

MODULE 6 - QUESTIONS AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

General

One of the best ways to get the audience to become involved is to invite questions. There are, however, other ways of getting an audience to participate and we will be looking at these later in this Module. First of all, though, we will be looking at questions. Should you invite questions from the audience? Is this potentially dangerous? If it is, and the worst happens, what can you do?

QUESTIONS

There are definitely some risks in allowing your audience to ask questions in that you can't control which questions they are going to ask.

When you think about it, that doesn't matter if you are confident that you know your subject. You may be relatively newly qualified and not know everything. You will, however, know enough to understand whether a question is reasonable or not, and you are sensible enough to say that you don't know, if you don't. If someone asks a question which is hostile or unreasonable, there are techniques for dealing with this.

Thus, if the question is a reasonable one and is on your subject area, you should be able to cope with it. If it is not, you go to your strategy for "hostile questions", which we detail below.

Thus, questions from the audience are not as frightening as they might seem at first sight.

The positive points about allowing questions

The first positive point is that it encourages audience participation. Audiences which participate are happy audiences. They are more likely to be sympathetic to what you are saying because they have had some input, and they are more likely to be sympathetic to you.

The second point is that people have a far higher retention level of material when they participate.

This entirely depends on what you want from your talk. We are assuming that your prime objective is to gain more clients. A secondary objective is to spread the good word about your therapy.

You can create a good impression from your speech alone. You do not have to encourage questions. However, if you do, the audience will feel that you are confident enough about your abilities and your therapy to put yourself up for what may seem like a cross-examination. That will create a far better impression.

In addition, there is a subconscious response to having your question answered personally. The person who has his or her question answered is having his ego stroked. He has been selected. He is being treated seriously. Unless it is a hostile question or an unreasonable one, you will be able to answer it. You can expect a proportion of your questioners to seek you out at the end of your talk and ask for your business card.

The negative points about allowing questions

The most obvious point is that you do not know exactly what questions are going to be asked.

That does not mean you are going to lose control. Far from it. You know your subject and the questioner does not. At its most extreme this means that you could say absolutely anything as long as you say it with sufficient authority and the audience will not know any different.

Let us assume you have more integrity than this.

If your questioner asks you something difficult or has a greater than usual knowledge of your therapy and completely floors you, you have two options:

- You can do your best to give an honest answer from the knowledge that you have
- You can say you don't know.

Neither one leaves you looking foolish, just honest.

Let's look in detail at some of the type of questions which might be thrown at you.

Types of questions

Open questions

These are questions to which a specific answer cannot be given. In practice, they are generally too wide for you to be able to answer successfully. An example might be:

“Do you think alternative medicine is better than conventional medicine?”

Now of course there is no easy answer to that. More importantly, there is no quick answer to that. You have already learned that it is important to set a time limit for your question and answer session. This is where the benefits of this become obvious. Your answer to this question, or any similar question, is something along the lines of: “That is an important question which will take some time to answer properly, time which we unfortunately do not have at the moment. However, I do want to give you an answer so will you accept that that both have some merits?”

Your questioner can only object to this answer by alienating the rest of the audience.

The point is that there will be many open questions which you cannot answer at all (“Do you think our modern world is sufficiently spiritual?”) or cannot possibly answer in the allotted time. Learn to recognise that and *don't* allow yourself to be trapped into trying to answer them. It is impossible. You will just be stepping into a morass.

What you need to do is to prepare some standard answers beforehand for questions like these, answers which are polite and helpful, which indicate that you would like nothing more than to spend hours answering that particular question but unfortunately, given the time constraints which have been imposed on you, this is impossible.

Note the phrase “time constraints imposed on you.” By using this phrase, or one similar, you are putting the burden of being unable to answer the question onto someone else, the someone who has set the timing for your talk (in effect, the organiser). As long as you give an appearance of reluctance, the questioner will not blame you. If the person in the audience persists in demanding an answer there and then, turn to the organiser, (the person to whom you have just passed the buck). If he is experienced in this type of situation, he will then blame the Council or the fire regulations or similar – some body beyond his control. Thus, everyone is happy. And you have not had to answer the question.

Closed questions

You can consider these as gifts. They are questions where there is only one, or a small range of, correct answers.

“Is there any evidence that aromatherapy oils actually enter the body?”

“Could you hypnotise someone into robbing a bank for you?”

“Is there any scientific evidence to support [your therapy]?”

Treat these as an advertising opportunity for your message, a chance to repeat and reinforce it. It doesn't matter if you've said it once already. The rule of thumb is that if one person asks a question, there are others in the audience who wish they had had the courage to ask it.

Don't make the questioner feel stupid. *Don't* tell him you have already answered this point. Treat it as an interesting and valuable question and as a chance to repeat your message.

Binary questions

These are, in effect, two part questions. “Have you ever regressed someone? What happened?”

