

# FUNDAMENTALS

## Dealing With Tough Questions

Don't let an inquiry get you out of step.

By Dianna Booher

Responding to questions—from fans or skeptics—is a critical aspect of training. Do it well, and people will believe you and benefit from what you say. Do it poorly, and your participants become confused and distrusting. Learning to think on your feet and handle tough questions appropriately is key to building rapport with participants. Here are some helpful tips for dealing with common difficult questions.

**Assume there's a connection.**

Sometimes what you think is a dumb question is actually the result of complex thinking. Be careful not to convey disapproval in your tone or body language. Instead, probe the asker. For example, you're leading a session on financial management for nonfinancial managers and you're in the middle of a discussion about profitability. Someone asks, "What's the average life expectancy for women today?" You

might be tempted to brush aside the question, thinking it's out in left field. Instead, explain that you don't follow. That allows the person to express a valid concern: the impact of the organization's aging workforce on benefit spending, such as 401(k) matches, health care, and severance packages for early retirement. In other words, assume that any question has merit until you know otherwise.

### The devil's in the details.

The pitfall in allowing hypothetical questions to ramble on is that others grow weary of the minutia of a situation that doesn't apply to them and their real concerns aren't addressed.

Suppose you're facilitating a supervisory skills session at a power plant when someone poses this question: "Let's say the landowner insists on walking within 25 feet of our bucket truck while I'm repairing the lines. How should I handle that?" Whatever you respond to that question will probably be wrong. That's because people often ask hypothetical questions when they have a point to make, and they keep changing the details about the situation to fit that agenda. Typically, a story behind the question will unfold. In this example, the asker described how a worker was terminated for allowing the landowner to get into her bucket truck.

Your best bet with a long hypothetical query is to isolate the issue that applies to everyone. In this situation, you'd ask whether the question was raised because of a safety concern. If the participant nods and clarifies the concern, then address the issue of safety as it relates to landowners in general, not just the one in the example. If you get into a discussion about specifics, such as what the worker said to the landowner, key learning will be lost. The specifics don't apply to the others because they don't know the people or the situation.

## Assume that any question has merit until you know otherwise.

### Take responsibility to clarify.

Sometimes, you can't understand a question because the participant has a heavy dialect or is fuzzy with phrasing. Instead of asking, "What are you saying?" be less accusatory. Say you don't understand.

You can also try this humorous response at your own expense: "I'm sorry, but I missed my caffeine this morning. Somebody's going to have to say it much slower and louder for me. And please dumb it down a couple of grade levels for me." Such gracious, humorous remarks relieve the tension of the moment.

As a last resort, when no one else can help out, pick one phrase and use it to frame a new question. Most group members will admire your courtesy, and you won't embarrass a participant by asking him or her to repeat the question. Privately, you should encourage learners to email their questions so you can respond.

### Put it on the record.

Some people view trainers as official spokespersons for management, so you may be asked questions off the record, to get your opinion. Typically, these questions come up in one-on-one conversations during breaks or after sessions. When that's the case, respond to a bigger audience than one or two people. If someone asks for your opinion about whether a recent merger will result in layoffs, despite the fact that management has officially announced that it won't, tell him or her that issue is on the minds of several in the group and you'll address it when the group reconvenes. Then do so.

It's far too easy for your words to be taken out of context or misquoted; just

ask any author, sports figure, or politician. But the comments you make before an entire group will be much harder to misconstrue than those you express privately to an individual.

### Don't let them intimidate.

Some questions are more like a monologue, either an opinion on an issue or a barrage of facts. The asker generally tacks on a limp question at the end—such as, "Wouldn't you agree?"

If show-offs can provide sound expertise that will enrich others' learning, by all means, use them in coaching roles. But if the questioner persists in monopolizing time or shuts down others, you may have to flex some muscle. Acknowledge the comment briefly, break eye contact, and move on. Say, "Thank you for that observation" or "that's one way to look at the issue." You can also ask the person to restate the question. After some fumbling, he or she may (or may not) come up with a question that you can answer briefly and use to regain control.

The key to handling any of these types of questions is to find a way to deal with them with finesse and ease. Like a CEO or celebrity responding to reporters, trainers must learn how to make the most of a difficult situation.

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