Handling Question and Answer Sessions

The question and answer session is as important as the presentation itself. It is the last thing the audience hears (recency effect) so it leaves a strong impression. A speaker or group who is unable to answer questions effectively can undermine the impact of a well-prepared presentation. On the other hand, a speaker or group who answers questions well can strengthen the impact of the speech and enhance credibility.

Practice answering questions with your group members. Take turns formulating questions for group members and have them practice giving answers. Anticipate possible questions and formulate answers in advance.

One important key to an effective Q & A session is planning. Decide in advance how the group will handle questions. Will the group take turns answering questions? Will a designated leader hand the question off to the person who has the most knowledge on the subject? There are many ways to organize the Q & A session. There is no “best method.” However, what is important is that the group continues to act like a group and that the Q & A runs smoothly.

In order to achieve this goal there must be a plan. You don’t want it to be a free for all, with several group members trying to answer the same question. This will look disorganized. Each group member should thoroughly understand how the group plans to handle the question and answer segment of the presentation.

It is also important that the group not undermine each other during the question and answer process. Resist the urge to correct group members or add to their answers. Occasionally, it might be necessary to add some information, but too much of this undermines the credibility of the team.

Below are some guidelines that you should follow when answering questions from your audience.

1. **Repeat or paraphrase each question after it is asked.**
   This strategy will provide a moment to frame your answer. It will also allow the rest of the audience to hear the question, if it was not clearly stated.

2. **When confronted with an unclear question, try to rephrase it.**
   Ex. If I understand your question, it seems to me that you are asking….

3. **When being asked a question, look at the questioner.**
   However, direct your answer to the entire audience. Make occasional eye contact with the questioner as you answer.
4. **Allow one follow-up question from each questioner, but do not allow yourself to be dragged into a personal debate with an audience member.**

You don’t want one person to dominate the question and answer session. Politely tell the questioner that you find this discussion interesting, but you would like to provide other audience members with an opportunity to make a comment. Invite them to continue the discussion with you one-on-one after the presentation.

5. **Answer questions clearly, briefly, and directly.**

Do not be afraid to admit that you do not know the answer to a factual question. If it is appropriate, you can ask if someone in the audience knows the answer. Tell the questioner that you will check into the answer as soon as possible after the speech and get back to him or her with a response.

6. **Avoid responding defensively even to hostile questions.**

The Q & A session is not a challenge to your competence or intelligence. Regard it as another opportunity to communicate your ideas. If someone has misunderstood a portion of your presentation, the Q & A is an excellent time to clarify your ideas.

7. **Thank the audience at the close of the session.**

References