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Crisis Management, Leadership
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ANSWERING TOUGH, TOUCHY, SENSITIVE QUESTIONS AND RESPONDING TO EMOTIONAL QUESTIONERS ©

James E. Lukaszewski, *ABC, Fellow IABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, BEPS Emeritus*
America's Crisis Guru®
President, The Lukaszewski Group Division, Risdall

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INTRODUCTION

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.”

Step Two: *Give Control to Others*

Emphasize restrictions, controls, regulations, monitoring, oversight, and continuous disclosure ahead of other issues and concerns, or the typical corporate self-forgiving, self-congratulatory language.

Examples: “This may be among the largest facilities of its kind, but it will be one of the most heavily regulated, observed, and monitored.” “The controls, restrictions, and regulations imposed on our operations will be monitored by outside, independent organizations for compliance.” “Independent monitoring combined with public disclosure will provide everyone who’s interested with moment-to-moment information.” “As time passes, we fully expect tough new regulations and even more rigorous restrictions and controls to be imposed.”

Examples to Avoid: Anything that begins with, “We are proud of,” “The facts are,” “This is the only way,” “There are no alternatives,” “It’s only an isolated incident,” “There’s no reason to be fearful,” or “There will be no difference.”

Step Three: *Find a Few Useful Positive Facts / Obligate Yourself*

One of the key lessons of managing emotional situations is recognizing that facts are of only limited value. The inclination of most business people and managers is to pile on the data, believing that objectively produced information, which would convince any rational person, will convince someone in an emotional state. The rule is that data is important but only effective when you can balance the emotional component. Yes, facts and data are important but far less so than dealing directly and empathetically with the emotional issues being faced.

Examples: “There are studies that acknowledge the issue you raise and provide helpful information, such as . . .” “Our experts have been telling us . . .” “We have really looked into this question deeply, and the information we have developed says . . .” “This is independent information that shows . . .” “We’re responsible for explaining everything we’ve proposed.” “You can count on us because it’s our obligation to . . .” “When you have questions or issues, we’re just a phone call or visit away.” “We will find an answer to your question.”

Step Four: State a Useful Positive Benefit, Gently

Emphasize how important your information may be to the individual's situation and, perhaps, other sources that might help the individual feel better and have more information.

Examples: "While this will be among the largest facilities of its type; it will also be one of the most heavily regulated and controlled facilities of its type." "As a condition of obtaining permission, there will be permanent oversight by independent, outside individuals and organizations to ensure that promises made are promises kept." "Questions like yours have triggered enormously helpful and serious research to find answers." "This permit or public decision will be made only after the community is satisfied that it has imposed sufficient restrictions, regulations, oversight, and controls."

With limited enthusiasm: "Some jobs will be created in . . ." "The economic benefit will be substantial." "The local economy will benefit by . . ."

Step Five: Tell the Truth / State or Acknowledge the Negatives:

Address the health, environmental, and community issues forthrightly.

Examples: "From our perspective, we are doing everything we can to address the issues you are raising, and the proof will be when we . . ." "Yes, the trains will be longer; there will be more emissions in these areas, but there will also be fewer pollutants by thousands of tons." "Overall mercury will decline 37 percent; however, the use of Western coal will raise the emission of mercury by about X pounds per year over present levels."

Step Six: Make Credible Comparisons

Accommodate personal feelings; try to avoid analogies by instead comparing "appropriate" and "like" situations and facts. "What other information can we provide?"

Examples: "A plant of similar size, but gas powered, employs 34 people versus 120 people for coal-fueled units." "Comparing coal-fueled plants to gas-fueled plants: The coal-fueled plants cost more to build, but the operating and expense elements are approximately the same. It's the extraordinary spiking and relentless growth of gas prices that makes coal the better choice."

Step Seven: Consensus/Solution (Optional)

If you are particularly successful in communicating with the individual or group on the emotional issue, you could move toward an acknowledged mutual understanding by suggesting positions or answers the emotional, adversarial questioner might see as mutually beneficial or that would move the process ahead.

Examples: “Have I responded to the issues that were making you uncomfortable?” “What was most important from your perspective?” “Has what I said been helpful?” “Was there anything that you found especially useful?” “If we modify X or Y in the manner you suggest, would that help you feel less concerned?” “What specifically would resolve your questions?”

SOME GENERAL THOUGHTS

1. **Focus Forward**: Always answer the question as though it was the first time you have heard it, even if you just answered the same question a few minutes before. Rather than directing people back to the content of your presentation or remarks, treat the question as if it were brand new and answer it from the stand point of now, and what’s next. This will help you avoid the use of negative language.
2. **Stay Positive**: The greatest emotional trigger in adversarial situations is the use of negative language or negative responses such as: “That’s not true,” “ I never said that,” “That’s not what I meant,” “You weren’t listening,” “That’s not our fault,” “We didn’t mean it that way,” “That couldn’t happen,” and “We would never do that.”

Find the positive alternative in every case, or you stoke the fires of emotion and antagonism.

3. **Put Yourself in Their Shoes Every Time**: The ability to have this level of empathetic response is one of the most important aspects of moving through an emotional questioning situation.
4. **Control Your Own Emotions**: Avoid taking inflammatory language and emotionally charged words, such as “ashamed,” “embarrassed,” “humiliated,” “bad,” “ugly,” “weird,” “worried,” and “scum,” personally. They are just words. Instead, move to answer the question and counteract your emotional reaction by focusing on a positive declarative response.
5. **Always Worry When They Throw Sticks and Stones**: Words rarely hurt unless you let them.
6. **Defuse the Situation**: “Let’s talk it through.” “Let’s look at the situation step-by-step.” “Let’s examine your question systematically, one element at a time.”