**Tips for Handling Questions**

Your performance in the Q&A influences the audience’s final impression of you, so prepare for and practice fielding questions to enhance your credibility and increase the audience’s confidence in you and your message.

* **To prepare, write down questions you anticipate**. Expect tough questions. Good audiences will challenge you. Have trusted friends and colleagues help generate questions. Prepare and rehearse answers to those questions, especially the ones you don’t want to answer. Create 1-2 back up slides to support your answers to questions you get asked frequently.
* **Invite questions and comments.** Say it like you mean it. Appear open and approachable. Step out from behind the podium and move a couple of steps in the audience’s direction if you’re comfortable doing so.
* **Listen actively to the question**. It is essential that you really understand the point of the question. Many questions are poorly stated. If you don’t grasp the question, ask for clarification: “Can you give me an example of what you mean by \_\_\_\_\_?” or “Better as compared to what?” If you sense a question is driven by a hidden agenda, say, in a courteous tone, “Why do you ask?”
* **Repeat or rephrase the question in your own words**. By repeating or rephrasing the question you show that you want everyone in the audience to participate in the Q&A, you head off misunderstandings, and you buy time to organize your response.
* **Don’t evaluate the question** by saying, “That’s a good question.” First of all, presenters usually utter those words when they don’t know the answer to the question, and everyone in the audience is attuned to that stalling tactic. Second, while the evaluation may make the person who asked the question feel good, it tends to make other people in the audience more reticent about asking a question that wouldn’t get such a favorable response. It puts the speaker in a superior position that doesn’t encourage interaction.
* **Monitor your body language**. Maintain eye contact and guard against retreat behaviors (backing up; pulling arm across body; hands behind back or in fig leaf position). When you start to reply to a question, first focus your eyes on the person who asked the question, but then expand your gaze to be more inclusive. Continue to interact with the entire audience.
* **Clear up assumptions in the question.** Don’t be afraid to challenge assumptions, definitions, or criteria in questions that are inaccurate or irrelevant.
* **Stay focused**. Keep answers short and to the point. Use STAR to organize your thoughts in response to situational questions. What was the *Situation*? What *Task* needed to be performed? What *Actions* did you take and with what *Result*?
* **Lead with a general answer** and then add specifics. Notice in the example below how Nathan Wolfe states his answer directly (in italics) and then reinforces his answer in the second paragraph.

**Question: Is there a virus you would characterize as “good”?**

*I would call Vaccinia a good virus.*

Here’s a useful metaphor to think of the world of viruses. There’s the universe of viruses — even just pathogens or microbes — in general. You have known galaxies, say retroviruses. That’s a known galaxy. Or orthopoxviruses, such as smallpox. Those are known galaxies. Part of our job is to look for unknown galaxies. Or to look for unknown stars in known galaxies.

Obviously, galaxies that we would label pathogenic are important. In the orthopox galaxy, we have smallpox, which is one of the deadliest pathogens of human history. If you move out a little bit from that star and look for neighboring stars, what you’ll see is *Vaccinia*, which is cowpox. That virus is actually the smallpox vaccine. It’s sufficient to cause immunity but does not cause disease. Viruses that are very close to deadly ones can act as vaccines. We can use proximity to help identify possible vaccine candidates, or new microorganisms that might point the way towards new vaccines.

* **Don’t relax during the Q&A**. The presentation is not over until the Q&A is over. Maintain your professionalism and stay in control. People in the audience may try to hi-jack your Q&A to promote their agendas. Don’t allow this to happen.
* **Don’t bluff**. You risk your credibility when you try to bluff your way through an answer. Someone in the audience will call you on it. Better to concede that you don’t know, than to guess. If you don’t know the answer to a question, you can redirect it to the audience: “That’s beyond the scope of my work. Can anyone offer an answer?” Suggest a source. Promise to get back later. Don’t apologize for not knowing an answer to a question.
* **Bridge to control irrelevant questions.** If the audience’s questions and comments lead to tangents, steer the conversation in a productive direction and get back on message: “That’s important, but I’m convinced [insert message] “

Another common approach is to ask and answer your own question. For example, “Assigning blame for the deficit doesn’t solve the problem. The fundamental question to ask is, ‘How can we pay it down?’ [Insert message].”

Listen to interviews with politicians on Sunday morning news programs or on NPR for examples of bridging.

* **Don’t say, “Does that answer your question?”** Assume your answer was sufficient. If it wasn’t, leave it to the questioner to seek clarification or to ask a follow-up question.
* **Wrap up well**. End the Q&A on a strong answer to a question (you can offer to answer more questions after the talk) or offer a closing comment that touches on a theme(s) that emerged during the Q&A and reinforces your key points. Rehearse it.

*Special circumstances*:

* If someone rattles off a string of questions, ask to take them one at a time, or choose one of all those raised and elaborate at your discretion.
* If someone launches into a speech, insist on a question.
* If someone asks a hypothetical question, stick to reality.
* If someone keeps interrupting and won’t allow you to answer, ask to finish without interruption.
* If someone asks a hostile question, keep your cool.
	+ Pause to think. Maintain a calm, professional demeanor.
	+ Empathize. Make clear that you understand the questioner’s point of view.
	+ Neutralize the tone when you repeat or rephrase the question.
	+ Establish common ground.
	+ Respond with specific facts and figures because theory and speculation are fuel for attack.
	+ Initially direct your eye contact at the adversary and respond firmly and respectfully. Don’t get defensive.
	+ If he/she continues to isolate you, break away. Offer to continue discussion later: “Let’s continue this after the session so others have a chance to enter the discussion.” Then turn your body and eyes away from the questioner and focus on a different part of the audience.
* If you’re met with silence after you open up the floor to questions, you have a couple of options. You can ask and answer your own question: “One question I’m often asked is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,” or you can reinforce your message: “If there aren’t any questions, I’d like to close by saying . . . “

Sources:

Some of this advice was taken and adapted from Jan D’Arcy’s *Technically Speaking*. Batelle Press: Columbus, OH, 1998.

Extended quote is taken from “An immune system for the planet: An exclusive interview with Nathan Wolfe” (3/27/2009), TED: http://blog.ted.com/2009/03/27/an\_immune\_syste/

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