

## ***Under Attack: Dealing with Hostile Questions***

*Public Management Magazine* - November 2002

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Communication between public officials and citizens often occurs in the form of question-and-answer sessions during community meetings. Ideally, this interaction allows neighbors to learn more about proposed actions that affect them and for an official to learn more about residents' concerns.

Too often, however, a productive Q-and-A session breaks down into a grilling by hostile activists, with attacks against the proposal and the public official wrapped up in the form of questions. Fortunately, there are several steps you can take to handle hostile questions effectively.

### **Look Away from the Speaker**

Americans are taught that it's polite to look at the person who asked the question when giving an answer. In a group setting, however, this respectful eye contact serves to keep the spotlight on the speaker, reaffirms the leadership position of that individual, and encourages aggressive follow-up questions.

Moreover, maintaining eye contact with the questioner while ignoring the rest of the audience suggests that other people do not deserve the same personal attention or that the subject matter isn't of interest to anyone else in the audience.

The key trick to defusing a hostile question is to shift attention away from the individual who asked it. When someone lobbs an aggressive comment or question at you, immediately shift eye contact away from the speaker, and address your comments to the rest of the audience.

Treating every participant equally reduces the emotional rewards to be gained by attention-seeking troublemakers and avoids reinforcing the impression that the toughest critic is a leader who deserves special deference. Don't look back again at the questioner during your answer, and don't return to that individual at the end of your response to ask, "Does that answer your question?" unless you really want a follow-up question.

### **Restate the Question**

At the same time as you look away from the hostile questioner, restate the question. Restating the question serves several purposes. First, it removes the spotlight from the questioner, who will be more inclined to sit down quietly, rather than to continue standing, while audience attention is focused on you.

All members of the audience may not have heard the question, so your restatement helps enlighten those who may not have been listening carefully. Finally, restating the question gives you a few extra moments in which to come up with a good answer.

Rather than simply reiterating an inflammatory question, word for word, it may be better to rephrase the question in a more reasonable or less emotional way. When a critic snaps, "Why are you insisting on building this ridiculous community center where no one wants it?" shift eye contact, and rephrase the question: "The question is, how did we select this site for the new community center?"

Instead of offering a direct restatement or rephrased question, you can offer an entirely unrelated inquiry: "This question raises a number of issues, which we should look at piece by piece . . ."; "Before we go on to that topic, let's go back to something Mrs. Garcia said a few minutes ago." Other common transitions used to redirect attention include:

"The real issue is . . ."

"It probably makes more sense to talk about . . ."

"Another, related question is . . ."

"What we should be asking ourselves is . . ."

"Another thing is . . ."

"A more important issue to consider is . . ."

### **Reestablish Personal Eye Contact**

Although you don't want to maintain eye contact with the hostile questioner, making good eye contact with the rest of the audience is absolutely crucial. Good eye contact demonstrates that you are interested in what listeners are thinking and concerned about whether your own comments

are being understood. Moreover, speakers who make a lot of eye contact are much more likely to come across as trustworthy, likable, and persuasive than those who avoid good eye contact.

Exactly, what constitutes "good eye contact"? There are three things to consider. First, where do you physically aim your eyeballs? Second, how long should each glance last? Finally, how frequently do you make eye contact?

For starters, most people use only their right eye to look at another person, using the left eye only for depth perception. Good eye contact involves using your right eye to look intently into the right eye of the other person. To test this theory, use your left eye to look into the left eye of another person. Feels awkward, doesn't it? This little bit of trivia also explains why name tags should always be worn on the right shoulder: people should be able easily to shift their glance downward from your right eye directly to your name tag, rather than having to cross over to your left shoulder to read your name.

Select one person at a time to look at. Establish eye contact with that individual, and hold that gaze until you shift eye contact to another audience member. If you cannot look at each and every person in the room, then at least make eye contact with every section of the audience: the front, the back, and both sides.

Although people naturally prefer to look at friendly folks who are nodding and smiling, you can reduce the chance of a hostile outbreak by making eye contact with persons who have unfriendly facial expressions. Eye contact with unfriendly people makes it more difficult for them to view you as an impersonal enemy and gives them reassurance that you really care what they think.

How long should each glance last? When two people are simultaneously gazing into each other's eyes, the average eye-to-eye contact lasts a bit more than one second. When one person is looking at the other without reciprocal eye contact, the glance lasts about three seconds. Glances that last too long can send inadvertent messages of aggression or sexual attraction, with gazes of longer than 10 seconds giving rise to extreme stress.

How often should you make eye contact? The average speaker makes eye contact 40 percent of the time while talking, although a speaker trying to come across as really honest or powerful may engage in more frequent eye contact. The average listener looks at the other person somewhere between 60 and 75 percent of the time while listening. A powerful person will make less eye contact when listening to a subordinate, while a less powerful person might engage in almost continuous eye contact while listening.