

Twenty Tips for Handling Tough Questions (2006)

By Tony Jeary

There are ways to deal with some specific audience mindsets that can presenters must be equipped to handle. In this article, we focus on another “must” for the master presenter – the skillful handling of difficult questions. Questions are an important tool for both learning and teaching. Good questions, answered clearly, can help you make your point. Tough Questions, answered candidly and skillfully, can demonstrate you've done your homework and have a proposition that holds together under fire. On the other hand, difficult questions that are fumbled or that result in arguments can ruin your chances of achieving the outcomes you wanted from your presentation and create added complications, and can affect your reputation and/or credibility.

How

We've identified our “top twenty” tips for becoming an expert handler of challenging questions. This of course isn't an exhaustive list, but will give you the drift our thinking.

Twenty Tips for Handling Tough Questions

1. Know your audience. A recurring piece of advice, yes, but very important here. If you know your audience well enough, you'll be able to anticipate questions and objections in advance. You can incorporate answers to some in your base presentation and prepare answers for other questions to have at the ready should they arise.

2. Be Prepared. Especially for topics that you know will be controversial to some degree, get some help from others to brainstorm possible questions and then have answers ready. Poll a few people ahead of your presentation(s) by email to get even deeper on their thinking. You may even want to have some backup slides or flip charts prepared with your anticipated FAQs.

3. Establish Expectations Early. If it's important that you are permitted to deliver your presentation without interruption for discussion along the way, say so at the beginning. Let the group know that you have set aside XX minutes for discussion and questions, and ask them to hold their comments until that time. You may or may not want to encourage “questions for clarification” along the way – some people really need the opportunity to get clarification; others define “clarification” much too broadly and can upset your flow.

4. Set Process, Guidelines and Ground Rules. (See Jeary/Lowe book Meeting MAGIC) When you're ready to take questions, set some ground rules:

- Simple things like having the questioner say their name, position and organization first can help you with answers (e.g. a question from an engineer about a sales process might be answered differently than if the question came from a sales person).
- A rule for “one question per person” may be a good idea if you expect a barrage of questions and don't want to have one person dominate.
- A rule about “no personal questions” may be good if the material you are working with has confidential components (e.g. a new pay plan).

5. Listen Actively. Listen carefully and repeat the question back to assure that you've heard it correctly and to buy a little time to think about how you may want to answer it. For loaded questions or those laced with highly emotional terms, you may want to paraphrase the question rather than repeating it directly to tone down a potentially hot situation.

6. Relate to your material. Whenever possible, relate the question to material that you've covered in the presentation. Be ready to pull up slides or flip chart pages that relate to the topic and expand your references.

7. Keep Your Cool. It's extremely important that the person at the front of the room maintains a calm and collected manner in the face of inflammatory questions. The old rule applies here: The first to lose their temper loses. . .

8. Manage Body Language. A calm verbal delivery isn't enough – make sure your body language doesn't telegraph anger or impatience (e.g. hands on hips)

9. Deal or defer? Presenters need to be ready to decide what to do with certain kinds of questions, especially those that may require a complicated or lengthy answer. If the issue is mainstream to your audience, the best choice usually is to answer it then and now. On the other hand, if the question is of interest to a narrow group, it may be appropriate to defer to after the meeting or facilitate the question and link to another person in the room.

10. Chunk down or up? Related to the above, questions that you might otherwise defer can be either broadened or narrowed to match the interests of your group and your answer will often fully satisfy the questioner as well. (e.g. I can't answer directly about your circumstances, but generally an employee with X years of service would receive Y benefits.)

11. Maintain control. Controversial topics or bad news situations can create an environment where loss of control is a major risk. Without losing composure, be firm if there is a need to return to order (e.g. "please, one question at a time")

12. Don't get drawn into arguments. Audiences generally don't want to witness arguments, but when they do, they will generally side with the underdog – the member of the audience that may have started the altercation.

Additionally, some people may have come in "spoiling for a fight" and will seriously test your composure. Another old one applies: Don't get into a mud wrestling contest with a pig. You get dirty & the pig enjoys it.

13. Take It "Off Line." If an argument or heated exchange seems inevitable, then don't be afraid to simply stop the process with a simple "let me talk to you about this privately at the break or after the presentation".. The audience will appreciate not having to watch the fight.

14. Redirect the answer. If you've got a reasonable answer to what came to you as an inflammatory question, redirect the answer to the audience at large rather than the questioner. You'll get a positive response and can move on with providing an opening for a hostile follow-up question.

15. Get Help. We've identified roles for both hosts and audience champions that can support a presenter in proactive and positive ways. These allies can also provide essential support in a challenging Q&A session. With advance permission, you may enlist their support by asking for their support of your answer or their general views on the matter.

16. Restate response - And the point of the ramble is? Some people will ask long and involved questions that may or may not be questions at all. Sometimes these are simply statements regarding the position they have taken on the matter. It's not impolite to ask them to briefly restate their question. (Larry King often demonstrates this technique on his Larry King Live television show.)

17. Reframe if need be - Black and White? Some questioners will sometimes demand a simple Yes or No answer to a question that can't be answered that way. (e.g. "have you stopped harassing your employees yet?"). Here you must reframe the question and/or use a non-answer to change the tone. (e.g. "I believe that you are trying to get at a larger issue here, could you tell us what success would look like for you?")

18. Move on smoothly. After closing a difficult question, move on smoothly, and if possible, pick the next question from a “friendly” in the audience, or use “target polling” to ask a question of an audience member to change the tone back to positive.

19. Remember that the majority of questions are sincere. Don't blow off a question just because of the way it's been asked. There are usually genuine underlying concerns and to take the “I won't dignify that with an answer” may cause a disconnect with other members of the audience and lessen your support.

20. Above all, tell the truth! Fudging to “get off stage” won't do you any good in the long run and can in fact cause permanent damage to your credibility. Inventing answers to questions is unacceptable – most audiences will accept an “I'll have to get back to you on that” answer as long as it's a legitimate “I don't know” and not a dodge for a painful point.

Benefits

- The meeting leader, manager, facilitator, speaker or trainer who is well prepared and rehearsed to handle difficult questions will move more “unknowns into knowns” and will go into the presentation with vastly improved confidence.
- The presenter that deals effectively with challenging questions will get dramatically improved results, and achieve his or her objectives more readily and enhance his/her credibility .
- The presenter's stature and reputation for leadership at the front of the room will increase significantly.

Action Plan

- Start early on planning your next presentation, especially if it will have controversial subject matter. Use the “Political Mapping” technique to study your audience and begin anticipating questions.
- Brainstorm potential questions with your team and build answers into your presentation and prepare a FAQ list as backup.
- Make special preparations to manage your own personal state going into the session. Be well rested and go in confidently and calmly.
- Print this list of 20 and use as a hand-out to discuss these with your colleagues and staff.

Tony Jeary is the personal coach to CEOs and presidents from Ford, Wal-Mart, Sam's Club and EDS. His company, Tony Jeary High-Performance Resources (TJHPR), offers special sessions (private coaching, speaking and strategic planning) based on the principles of "Presentation Mastery."