

Giving a presentation?

Thinking about including a Q&A session?

Been told that you have to have one?

Then you need to read this!

How to
plan + organise
+ manage

a Question & Answer Session



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A question and answer session can take many forms...

A Question & Answer (Q&A) session is usually held at the end, or close to the end, of a presentation and involves the presenter answering some questions from the audience.

A Q&A session can be part of almost any type of presentation including those delivered at staff meetings, seminars and conferences.

They range from being quite short, with perhaps two or three quick questions followed by concise answers, to being quite long with poorly formulated questions and rambling answers. They can be useful and interesting but can also be dull and boring.

A Question & Answer session deserves careful planning and execution.

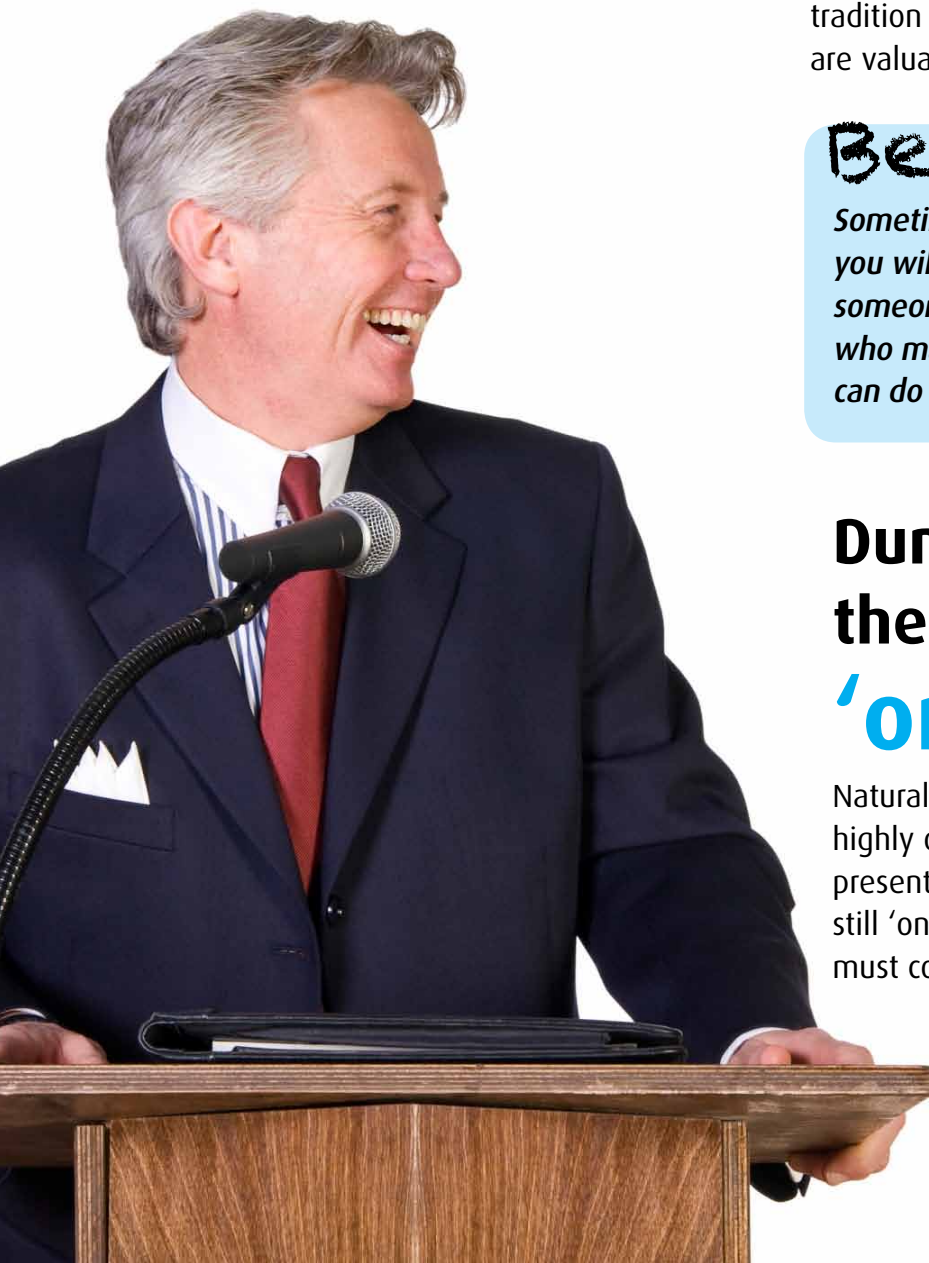
Sometimes having a Q&A session is a good idea and sometimes it isn't. They aren't always valuable to the bulk of the audience and don't always enhance people's understanding of the material or their enjoyment of the event. Sometimes they seem to exist more out of tradition than because there is evidence that they are valuable.

