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Handling Q&A: The Five Kinds of Listening

FOR MANY SPEAKERS, the most frightening part of the presentation is the unscripted part: the question and answer session at the end. While some thrive on the improvisatory challenge, others fear the nightmare possibilities. What if someone asks you a question you can't answer? What if someone turns hostile? What if someone wipes out the memory of all your hard work by monopolizing the Q&A with a long disquisition on some other topic?

We'll give you specific suggestions for each of those situations, but first let's consider the reason you gave the speech in the first place. Most likely, you were asked to speak to a particular audience. You wrestled with the topic, did your homework, calmed your nerves as best you could, and set off to find the podium. So far, it's all been about you. But as soon as you arrive in the room to face the crowd, something changes. The speech is no longer about you. It's about them. Once the speech starts, you need your listeners more than they need you. Without them, it's just a rehearsal.

Fast forward to the end of the talk. It's time for Q&A. Now, you'll find out how well you did. Did you in fact communicate?

The only way to know is to listen. Handling Q&A successfully depends on good listening. Good listening is a skill that can be developed, and one that is poorly understood by most speakers.

There are five levels of listening: feedback, paraphrasing, clarification, empathy, and active listening. Most of us are adept only at the first level. Developing your skills at the other levels will greatly increase the comfort and ease with which you handle question-and-answer time.

Giving feedback

Feedback is fundamentally a reaction. The other person says something, and you say something back, giving your attitude toward or evaluation of what was said.

You're a senior manager, and you are responsible for developing a new software product that is late to market and way over budget. You've been asked to rally the troops and give them some hope, a way forward, assurance that the proverbial light at the end of the beta-version tunnel isn't the Microsoft train. You finish your talk with some stirring words about pioneers and landing on the moon that you hope didn't sound too goofy under the circumstances, and it's time for Q&A. The first question comes from a quiet looking guy in the back.

"Forgive my skepticism, but why should we believe you when we've been hearing similar stuff from senior management for months now, when what we really need is more help, more support, and a whole heck of a lot less red tape?"

It's the question you most feared. You begin to think that you made no progress whatever with these people. All your work was for nothing. You take a deep breath, and respond.

"Like I said, we're committed to getting you more people. We're frankly struggling to hire as many people as we need. We can use your help—tell your friends. As for the rest of it, we just don't have more money to throw at the project now. And we'd like to think we've gotten as much of the bureaucracy out of the way as we can. After all, we set you up in a separate building to get away from the stuff that goes on around here. Next question?"

It's a response. On the surface, it's an unexceptionable one. After all, it responds to each of the points raised by the questioner. And yet, it will do little to deal with the attitude the questioner has, and he's probably not alone. Could you have done more?

Paraphrasing the question

At the second level of listening, you paraphrase the question, mirroring questioner's points. Let's look at how that works in the example.

"So what you're saying is you think that I'm just giving the party line, when what you really need is more help and less bureaucracy, is that right?"

See what happens? The questioner's likely response is "yes." From the start, you have him agreeing with you. You can then go on to give your feedback, as above, but at least you have created a more receptive listener, because you've got him nodding at your paraphrase of his question. But there are even better ways to respond.

Clarifying the issues

The third level of listening involves working a little harder with the questioner's words to identify his real concerns. Let's see how that would work here.

"So what I hear you saying is that you've got two main problems you want help on: not enough people, and too much bureaucracy. The first is probably the most important. Is that right?"

Once again, you've established a level of agreement with the questioner. By clarifying, however, you've gone one step further. You've shown the audience that you can think on your feet and that you're trying to sort out the vital issues as you go. You keep better control of the Q&A session in this way. Moreover, if you get agreement, you've actually helped the audience do its thinking. It's hard to remember information presented orally. Audiences

appreciate it when longer points are accurately summarized.

Empathetic listening

The fourth level, listening with empathy, means showing that you understand the feelings of the questioner. The empathetic listener finds similar emotions within his or her own experience and shares them with the questioner. Let's see how that would work in this example.

"You know, I've been there, too. Don't forget I worked in a start-up in '92, one that was strapped for people and drowning in red tape too. I know what you're going through."

Empathy has the inestimable advantage over the first three levels of listening in that it shows the other person that you understand his situation. Even if you can't offer much help, at least you've aligned yourself with the questioner. That in itself can go a long way to defusing hostile questions and reassuring nervous audience members.

The danger with empathy is that your own expression of solidarity can overwhelm the questioner's words. He may end up feeling upstaged. Take care that your empathetic response doesn't last longer than the question that triggered it, or your answer may sound insincere. The fifth and final level of listening avoids this trap.

Active listening

With active listening, you identify the underlying emotions in the questioner's words. This is potentially the most powerful listening response, because it is usually emotion behind the phrases that prompted the question in the first place. When you respond to the real reason that the questioner spoke up, you get to the heart of the issue—even if you never provide any concrete answer. Let's see what the active listener would say in our example.

"It sounds like you feel really alone out there, without much support. You're

frustrated because you're putting in all this hard work, and all you feel you get back from us is red tape. Is that it?"

Here, if you've listened accurately, you're likely to get a truly heartfelt "yes!" from the questioner, and often from other members of the audience. By accurately identifying the emotional state of the questioner, you've validated the aspects of his mental state that are most important to him. You've not only aligned yourself with the questioner, but you've also allowed true healing to begin. By labeling emotions that are not usually acknowledged, you've brought them out into the open air and created the conditions for them to be dealt with positively. Active listening incorporates empathy, but goes beyond it. You don't have to use such attention with every question, but it is almost always helpful.

What do you do if someone asks a question you can't answer? Be honest in your response. Tell the questioner you don't know the answer, but you'd be happy to find out. Or turn the ques-

tion back to the audience, asking for their input.

What do you do if someone turns hostile? Use active listening to acknowledge the anger. Find out the reasons for it. Acknowledge the valid ones and reject the ones that are not accurate. Then, politely and firmly, move on.

How do you prevent someone from monopolizing the Q&A period? If the question looks like it will go on longer than a minute, interrupt politely with "excuse me, but we're almost out of time, and out of concern for other members of the audience who have questions, let me stop you there and answer as best I can." Or, "Since we're almost out of time, I'd be happy to take your question off-line to give it the time it needs."

The best answers come from good listening. Successful handling of Q&A begins with a speaker who realizes that a presentation belongs to its audience.

Are you a good listener?

Good listening involves seeing as well as hearing. Nonverbal communications often can tip you off about the real issues involved in workplace dialogue. Here are four quick tests of how the nonverbal "conversation" is going.

Always remember that "body language" is multi-determined; crossed arms can mean defensiveness or simply that the person is chilly. You must always know the person and the context to evaluate nonverbal communication.

Is the body language open or closed? Are the arms unfolded or crossed? Is the person with whom you're talking turned toward you or away from you? Are the hands visible? These are signs of degrees of openness.

Is the body language engaged or disengaged? People who are engaged

in discussions tend to find ways to move closer to one another. The opposite movement can mean disengagement.

Is the body language allied or opposed? People who are allied in opinion or loyalty tend to adopt the same body position in conversation. Look for the person who moves at the same time you do, ending up in a similar position.

Is the body language committed or uncommitted? The sum of the other three add up to commitment. If you see signs of openness, engagement, and allied behavior, you may be ready to close the deal. Evidence to the contrary indicates reservations, and it may be a good idea to try to explore the areas of resistance in order to deal with them verbally.