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Here's How to...

## Handle Question and Answer Sessions Successfully

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When giving a presentation, encouraging and answering questions from the audience will complete, and can enhance, the program. It injects energy and anticipation into the room and provides an excellent opportunity for interacting with the people who listened to you speak. However, since most question and answer sessions are unscripted, they can be nerve-racking. Why? Because they provide the audience with an opportunity, too—an opportunity to see if you, the person at the front of the room, really know what you're talking about.

Nevertheless, the popularity of "town hall" type events held by politicians, senior executives, and university administrators testifies to the power and appeal of direct interactions with one's constituencies. Bob Nardelli, former chief executive officer of The Home Depot, has said in recent interviews that he wished he had subscribed to this approach in the past.

During The Home Depot's 2006 annual shareholder meeting, Nardelli did not allow shareholders to ask general questions, and select investors were allowed to ask just one question each in one minute or less, after which the microphone was turned off. Then, Nardelli ended his session abruptly after 30 minutes, preventing direct questions about key proposals and his compensation package. In January of this year, eight rocky months after that meeting, Nardelli resigned.

Of course, answering questions in public occurs outside of formal talks or presentations, especially in forestry. Q and A sessions can take place during team meetings with colleagues, through interacting with the media, and during job interviews. Yet regardless of where they take place, active listening and answering questions promptly are vital to successful communication in any situation.

Typically, the following three steps enable speakers to handle question and answer sessions successfully.

► *Repeat, or rephrase, each question.* The audience wants to know what you've been asked. In groups larger than two, there is no guarantee everyone heard the question. This also confirms your understanding of the question and gives time to consider an answer.

► *Reflect on the question.* Pause. It shows respect for the questioner and lets you organize your thoughts. Pausing also helps minimize the "ums" and "ahs" that weaken any response you provide.

► *Be sure to answer the question.* Have you ever felt that a speaker didn't answer the question? Don't be that person. Keep your answers brief and to the point. Maintain eye contact with the questioner and with the audience in general. Looking at just the questioner neglects the rest of the group, and may make the questioner feel like you are drilling holes into his or her head with your eyes. Plus, if the person is hostile or chatty, making eye contact with someone else will end any extended one-on-one discussion

and help you move on to the next question.

In sum, the recipe for answering questions is Repeat, Reflect, and Respond.

In some situations, it might be best to postpone answering a question. For example, you can wait to address specific problems that seem off topic until the end of the talk. This is particularly important if the answer would take a long time or break the general flow of your presentation. Don't hesitate to respond to an inquiry by saying something such as, "I can better answer that question one-on-one. Let's discuss that after my presentation."

If you can't answer a question, say, "I don't know." Don't apologize and never bluff. You may offer to research an answer and get back to the questioner later. And if you offer to do this, follow through. Ultimately, your reputation and integrity rest on doing what you say you will do.

Alternately, suggest resources that can help inquirers to answer questions themselves. Often, someone in the room knows the answer or is familiar with a resource and can provide additional assistance. Ask for ideas from the group, and thank the person for his or her assistance.

If you field a hostile question, be respectful and maintain control of your emotions. Audiences do not like it when a well-mannered speaker is attacked, and you gain the sympathy of the audience by keeping your cool. Focus on the issues raised and respond with facts. Avoid personal confrontations in front of the group.

Sometimes, there is no question. When this happens, you can tactfully break off a vague, rambling query with, "So, are you asking ...?" If the person appears to be talking to talk, ask sincerely, "What is your question?" or "I'm not sure I understand your question?"

Informing the audience at the beginning about how you to intend to handle questions during a talk will help you establish and maintain control of the room. Will there be a designated time for questions at the end of the presentation, or will you encourage and invite questions during your talk? And when calling on a questioner, use an open hand instead of pointing. We point in directions, not at people.

When wrapping up, notify the audience that the next question will be the last one. Your ability to interact with an audience is always being evaluated, and audience members will ask themselves if you were candid, direct, and in control. Finally, when the question and answer session is finished, be sure to thank the audience. Etiquette matters.

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