Skill 5

ANTICIPATING AUDIENCE QUESTIONS:
How to handle audience questions

This chapter you will find key strategies for handling questions from the audience and three ways to "break the ice" when you meet with a non-responsive group. In addition, you will see why writing anticipated questions in advance on index cards could prove an invaluable aid in your preplanning strategy.

How to anticipate questions or objections

In order to give a successful presentation, it is essential that every conceivable type of questions or objections that might be raised by the audience is anticipate in advance of the presentation.

Preplanning Strategy

- ♦ List all possible questions you think might be asked by the audience and corresponding answers that can be used
- ♦ Put the questions and answers on index cards. Remember when using index cards, that is usually best to place one question and answer per card.
- ♦ Review each question and answer with an associate prior to the talk.
- ♦ Be flexible, liberally add any additional questions and answers to the list.
- ♦ Review the list one more time.

Here is an example of index cards.

TITLE OF TALK: Proposal Increase Productivity
DATE TO BE GIVEN: 1/10/02

ANTICIPATED QUESTIONS: "A planned reduction of 20% in our overtime expense sounds like a fine idea-but just how do you intend doing this? In my opinion, it's far easier said than done!"

PLANNED RESPONSE: "Can be done in three steps:

1. **Analysis of peak workloads (where heaviest overtime occurs) during past 3 months.**
2. **Heavier use of part time temps to fill unexpected demand.**
3. **More effective scheduling of work force through better planning of first two steps.**

At conclusion of presentation

- Solicit questions from audience, but always let the group know if there are any kinds of constraints or time limitations.
- As a courtesy to the audience, if a time constraint arises during questioning, specify how many additional questions you can answer before time runs out.
- If time does run out before all questions are answered, try to remain after the presentation has formally concluded and speak individually to people who may still have questions.

The ice breakers: What to do when no questions are asked

Here are three simple strategies:

Ice breaker 1: The open-ended question

With this method, you casually state an open question that members of the audience are sure to have an opinion on, wait briefly for a response, and then answer it yourself. By offering your opinion, you also will invite reaction from your audience.

Ice breaker 2: Motivate audience response

Ask the same type of general question, then motivate audience interest through an actual involvement step ……. Such as a voice vote, show of hands, etc.

Ice breaker 3: Secure an active response

Follow the same procedure as Ice breaker 2, but secure involvement with a participant. Using firm eye contact, ask a general question from someone in the audience who has been an active listener (as evidence by their verbal and/or non-verbal language during your presentation).

The "paraphrase" strategy

The cardinal rule in answering any question is to **paraphrase** (either completely or partially) before responding directly to the question itself. This method gives the speaker on immediate dual advantage:

1. It enables everyone in the audience to understand fully what has been asked, thus avoiding any potential type of confusing or misunderstanding on anyone's part.
2. By paraphrasing, the speaker is automatically given a few extra seconds to plan for the answer.

Here's a technique rarely found in text or workbooks. It applies to situations where you (the speaker) *have forgotten what was asked, or are absolutely certain of the correct answer.*

Technique 1: Rephrase question

After the question has been asked, request person to "Please rephrase the question so that it will be clear to everyone in the room."

Technique 2: Repeat question

This skill comes into play when

a) the speaker needs additional time to respond, or

b) the benefit of group thinking would be highly beneficial before the official response from the speaker.

Here are two examples of audience questions that the speaker anticipated together with his planned response.

Possible audience questions	**Appropriate responses**
1. The proposed plan looks okay, but why must we vote on it now? How about holding off a decision until we meet again I three weeks?	We have all agreed to the necessity of having the new system operational within 3 to 4 weeks. In order to do that, we need your decision today. If any of the facts are still unclear, I'll be happy to review them with now.
2. Are you certain that our key supervisor will accept a new plan?	Yes. Six of our key supervisors were represented on the steering committee and are 100% in agreement that the new plan is excellent.