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How to master the art of thinking quickly on your feet

Toronto firm offers some advice on how to keep an answer simple, clear and direct

By Virginia Galt

Workplace Reporter

Caught off guard by a question at work, do you blurt out the first thing that comes to mind? Or do you take a moment to marshal your thoughts?

Most of us are not too adept at thinking on our feet. Extroverts tend to respond with far more information than the situation warrants, while an introvert, at worst, might say nothing, says Roger HB Davies, chief executive officer of Toronto-based McLuhan & Davies Communications, Inc.

"Most communication is one-on-one, informal, impromptu," Mr. Davies said in a recent interview. You don't generally have time to prepare speaking notes before bumping into your boss in the hallway — and, even in the age of e-mail, hallway encounters are still important.

So, when face-to-face opportunities arise, how does one make the best of the situation?

"It is not enough to be spontaneous. That can come over as a ramble, or beating around the bush," Mr. Davies said. "It is also not enough to avoid a response, to be evasive."

Mr. Davies, a former journalist, started his consulting business 25 years ago teaching business writing strategies. In recent years, however, he has noticed increasing demand from clients for help with verbal communications skills. His firm now offers its trademark Think on Your Feet® program, developed by former federal communications regulator Keith Spicer, in 20 countries. The concepts cross cultures, Mr. Davies said.

"Today, no one has time for you to ramble. Everyone is in a rush, hence the premium on the skill of thinking on your feet."

Mr. Davies said clients are seeking pointers on how to answer questions on the spot, how to explain complicated ideas more clearly and how to be persuasive.

Whether you have 10 hours, 10 minutes or 10 seconds to prepare, Mr. Davies offers some tips:

Think brevity

Be aware that your audience values you getting to the point. They value complex ideas being explained simply. Everyone suffers from information overload. If you don't get to the point, you're adding to the overload.

Think structure

Place some kind of framework into your communication so that your audience can see you are organized and have thought about your answer. You have focused your answer into something digestible, something an audience can absorb. It forces you into brevity and clarity.

Think threes

Strong verbal messages require focus. They also require substance. One item is not enough. Seventeen items is too many. Three items is enough for you, and your audience, to retain. Three items forces you to focus on what is really important. It also focuses your audience on only having listen to three. Remember your audience's attention span.

Think movement

Demonstrate your mental ability to be logical, and to move your audience through that logic. What if someone asks a question to which you do not know the answer?

Mr. Davies advises that if you really don't know the answer, say so.

"Our research clearly shows that people expect and value honesty and directness. They don't like waffling ... Just acknowledge that you don't know, but promise to get back to them — and then get back to them."

How do you buy time if you just need a moment or two to gather your thoughts?

"Usually, people know the answer but get flummoxed, pressured and have a hard time recalling what they know," Mr. Davies said. "One strategy that will buy you time involves instantly taking your questioner back in time, to review what happened."

"For example, you are cornered by your boss to discuss your group's sales performance. You can quickly frame a response by grouping all the details into what affected past sales, your targets for present sales and your strategies for increasing future sales."

Mr. Davies has people prepare for his workshops by bringing a list of the 10 questions they most hate to answer. For bosses, these often include: Why haven't you given me a raise? For sales people, one of the most hated questions is: Why should I buy your product when the competition sells it for less?

Anticipating questions that might be asked helps you respond to the tough ones when they do arise, he said. As an opening Think on Your Feet® exercise, workshop participants are invited to assume the role of a famous person, and field the types of questions that person might be asked.

For instance, a person playing the late prime minister, Pierre Trudeau, might be asked to justify his decision to drive an expensive German sports car.

A hint from Mr. Davies: Fuddle duddle is not an acceptable answer.

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