



## ANSWERING HOSTILE QUESTIONS

If the idea of giving a speech strikes fear in the hearts of most mere mortals, the prospect of confronting a hostile questioner is their worst nightmare. More than anything, we dread the loss of control that could result when some member of an angry audience accuses us of incompetence, bad faith, or worse. At times like that, there's no place to hide.

Maybe so, but you don't have to concede defeat the first time your authority is challenged. This chapter teaches you how to hold your ground, maintain your equanimity and demonstrate your credibility in the process. In fact, hostile questions present a dramatic opportunity to strengthen your bonds of trust with your audience. If you can respond with courage, honesty, and dignity in the face of a direct assault, your leadership quotient multiplies before the eyes of all present. But it's crucial to distinguish between hostility that has the potential to further meaningful dialogue and purely obstructionist provocation. You need to learn to work with the former; while maintaining control over the latter. Here are some practical guidelines:

- *Prepare yourself for a question and answer session by rehearsing potential hostile questions.*
- *When dealing with “workable hostility” acknowledge the validity of the question, summarize your best understanding of both sides of the issue, and invite the audience to continue the conversation within civil guidelines.*
- *When the hostile question is a personal accusation based on truth, admit, divert, and mitigate the accusation.*
- *When the hostile question is a personal accusation based on falsehood, deny it forcibly and immediately move on to another question.*
- *Do not allow a questioner to trap you into a heated argument. If you raise your voice or lose your cool you have lost the argument and the audience.*
- *Use the opportunity of a “workable” hostile question to introduce additional factual support for your position.*
- *Be aware of body language and placement. Respond to hostility with non-defensive expressions and gestures.*

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