Be Prepared

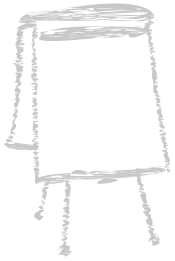
Sometimes you're in a position to decide if you will have a Q&A session, but sometimes someone else makes the decision. No matter who makes the decision, there's plenty you can do to make sure it's as good as it can be..

During a Q&A session the presenter is still 'on show'!

Naturally, you want your audience to think highly of you; for both your content and for your presentation skills. During a Q&A session you're still 'on show'; you're still presenting and you must continue to do your best.



The four stages: Plan, Announce, Conduct and Follow-up



Plan > Announce > Conduct > Follow-up

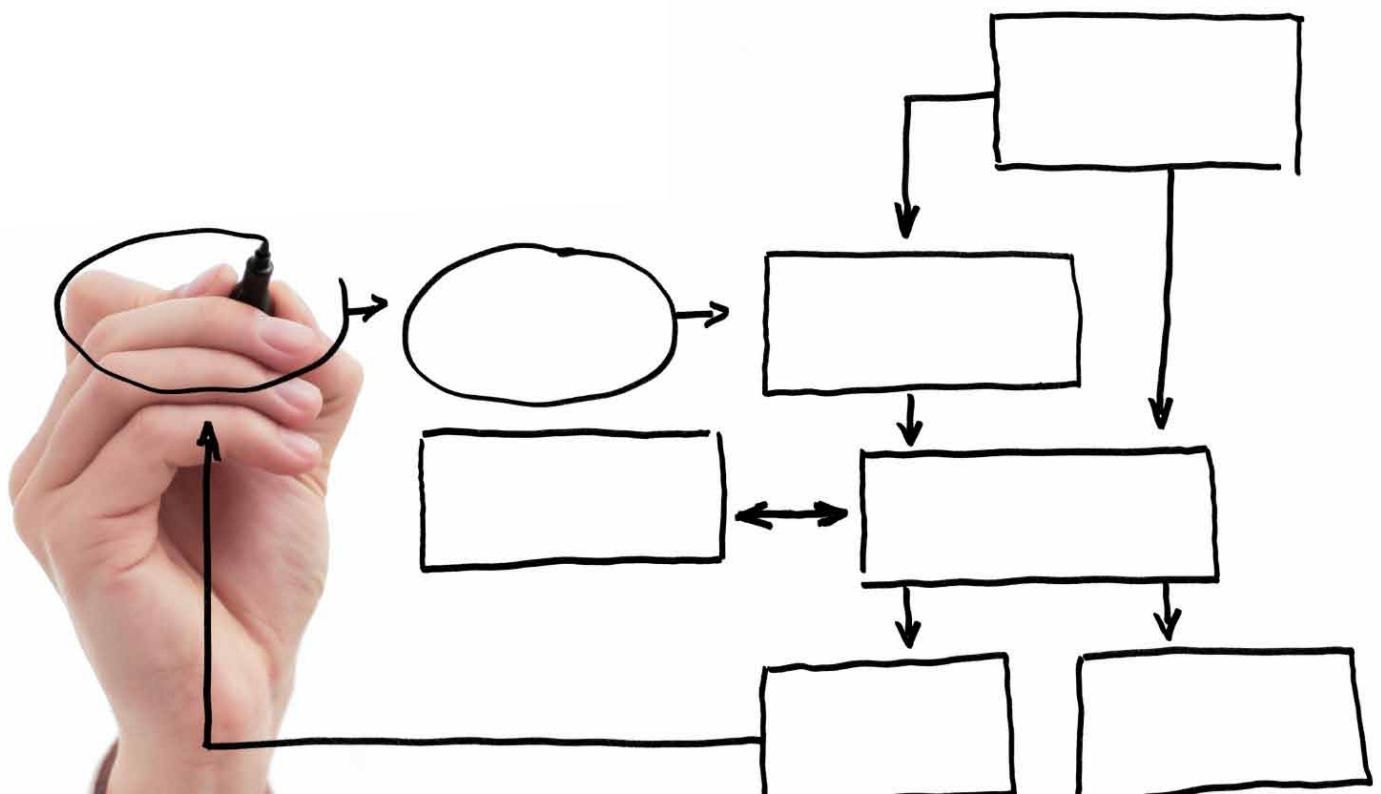
There are four stages to conducting a successful Q&A session:

