

Thinking on Your Feet—It's not Impossible!

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If you think it is impossible to think on one's feet, you are not alone. Many business professionals dread speaking to senior level executives or important customers for fear their brains will freeze and decision makers will see them as the village idiot. There are three very practical tips to help you dazzle, rather than fizzle.

- 1. Do your homework, do your homework, do your homework.** Take the time to thoroughly investigate your listening audience. Identify their "pet" issues or "hot buttons." Ask peers, friends or others the best way to communicate with them. At a bare minimum, learn titles and functionalities. Knowing even this will help you to answer from the right perspective. For example, a Chief Financial Officer's interest lies in saving money so your answer should focus on lowering costs. A Benefits Manager's concern is with people so stress the training you will provide or how little the disruption will be. The more comfortable you are with the audience, the easier it will be to decide the best approach and the necessary amount of detail for your explanation.
- 2. Brainstorm all the possible questions and practice your answers.** After identifying who will be in your audience, sit down with a packet of index cards. On one side write down a question you could be asked related to your topic from any one of the perspective attendees. On the other side, write how you will answer it so that it resonates with their "care-about's." Then, practice your answers in front of your bathroom mirror. Saying your answer out loud will imprint the answer and solidify how best to express your thoughts. This type of preparation is similar to what the President of the United States does when speaking to the press. The only difference is his staff takes the time to come up with the questions and the rehearsal is with staff members pretending to be hard-nose reporters.

- 3. Pause, consider what the questioner needs to know to make a decision related to your topic, and then formulate your P.A.B.** A two or three second pause will help you to access the right file folder in your brain. Even if you know the answer, it is a good idea to pause for a few seconds. It shows you are trying to be precise. Begin your answer by paraphrasing the question and acknowledging why that is an important issue to resolve or consider. This will insure you are on the right track with the questioner and keep you focused. When you do answer, make it brief, 45 seconds or less. People typically prefer the abridged version. If they want more detail, they will ask you to elaborate.

When you have been asked to present data, people assume you are the subject matter expert. Typically, when they ask you a question, they want to know three key things:

- 1) What your position is as the expert,
- 2) What you would recommend they do and
- 3) How it will be of benefit if they take your suggested action.

If you can remember the acronym, P.A.B. you will answer clearly and concisely.

The challenge to thinking on one's feet is fear of the unknown. With preparation and practice, there should be very few questions you can not answer.

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their face-to-face and over the phone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our web site, [www. ImpactCommunicationsInc.com](http://www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com).

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