piece, at least you are in control. The moment you ask your audience if they have questions, you lay yourself open to any one of a number of challenging situations.

Our experience of training and presenting to varying audiences around the world leads us to place these tricky situations into four main categories. And we'd like to share some useful strategies for dealing with each one.

Tricky situations

The first situation you may find yourself in is what we might call 'Tumbleweed'. Nothing is worse than asking the audience for their questions and being greeted by stony silence. The only sound is that of tumbleweed blowing through the room. What's your next move?

The second situation involves the 'Eager Beaver': that person who will never leave you to suffer in silence because they will always have a question or a comment. And then they'll ask another. And another. How do you give others a chance to get a word in without offending this well-meaning individual?

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The third situation sees the 'Country Rambler' take centre stage. The Country Rambler doesn't so much ask a question as go on a journey which may last several minutes and cover life, the universe and everything (as well as your presentation, if you're lucky).

What can you do to bring them back on track?

Lastly, you may have to cope with the 'Flame Thrower'. This is perhaps the most challenging situation to deal with, because this person is simply out to burn you. They're not particularly interested in what you have to say, they just want to see you squirm...

How do you go about diffusing their anger and avoid a slanging match?

Tumbleweed

The first thing to remember in the eerie silence that is Tumbleweed is to give your audience time to answer. It is tempting to fill a silence, which you see as awkward but others are happily using to think and reflect. It's also worth recognising that sometimes no questions, is a good thing. Maybe you've already dealt with all the main issues comprehensively and people are ready to go. Don't overstay your welcome!

However, sometimes your audience will need help with their bit of the presentation. Here are some suggestions:

- Ask something better than "Any questions?" This can be just too open for some people. Try asking something more forward, e.g. "How did you feel about the materials we produced for the campaign?"; "Would it be helpful if I went through the project costings again?"
- Use questions and comments you've had from other audiences. "I'm often asked when I talk about our work about the levels of drug use amongst homeless people"; "I heard someone during the break talking about..."
- Ask the audience for a show of hands. "How many of you had ever heard of Warren Buffet before last year?"

Eager Beaver

While you don't want to let the Eager Beaver dominate the discussion, under no circumstances should you offend or belittle the questioner. Try the =mc 4-step solution:

1. Thank the questioner for their enthusiasm
2. State openly that you'd "Like to make sure that everyone has a chance to ask a question."
3. Offer the opportunity to someone else in the audience
4. 4'Phone a friend': if you fear that no-one will ask a question (and you risk being left with the Eager Beaver!) better to ask someone you know in the audience to make a comment. "Priya, I'm sure you have some thoughts on this..."

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Country Rambler

The Country Rambler is often in what we call a 'first-person fantasy': they're in their own little world using the audience as their audience. The trick here is to realise that they are effectively in a trance, cut off from their immediate environment. Accordingly, the first thing to do is break the trance. Do this by:

- Gently taking a small step towards them
- Then say something like "Brian, I'm going to put you on 'pause' just for a moment" whilst making a gentle downward gesture with your hand

This combination of movement, gesture, saying their name and using a word like 'pause' should be enough to make them stop. Once they've stopped, you can:

- Acknowledge their contribution and interest (again, never offend or belittle)
- Use an Eager Beaver tactic to bring others into the discussion

Flamethrower

When handling the Flamethrower, there are a number of things to consider:

- As with everyone else, treat the questioner with respect. An audience is typically ready to side with a presenter against a flamethrower, but not if the presenter is just as badly behaved!
- Stand your ground. It's easy in these circumstances either to move towards the questioner (in a way that may appear aggressive) or to move back (and suggest that you're defensive). Stay in a relaxed position while listening to the point being made
- 'Ask the audience'. "Before I answer that, I'd just like to see how other people feel about this issue..." If the question is unreasonable, somebody will usually come to your rescue. If everyone agrees with the flamethrower, you'd better deal with the point being made!
- Separate the fact from the feeling. Then acknowledge the feeling but respond to the fact. "This is clearly an issue you care about deeply. Your main concern seems to be the impact of these changes on the effectiveness of your department. Let me deal with that..."

Hopefully these few tips will make your next presentation a little less nerve-wracking! But remember, handling challenging questions and situations is just one part of delivering an outstanding presentation...

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