



Fielding difficult questions during a speech or presentation

The challenge

Your presentation is more likely to have impact if you show you are willing to listen to your audience. Engaging in dialogue will help you build trust and create a shared understanding of the topics covered.

However, if you give listeners the floor, you may be asked difficult questions: inquiries about confidential matters, questions to which you do not have the answers, more or less thinly veiled criticism, trick questions, etc. Such questions could put you in an embarrassing position. The following are several tips to help you address these challenges.

A few practical tips

How you react to an embarrassing question depends on the type of challenge it represents:

CHALLENGE

TIPS

You cannot give an answer

When you do not know the answer to a question or are not authorized to communicate it, you may be tempted to ignore the question or give a vague response. However, such choices can needlessly undermine your credibility.

Try to be as transparent as possible:

- Do not hesitate to **admit your ignorance**. Explain why you don't know the answer. If possible, commit to finding and communicating the answer by a certain deadline. If this is not possible, explain how to do without this information: for example, cite facts that can be used as a basis of comparison to get a rough idea of the answer.
- If you are **not authorized to respond, say so and explain why**; your listeners must understand your duty to maintain confidentiality. They will probably even respect you for it.

You need to prepare an answer

Sometimes you need time to respond to some questions, for example because the answer involves other people or touches upon complex matter. However, not responding immediately can give people the feeling you are ducking the issue or are not sincere.

Defer your response, while taking certain precautions:

- **Emphasize your interest in the question**. For example, reformulate it, note it on the board or in your agenda to show that you will not forget it, etc.
- If you can, give an **initial partial response** and say that you will answer the rest later.
- Indicate **when and how** you will give a **complete response**. E.g. I will send you an e-mail next week.

The question is intended to throw you off balance

Some questions may be deliberately embarrassing, by making implicit judgments or even open accusations. Counter-attacking on the same level would be a mistake, because this could lead to an embarrassing public argument.

Refuse to enter into an aggressive exchange:

- Stick to the **facts**. E.g. To the question, "How can you believe that such a project will work?" ask "What makes you doubt that it will succeed?"
- **Reformulate** the question in more acceptable terms. E.g. "Do you really think that this product will sell?" – "You mean, what arguments do we intend to use in our sales platform?"
- **Refuse to respond** to a personal attack, explaining that this is not the time nor the place.

The question is intended to manipulate you

Some questions are purposely designed to force you to give a specific answer. Refuse to be pushed around. Listening to people doesn't necessarily mean agreeing with their point of view.

Don't let yourself be manipulated:

- To a closed question that does not give you any room to support or explain your position, don't hesitate to expand the **scope of the question**. E.g. "Are you going to close the factory?" – "We are studying all possible scenarios to turn the situation around."
- Reformulate the question to **expose its insidious nature**. E.g. "Will growth benefit everyone?" – "If you mean pay raises, then naturally, they cannot be correlated to growth. But growth will clearly reinforce our financial solidity and opens new opportunities for people."