

Turn Tough Questions into Opportunities!

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Sales have been lost, projects stalled and promotions given to someone else all because of the way questions were answered. Your ability to handle tough questions is critical. Since questions can make or break you, consider the following suggestions. They will help you turn questions into opportunities and make your point resonate.

First and foremost, be prepared. Without proper preparation, tough questions can derail you. Before going into your meeting, sit down with paper and pen and brainstorm all the difficult questions you might be asked and how you will handle them. Consider the titles and functions of your listeners. Determine what a decision in your favor would depend on. Knowing this will help you to focus your answer on the things questioners care about, whether it's return on investment, the risk or why you. Solid preparation will help you think on your feet.

Be a good listener. Instead of only listening to the first three or four words of a question, listen all the way to the end. Never interrupt or talk over a questioner. Be sure to demonstrate that you are listening with your body language. Nod, move closer if standing and look the questioner in the eye. Avoid looking to the ceiling or floor, and be sure to uncross your arms. Your body language will be noticed and speaks volumes.

A lot of people automatically repeat a question. If you are unsure what the question actually is because it is buried in a lot of verbiage, of course, repeat or ask clarifying questions. You may learn that the person is only objecting to one small element. By resolving that one issue, you may sway the individual to your point of view. If you are quite clear on the question being posed, repeating it will look like a "stall."

Obviously, if you do not know the answer, be forthright. It is easy to say, "I don't know." However, without blaming, tell why you don't know the answer. "I don't know the answer to that because the numbers

haven't been reported yet, and I know you want me to be accurate. I will get that to you as soon as I know."

Avoid patronizing by saying, "Good question." It seems like a superficial or perfunctory comment that really isn't sincere. Also, it sets you up as the judge of which questions are good and which don't deserve a comment. A better way is to acknowledge the person's attitude or position on an issue. "I can see why you would bring that up. Cost is a consideration with all of our customers. Our products are expensive, and you want to be sure that you are making the best investment for your company." OR "Yes, you are correct. The project is three months behind schedule due to an unexpected quality issue from an outside vendor." If you are unsure how to acknowledge, ask yourself, "What is the point they want me to see?" Simply saying "Yes" or "I understand" is not enough. A strong acknowledgement statement shows respect and makes the questioner more receptive to your answer. At all costs, avoid following your validation statement with "But," "However," or "Although." It erases all the good you will have established and says that your point of view is better than theirs.

Always keep your answer short. A long answer may overwhelm and open up new areas for discussion that may be unrelated. If the questioner isn't satisfied with the brevity of your answer, the individual will ask a follow-up question. Have at the ready addendum slides. Number your slides. Print them off in slider sorter mode. Circle the slides that might prompt discussion so that you can quickly access them by typing in the number and the enter key.

On the back end of your question, there is an opportunity to solidify your ideas by tying your answer to a key point, a benefit or an action step for your listeners. A good example might be, "By acting now, you will see a return on investment in the fourth quarter." OR "Again, the risks are minimal, and, by launching now, we capitalize on customer demand before our competitors."

People make decisions by the way you answer questions. If you do a good job, they will see

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you as a subject matter expert, the right individual for the job. If you do a poor job, you and your company may leave money on the table and your own integrity might be jeopardized. By applying the tips outlined here, you will turn questions into opportunities.

Question: *What issues are you still unsure of related to handling tough questions? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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