

HAYES
COLLINS / **MEDIA**

Answering Questions

Handling difficult questions – it's as easy as ABC

Even the most experienced communicators can come unstuck when faced with a really tricky question.

A common technique of politicians is to ignore the question and answer by saying exactly what they want to say. It may make them feel in control - but how does that make us feel as the audience? Probably rather annoyed and irritated - and less likely to trust them.

But you will sometimes be in situations where you aren't getting the right questions for putting across your key messages. That's where you can use the following ABC technique:

Address the question (make a reference to the question you have been asked).

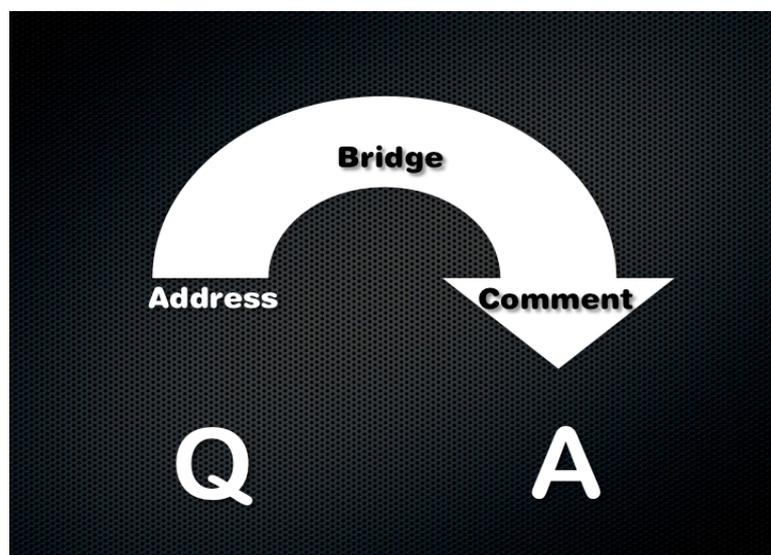
Bridge to the message you want to give out.

Comment (and add value to the message by using examples and illustrations).

Here's an example where the person asking the question wants to draw you into an area that you don't want to go:

"Do you think the Health Secretary is up to the job?"

"Well I've been working in the NHS for well over a decade now under several different health secretaries and my personal view is that I can achieve a lot more by focusing on doing my job well rather than worrying about someone else's (A). Because, whoever is in power, the bottom line is that we're all about helping people who are in distress and doing so in the most effective way possible (B). Recently, that's meant...(C)."



If you are bridging to something that the interviewer knows will interest their audience, they won't care that you haven't exactly answered the question. However if you use this technique just to avoid answering questions that your organisation really should face up to, then the questioner is likely to come back and insist you answer the question. So let's look at how to communicate clearly when something has gone wrong.

Dealing with crisis situations

Even the best organisation will sometimes find itself having to handle a crisis. This could be a situation where a patient dies due to negligence, a member of staff behaves inappropriately, or any number of other unforeseen occurrences.

Whatever the situation, there are some standard approaches that will help:

- **Always face the music:** the longer you leave it, the worse it will get.
- **Take control of the story:** if you don't do this as soon as possible, you are leaving it to others to 'define' the story.
- **Be there:** never leave an 'empty chair', because someone else will fill it.
- **Stay positive:** never repeat a negative word or phrase used by the journalist.
- **Never say 'no comment':** people will interpret that as 'I'm guilty'.
- **Remember the three Rs:** Regret, Reason, Remedy.

Let's look at an example of how that might work. Imagine that the wrong wages have gone into your staff's accounts - some have been paid too much, some too little. Angry staff have gone to the media and you're asked:

"What went wrong?"

One possible reply could be:

Regret: "Firstly, I want to say how sorry we are that this happened - our staff work really hard, we know we've let them down badly and they really don't deserve this."

Reason: "As soon as we found out this had happened, we looked into what had gone wrong and, as we suspected, it's down to the new payroll system we've introduced and a glitch in the software."

Remedy: "The suppliers have fixed this and have tested it extensively so we're confident this won't happen again. Of course this doesn't help our staff who have been underpaid, and so we have arranged for emergency

payments to tide them over until the next pay packet. For staff who have been overpaid, we're going to allow them to pay it back over six months if that's what they would prefer."

By being upfront, you're in a good position to shut down the story and move on - and you may even get some credit for 'fessing up. Try to sweep things under the carpet and you'll be dealing with accusations of dishonesty, as well as the original problem.

And finally...

Watch others communicating, looking out for the techniques we've described. Think about which stories had the most impact on you - what were the people doing or saying that made it memorable?

Because we communicate all the time, we tend to take it for granted. But purposeful effective communication takes practise, like any other skill. The more you do, the better you will get.

Good luck!