

How to think quick when faced with unexpected questions

Learn easy-to-implement strategies to communicate more effectively with your senior managers

One of the most challenging skills for executives to masters is handling unexpected questions. An unexpected branching off into a related subject or a sudden request to give an opinion often leaves even senior executives stuck.

This is an important skill to master as most communication is handled through discussion than through formal presenting. Here are some tips:

A. Use thinking hooks to give you time and cue in your reply

I teach executives to use a simple framework called Open Your Mind. In this framework I introduce the concept of a thinking hook. This is a simple, all-purpose, all-weather tool to help you structure an answer more clearly.

An example of a thinking hook is to use cue words like *“Firstly, I would like to talk about x”* or *“In my experience, the most urgent priority is ...Y”*

The value of a thinking hook is that it sets up your reply by giving you thinking time. Likewise with a two part thinking hooks; while you are setting up your answer, you might not know what you will say in your answer. The hook leads you into the answer:

“On the one hand....On the other hand...”

“From perspective X.....From perspective Y”

“Based on past performance....Looking at future estimates”

“John, that’s an interesting observation. There are two things that come to mind. First,

“The first thing that comes to mind is...”

These phrases tell your brain to think of two things to say. As you are a technical expert, you will find it no problem to come up with two things to consider. Usually, the first things that come to mind are the most important. The thinking hook format buys you time when you are under pressure.

B. Contrasts with two part thinking hooks

You can use thinking hooks to offer alternative views. By introducing your answer with this format you provide a very clear opening, allow the audience to know the direction of your answer and importantly give yourself some time to prepare an solid reply.

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“John, with this question there are two approaches. One for residential, the other for commercial. Let's take a look at the residential issue first as this can be covered quickly....Now, let's have a look at the commercial aspects....”

“We need to look at two perspectives here. They offer two distinct approaches. They are A and B. From A's perspective.....From B's perspective....”

C. Communication tip: Take a deep breath before replying

Give yourself a second or two to think before you get into your answer. The difference between a top presenter and an average communicator is that top performers are comfortable pausing before giving an answer. Take a short pause before you deliver your answer during the Q&A.

D. Prepare fully but allow some flexibility

Before a conference call or presentation where you expect to face questions [as an executive you should always expect to express your opinions], spend time to think through the topics, issues and areas that may come up. Tagline your thoughts in soundbites. Now you are mentally prepared. In the meeting, be ready to hook to one of the points. Be ready to branch off to new areas. Expect that you may cover the points in a different order or a different way depending on how they are raised in the meeting. The test is how easily you can explain your talking points to your audience. It is not enough that you understand an issue. What counts is how you convey the content in an easy to understand format.

Summary:

- Think through the issues in some depth
- Write down possible questions on these issues.
- Ask possible follow up questions
- Prepare your answers into soundbites
- Use two part thinking hooks to cue in your answer
- Project as much confidence as you can in every answer

While you may occasionally be stumped by an expected or tough question, through good preparation this will not happen often. The better you handle questions, the higher your credibility - an important competency in executive presence - will rise among your superiors and peers

So what now?

If you are ready to take a step up in your career, contact us for a initial complimentary strategy session where we can outline approaches to help you starting speaking like an executive.

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About Warwick J Fahy

Warwick works with high-potential senior finance executives who struggle to get their point across and influence their key stakeholders. Warwick helps the executive gain respect by quickly and powerfully expressing their opinions - even when under pressure. Warwick is the author of "The One Minute Presenter: 8 steps to successful business presentations in a short attention span world. Warwick can be reached on warwick@oneminutepresenter.com and +86 21 6101 0486.

Links:

More about Warwick John Fahy at www.warwickjohnfahy.com

Book information and blog at www.oneminutepresenter.com

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