Again, these can be gifts as long as you remember both parts. Don't be shy about writing them down.

Repeat them out loud to the audience, saying that this is really two questions in one and you will deal with both separately. Then proceed to do so. It is important to do so because you can be sure that there will be someone who will raise their hand at a later stage and say, "But you didn't deal with"

Answering questions of this type can take a little time, time in which *really* awkward questions are *not* being asked, so they are a gift to a nervous presenter.

When to allow questions

The *only* time to allow questions is at the end of your talk. Don't even consider allowing questions during your presentation. This will destroy the flow and logic of what you are saying. It will confuse you and it will confuse the audience.

When you ask the questions

There is no reason at all why you cannot be the one to ask the questions. "Has anyone here ever had experience of [my therapy]?" *Don't* then go on to ask them whether they found it beneficial in case they say no. All you need say is, "Good. That will be helpful." You don't need to specify why it will be helpful. It is an acknowledgement and a placebo. However, it is a way of encouraging audience participation.

Other possible questions for you to ask might include,

"Does anybody think all alternative therapy is nonsense?"

This is guaranteed to make everyone look round the hall (participation). The chances of someone saying "yes" are small because they would not have bothered to come if that is what they believed. If they do, all you have to say is, "Good. It's my task tonight to convince you." If at the end they remain unconvinced and say so, it doesn't matter, because you will have convinced a lot of other people.

"Has anyone suffered side effects from prescription drugs?"

The chances are, someone will have done so. If not, say, "You are lucky people."

No doubt you can think of a number of similar questions.

Prepare your answers in advance to possible negative replies. It looks professional and it prevents you from having to think on your feet.

That is really the secret of running a successful question and answer session: preparation. Let's look in more detail at how to handle questions which might be thrown at you.

How to handle questions

The first piece of control you have is in choosing your questioners. Clearly, it is not wise to choose as your first questioner the member of the audience who has been looking sceptical all the way through your presentation. Ideally, pick a gentle looking woman or someone who has been nodding enthusiastically at everything you've said.

- Make sure you understand the question.

If necessary, ask the questioner to repeat the question. If you still don't understand, say "Do you mean...?" and in that way draw him out to explain exactly what he does mean.

Often, the questioner will not be too sure themselves. They will have some idea that they missed a point or failed to see a piece of logic but will not be able to formulate the exact question which homes in on this.

In this case, try to help them clarify their thoughts. If this is unsuccessful after two attempts, say something like, "Clearly, some of you have some questions about this area. Let me explain it again," and proceed to give a brief precis of the general area around which the question was based.

- Repeat the question out loud to the rest of the audience

They will probably not have heard it in its entirety. There is a trick you can use here. This is an opportunity to reformulate the question slightly if you feel you need to, to make it easier to answer. "Which ailments does lavender oil treat" might be reformulated as "Which ailments does lavender oil treat particularly well." You are thus limiting the question, saving yourself from reeling off a long list.

- If it's a long question, break it down into several questions.

Write these on a pad to make sure you remember to answer them all. Then answer them in sequence. Before each question, say something like, "...now, the second part of the question referred to"

If all the questions together would take you all night to answer, you could legitimately say so, but say that you will answer the first one.

- If you don't know the answer, say so.

We've said this again and again in this course. "I've never come across this before, but I will find out," establishes that you are honest and that you are prepared to learn. It is by far the best way of dealing with questions which catch you unawares.

- Use images and examples in your reply

Try explaining your answer in a different way, perhaps using images. “It is rather like....” Try to make your images refer to every day things or events.

- Try to stick to facts in your reply.

If you offer opinions, these might lead to an argument or discussion which you don’t want.

- Check that the questioner has understood your answer and is happy with it.

“Does that answer your question” is a useful phrase. If he says no, rather than turn the whole question and answer session into a discussion between the two of you, to the boredom of the rest of the audience, say that you will speak to him at the end of the session and you can discuss it in detail. The overwhelming probability is that he will forget and leave without speaking to you about the question. Most people, faced with an answer which doesn’t really give the reply they need, will say something like, “Not really, but it doesn’t matter. I’ll think over what you’ve said”. This is a heaven sent opportunity for you to suggest they contact you at some stage later on, possibly during the week, at your consulting rooms if they require more information or a clarification. That person could well become a client. One point to note – this is an offer you shouldn’t make if the questioner appears too intense or disturbed. You don’t want to invite the attentions of anyone who might be obsessive.

How to handle hostile questions

This is the nightmare scenario for the nervous speaker. You ask for questions and there are one or two people in the audience who, for whatever reason, are hostile to you and show it by asking deliberately awkward questions.

In fact, it’s not a nightmare scenario at all. You just think it is because you haven’t faced it and your imagination is making it far worse than the reality. In addition, there are tried and tested ways of dealing with these questions.

- Ensure that you don’t suddenly hold your breath with fear or shock.

Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly – the audience has to wait for you to reply, they’re not going anywhere. It’s important to keep breathing normally. This will put oxygen in your blood which will help the response of your brain. It will give you a few seconds to calm down and to think what to say. Most of all, it is dignified. You are not leaping in defensively. You are retaining control and it shows.

- Don’t be rude or sharp

Sometimes, it might be obvious that the person either hasn't listened to you or has chosen to forget what you spelt out not ten minutes before. He may phrase his question to try to make you appear incompetent or negligent in not mentioning that particular point. Don't, under any circumstances, snap at him, tell him he's stupid or be sarcastic. Your best weapon is exquisite politeness. "I believe I did talk about this matter but obviously not as well as I should have done. Let me explain it another way." (This also applies when the questioner has asked a silly question simply because he hasn't been listening, rather than because he is hostile and wants to show you up.)

If the questioner is hostile, rather than just stupid, the audience will pick this up immediately and mentally praise your calm handling of him and of the situation.

- Stay calm, even in the face of rudeness or aggression.

This will keep the audience on your side and make the questioner look a fool. If someone really is rude and it is clearly unacceptable, don't be afraid to say so, firmly and politely. You could also add that he is upsetting the rest of the audience. If he persists, don't forget you are not running this event. Turn to the organiser and ask for assistance. He is the one with the power and the authority to eject someone from the hall if necessary. Remember – politeness, politeness, politeness. It is a very powerful weapon.

- If someone shouts at you, don't shout back.

This is a similar point to the one above but there are circumstances in which it could be slightly different and that is where someone is being emotional rather than hostile. Probably the nastiest situation you could meet is where a member of the audience stands up and asks you to justify your therapy because her husband, who had cancer, was advised that it would help him, and he died. She then becomes emotional and starts shouting that you are a fraud. Don't shout back, especially in these circumstances. Keep calm and point out that no type of treatment of any description succeeds in every case. Also, you can't be held responsible for what someone else advised.

You may find a situation where you feel you need to shout back in order to make yourself heard. Don't. Physically stand back from the microphone, or just stand back if there isn't one, to indicate that you are not going to participate in a shouting match and turn to the person running the evening for help. That is what he is there for.

One trick is to use the rest of the audience to support you. Say "Do you think this is the right way to behave?" or something similar. The questioner will then find that, far from being a hero and the centre of attention, he has become an unpopular minority of one. That usually ends the shouting very quickly indeed.

- Use the interruption to your advantage

At a talk given by one of the authors of this course on the subject of hypnotherapy, a belligerent member of the audience stated that he had read in a newspaper that hypnotherapy was rubbish. Turning this around, the speaker thanked the gentleman for bringing to light this gross example of uniformed journalism. He then requested the name of both the paper and the journalist, so that he could send them information detailing the many thousands of scientific and medical studies which had been carried out, proving beyond any possible doubt that hypnotherapy was a very viable and important psychological therapy.

Set time limits

Set time limits for your question and answer session. You could add that you would appreciate anyone with a question which requires a long answer to see you individually at the end of the evening. Thus, if someone does produce a long and complicated question, you can gently point out this request you made earlier, and suggest he sees you later.

OTHER WAYS TO INVOLVE YOUR AUDIENCE

This will depend very much on your therapy. Some lend themselves to audience participation while others do not. If you are talking about a therapy which does lend itself to audience participation, make use of this. The audience will feel more involved and it will also take up part of the time allotted for your presentation. This is a useful trick if you are scared of public speaking. While they are participating, they are doing the work for you.

Use visualisations

This trick is an absolute gift for hypnotherapists, stress managers and those who practice similar therapies. You can do anything you think is ethical, from getting them to close their eyes and visualising a calm scene to guiding them into a light trance.

Other therapists could ask the audience to visualise white light streaming down from the ceiling to the tops of their heads.

The world is your oyster if you have a good imagination.

Change the atmosphere in the hall

You could ask people to sit and achieve a feeling of calm. This will have the effect of changing the overall atmosphere in the hall.

Create a physical response

Get your audience to raise their hands if they have ever consulted an alternative therapist or in response to some other question you choose to ask.

Summing up

You are not a potential victim standing up there on the stage. You are in control. There are words you can say and actions you can use which will enable you to keep that control. If you allow yourself to fall into the victim mentality, you are passing control to the audience. They don't want that. They've come to hear you, to hear you tell them something interesting. You are the expert, the one they are looking up to. Remember that that is your starting position. Now, you can throw this away by *losing* control, but this is quite unnecessary. Remember also that even if there is a troublemaker, the vast majority of people listening to you will be fervently wishing for him to sit down and shut up. They are on your side. Speakers tend to forget this. Look at it another way – if one person in an audience of fifty is causing trouble, there are forty-nine who are totally on your side in trying to calm him down. As long as you don't actively antagonise them, they will support you in almost anything you do or say.