

Managing Q & A

A Great Opportunity to Clarify and Convey Our Message

Question and answer periods can be a presenter's best friend. They usually offer us good opportunities to:

- engage in a less formal, more conversational way with our audience
- check for understanding and offer clarifications
- reinforce our key points
- re-assert our “call to action”
- gather new information about the audience and the issues
- discover ways to improve our next presentation

But let's face it, Q & A can also be challenging, especially if our ideas, proposals or plans for change have aroused opposition, resistance or skepticism. As writer Terry Pearce says in Leading Out Loud:¹

Questions from the audience are the most direct kind of feedback and therefore offer the best chance to engage....you offer a direct relationship with individuals rather than the group as a whole. If you can conduct the Q & A period displaying the same competence and connection you did in your more formal remarks, you can further solidify the trust of your audience...[but] during questioning, your natural tendency is to defend, patronize, and avoid exposure. It takes a planned process and practice to avoid these tendencies and stay within yourself, speaking in a way that continues to engender trust.

Furthermore, as Pearce points out, questions are often “two questions in one:”

...the stated question, which is literal, and the unstated question, which is only hinted at by the words of the question. The first task of the speaker is to discern when these two questions coincide and when they don't. The second task is to respond to both. In doing so, the speaker can indeed display competence and generate a new level of trust. The stated question is the obvious, objective one; the unstated one is the intent of the questioner, revealed in the subtleties of voice, body, and attitude.

¹ Pearce, Terry, Leading Out Loud, Chapter 9, *Answering Questions Authentically*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA, 1995.

Example:

A manager has just described the timetable for relocating and training employees at a new store. An audience member asks, “*How many people will have to relocate to the new store?*”

The stated question simply asks for a number. But depending on the speaker’s tone of voice, body language, facial expression, etc.—it may be possible to discern an unstated question, too—basically, “*How painful is this going to be?*” -- an expression of distress and unhappiness.

Answering the unstated question requires a greater sensitivity and candor from a speaker who wishes to win or maintain the audience’s respect. In response, it would at least be appropriate for the speaker to acknowledge the hardship the relocation may impose and outline any mitigating measures—and possibly to probe for more information from this speaker.

But, admittedly, this can be difficult. As Pearce explains:

Unfortunately, convention allows a speaker to ignore or evade the unpleasant. Dealing with anger, disappointment, or disagreement is uncomfortable. The temptation is strong to treat these questions as though the intent is stated in the words, and of course, you will rarely be criticized for ignoring indirect challenges. The questioner hides the intent to avoid direct confrontation, and the speaker detects the veil but ignores it to avoid dealing with the real issue of the questioner. This is an insidious conspiracy. Authenticity demands that this bargain not be kept, and the first to acknowledge the real agenda gains the respect and admiration of the entire audience.

Quick Tips and Reminders

Here are some tips for preparing for and managing Q & A, authentically and effectively:

- **Anticipate questions and practice your answers.** Test your answers with people whose knowledge of the subject will be comparable to that of your audience. You may discover that you are unconsciously making too many assumptions about what your audience knows (especially with industry jargon). If you’re presenting with a team, it’s often a good idea to ask each team member to develop a question or two. Practice role-playing and critiquing each other’s answers.
- **Invite questions graciously.** In general, don’t simply ask “Are there any questions?” because many people may feel embarrassed or uncomfortable about speaking up. Even a statement like, “I’d love to know what else might interest you,” or “I know we’ve covered a lot of very technical material, is there anything I can clarify?” Or consider posing a question yourself on behalf of your audience, e.g., “I’m often asked about security...let me say a little more about our plan....”

- **Listen and watch carefully to catch both the stated and unstated questions—the “question within a question.”** The questioner’s vocal inflection, facial expression and body language may be more revealing than the words themselves. Is the question merely a request for clarification, or is it a veiled dispute, challenge or sign of discomfort?
- **Repeat or paraphrase the question,** if it is at all complex or if the audience is large, so that everyone has a chance to hear it and also to make sure that you heard it correctly. If necessary ask the questioner to clarify what he/she meant, but do so graciously—without a “sharp edge”—even (or especially) if you are “under fire.” Example: rather than “I don’t understand what you’re asking,” say, “Let me be sure I understand you...are you asking...or....?”) Taking time to do this also gives you an extra moment to consider your answer.
- **Incorporate the point of the question into your answer,** especially in large meetings where some audience members may easily miss a point. (e.g., Q: “Will there be a security fence around the construction site at night?” A: “Yes.” Better: A: Yes, we will have a security fence around the site from dusk until dawn, and the fence will be kept locked until the crews return the next day.
- **Listen for and address the real concern behind the question,** which may not be explicit (e.g., A: “Yes, we will have a security fence around the site and locked at all times, day or night, whenever construction crews are not around. We know that security is a concern in this neighborhood, so we are also taking other precautions including special lighting and a roving security patrol. We’ll continue to ask you and your neighbors to report any suspicious activity to us or to the police. Does anyone else have a question or specific concern about security while we’re on the subject?”)
- **Answer concisely and check for understanding.** While it’s important to listen for and respond to the underlying concern, it’s also important to be concise: the audience is not interested in everything you may happen to know about the subject. Stick to the point and watch your questioner’s facial expression to see if your answer is adequate. Ask them, “Does that answer your question?” If you sense they’re still not comfortable with your answer, you might offer to speak to the questioner individually later on.
- **Use a black board or flip chart to acknowledge a question** that you can’t or don’t want to answer right away or even as a way of publicly “taking notes.” This allows you to stay on track yet while also “validating” the question and the person who asked it. (This is sometimes called the “parking lot” technique.)
- **Avoid prolonged debates,** especially with a questioner who you sense may have a “personal agenda.” Politely give them the floor to get the question off their chest

and wait for a good moment to jump in; if necessary, gently interrupt by first raising your hand. If they're particularly obstreperous, it may help to take a few steps toward them and offer to speak with them later about their concern. But indicate that you need to move on to accommodate others and finish the presentation.

- **Admit that you don't know the answer to a question but offer to find out** or even see if someone else in the room has the information. See if you can use the question to learn something new and involve other audience members in the search for an answer. (Q: "The last time we had a construction fence here, somebody broke through it with wire cutters and stole some tools. Are you going to be able to prevent that?" A: Well, it's good to know that. We may need to order a heavier gauge fence, but I'm not sure. Does anyone have any suggestions?)
- **Watch your acronyms and abbreviations!** Unless you're speaking to a group of peers, you can easily lose an audience by using technical shorthand that's familiar to you and your peers but might as well be an ancient language to your audience (who may feel uncomfortable asking for explanations). If you do want to introduce some technical or unfamiliar technology, consider putting the terms and definitions up on a flip chart or blackboard, and/or in a hand-out.
- **Consider preparing a list of FAQs** ("Frequently Asked Questions") that your audience can take with them and share with others. This can be especially helpful with complex, technical questions. If the answers are in your words, in print, there's less chance for misunderstanding.