1. Planning and organising the session;
2. Announcing and setting up the session;
3. Conducting the session; and
4. Dealing with unfinished business which might include dealing with people who:
 - Asked a question but, for whatever reason, you said you'd answer them later; and
 - Wanted to ask a question but didn't get a chance to do so.

Even if you don't have control over a particular stage, you can do a lot to enhance its value. First, you should gather information about each stage and, second, you should make sure you have as much input as possible.

Be Informed

You need to decide (or at least gather information about) whether there will be a Q&A session or not and, if there will be one, whether it will be fully embedded in your presentation with you taking control or will it be attached to the end with perhaps a moderator or MC taking control.



There are some questions you need to think about

Q&A's:

If a decision has been made to have a Q&A session then, as part of the planning and organising stage, the following questions need to be clearly answered. Every presenter, presentation, audience, event and Q&A session is different so you'll need to modify these questions to suit your situation.



The planning questions are:

1. How long will it be and how many questions will time allow (or how many people will be able to ask a question)?
2. How will the session be introduced, who will introduce it, and what instructions will be given to the audience?
3. Who will conduct the session?
4. What will the process be for indicating who has been chosen to ask a question?
5. What will the process be for answering them?
6. How will you handle the possibility that there aren't enough questions or even no questions at all?
7. How will you handle the possibility that there are more questions than time will allow?
8. How will you handle questions which:
 - Are not in fact questions but statements?
 - Are long, confusing and rambling?
 - Are not 'on topic'?
 - You can't answer at all or can't answer in the time available?
9. How will the session be terminated?

Not every question that's asked in a Q&A session is well thought out, useful or even polite.

Sometimes, during a Q&A session, questions are asked which are clear, concise, relevant, straightforward and interesting to the bulk of those present. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, questions are:

1. Irrelevant to the subject matter and to the presentation;
2. Irrelevant because the answer was clearly given during the presentation;
3. Unclear (the content and/or the enunciation) and convoluted;
4. A mixture of two or three questions (which is annoying enough but sometimes there's no clear differentiation between them);
5. Long and rambling;
6. Prefaced by a long, and often meaningless, introduction;
7. Of no interest to the rest of the audience;
8. Not questions at all but statements; and
9. Not questions but critical and rude remarks.

Don't be concerned with why someone asks a question

How to ask for questions



You must frame the session. You must tell the audience what is going to happen and what is not going to happen.

This helps you be organised and helps you look organised. It helps the audience know the process, the parameters and whether you will or will not be available later to answer questions. Audience members deserve to know, and want to know, what will happen.

In addition, if there are any problems (like people being annoyed that there wasn't time to ask their question), you have the frame to fall back on.

If there is an MC or host, the frame is sometimes delivered by them. A skilled and caring MC will plan the frame well in advance (and will talk to you days or weeks beforehand) and will deliver the frame. Unfortunately, it's not always done.

Be Organised

There are many reasons why a person might ask a question; some more honourable than others. It is important to remember that it doesn't matter why someone has asked a question. You will rarely really know why so don't waste time thinking about it.

“So let’s open it up to **the audience**”

Too often something ordinary is said to start a Q&A session such as: “So let’s open it up to the audience.”, “Now it’s time for some questions. Has anyone got any?” or “We have time for some questions and yes Professor Smith up the back you clearly have one so let’s start with you. It’s much better if you (or the MC) says something like:

“Today we have looked at The information provided, and the points made, are likely to raise a number of questions. I’m happy to answer some questions regarding

“We have minutes available and this is enough time for 3 or possibly 4 questions. I will also be available to answer some questions later in the day and you can also contact me by email.

