

ANSWERING TOUGH, TOUCHY, SENSITIVE QUESTIONS AND RESPONDING TO EMOTIONAL QUESTIONERS

Presenters often say that the easy part of presentations is handling questions and answers during and at the end of their talks. This enthusiasm is tempered severely when they encounter situations that are extremely difficult and tension filled, usually when the questioner is emotional, irritating, or intentionally trying to embarrass the presenter or disrupt the proceedings. Handling emotional questions is often grueling and gut wrenching.

Emotional questions and emotional responses are most likely when the issues being raised involve health and safety; property values; and quality of life issues such as peace of mind, freedom from fear, and pride in community or family. These issues are mostly emotion driven.

The questions themselves may be relatively straightforward. It is the emotionalization of the question, or bringing up sensitive topics, that leads to presenter discomfort and, perhaps, a feeling of inadequacy, even fear, in dealing with these situations.

A seven-step process

Remember, every question is important since communication occurs only when someone asks a question and there is an opportunity to answer. Use this seven-step process to respond effectively, humanely, and appropriately to emotionally charged situations. It's a process because the steps impose a purpose, order, and helpful structure for the presenter's answers and, like most process approaches to communication, tend to de-emotionalize the situation.

Step One: Manage the Emotional Dimension First

React to the people, animal, and living system dimensions of the question first. If questioners are angry, acknowledge their anger; if questioners are fearful, acknowledge their fear; and if questioners are upset, acknowledge their discomfort.

Examples: "That's an important question." "We all can understand why you're so concerned." "Health issues are among the most important concerns for each of us." "I'm sorry you're so uncomfortable; let me see if I can provide some useful information." "I've heard this truly important question asked and answered a number of times; let me see if I can be of some help." "Let's talk it through."



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James E. Lukaszewski (loo-ka-SHEV-skee) advises, coaches, and counsels the men and women who run very large corporations and organizations. He is an expert in managing and counteracting tough, touchy, sensitive corporate communications issues. The fastest growing portion of his practice involves civil and criminal litigation. He is one of the few who can and truly does coach CEOs.

He is a prolific author (several books, hundreds of articles), lecturer (corporate, college and university), coach, and counselor. He is quoted in publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Miami Herald*, the *Harvard Business Review*, and industry trade journals. He is a columnist, advisor, or editor for almost every major public relations periodical. His 1992 book, *Influencing Public Attitudes: Strategies that Reduce the Media's Power*, remains a classic work in the field of direct communication. He is an internationally recognized speaker on crisis management, ethics, media relations, public affairs, and reputation preservation and restoration. Visiting his Web site, www.e911.com, is like attending the University of Crisis Management.

An accredited member of the International Association of Business Communicators (ABC) and the Public Relations Society of America (APR), Mr. Lukaszewski is a member of the PRSA's College of Fellows (Fellow PRSA) and Board of Ethics & Professional Standards. He served as a crisis communications advisor to the International Disaster Advisory Committee, Agency for International Development, Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance from 1989 to 1992, and is a civilian advisor to several other federal agencies. He lectures annually at the U.S. Marine Corp's East Coast Commander's Media Training Symposium and was the second recipient of its Drew Middleton Award. He is the recipient of both Ball State University's 2004 National Public Relations Achievement Award and the 2004 Patrick Jackson Award for Distinguished Service to PRSA, and is among the winners of the 2005 *PR News* Lifetime Achievement Award. His name appeared in *Corporate Legal Times* as one of "28 Experts to Call When All Hell Breaks Loose," and in *PR Week* as one of 22 "crunch-time counselors who should be on the speed dial in a crisis."