In addition, it’s often useful to suggest some questions to the audience. To do this, say something like:

“Some of you may want to know more about the history of Some of you may want clarification about why we chose And some may be interested in what we see as the next step in the process.”

Giving them some questions is a good idea because it helps people think about issues that you want them to think about, helps them develop clear questions and sometimes even gets someone to ask one of your suggested questions for which, of course, you have a prepared answer. Therefore, make sure you suggest questions which you would like to be asked.

It can also be useful to give the audience time to think. You can do this by giving the audience, for example, 20 secs to think about possible questions, and even another 20 secs to discuss their questions with the person next to them. There will always be a few people who already have their questions (perhaps before you even took the stage) and already have their hand up, but there are many other people in the audience besides them.



How to answer questions - the basics:

When someone is asking a question, and while you are answering it, you are still in presentation mode and must continue to engage the whole audience.

To start with

1. Acknowledge the person and look at them. This is good manners.
2. Do not move towards the person. First, it's unnecessary. Second, it can make it become a conversation just between you and them. Third, it doesn't help you keep the rest of the audience engaged and can actually disengage and alienate them. You should, if you can, move away from a person asking a question. If you're at a lectern, or sitting at a table at a staff meeting, then moving away from a person asking a question isn't really an option but at least try not to move towards them by leaning, turning your body, using gestures, etc.



If the question is clear, relevant and appropriate

1. Repeat the question, or at least paraphrase it and engage with the whole audience. This makes sure you've understood the question, makes sure the rest of the audience has heard it, gives you a chance to re-organise poorly formulated questions, and gives you a little time to organise your thoughts.
2. If you can answer it, then answer it.
Keep your answers short, on track and to the point.
Many questions require a longer answer than time permits. If this is the case, tell them that you will be giving a brief answer and they can see you later for a more detailed response.
Continue to address and engage the whole audience.
3. If you cannot answer it, then say so.
State that you will do your best to get the answer for them. For example: "I don't have the details that you're after but I'll find the information for you. Please see me after the presentation."

If the question is unclear

... ask for clarification. If it is unclear to you, then it is most likely unclear to others too. You have a duty to the rest of the audience to not waste their time. It is acceptable to ask for clarification and it is also acceptable to say you don't understand the question and that you'll see them later or answer their question by email, etc.

I don't understand

You should place your emphasis on you 'not understanding'.

How to answer questions - **the basics:**

Answering questions that are **irrelevant, inappropriate and even rude.**

If the question is irrelevant, inappropriate, rude, a statement and not a question etc, then be rest assured that most of the audience will also find it that way.

Don't be intimidated; be cool, calm and collected. Don't waste your time trying to work out if the person is trying to make you or others look stupid; trying to prove you wrong; showing how clever they are; or in a bad mood and you just happen to be in the firing line.

First, let them and the audience know that you're not going to answer their question now by saying something like:

"That's not something I'm able to answer now." or **"That's beyond the scope of this Question & Answer session."** or **"The answer to that is quite detailed and long."** or **"I'd like to give you a full and complete response but that is beyond the time we have available."**

Second, let them and the audience know what you're prepared to do by saying something like:

"I'll provide a thorough response as soon as the presentation is over." or **"Please contact me by phone, or at the break."** or **"You seem to be well versed on that issue. I'd like to talk to you later and compare notes."** or **"I'd be happy to get your point of view after the presentation."**

Be direct, assertive and ethical. Try to close down the conversation or move it to another channel and away from the session. In any case, move on. Here are some further suggested responses:

"That was a statement rather than a question but I take your point." And move on!

"Your question was detailed and involved a few sub-sections. I will only be able to answer the first part today." Do it and move on!

"I understand that you disagree with my conclusion." And maybe add **"I stand by my findings."** And move on!

"I know that there are many people who, like you, believe that there should be more funding devoted to this issue." And move on!

"I won't respond to that point in this forum." And move on!

A Q&A session can be embedded in your presentation or it can occur after your main presentation is finished. Also, it can be facilitated by you or by someone else.

However, no matter what the circumstances, there's plenty you can do to make sure a Q&A session is the best it can possibly be. In this document, we've only covered some of the things you can do. For example, when a Q&A session is embedded in your presentation and facilitated by you, you have the opportunity to use the technique represented by the acronym E.S.C.A.P.E.; but more on that another time.

All the best,
Mark McPherson