



Ajit Ninan

## 20. HOW TO ORDER DISORDER!

Even if you're a seasoned public speaker, you could often encounter difficult people who disrupt presentations with rambling, disorderly – even hostile – questions. It could be the "know-it-all" determined to display greater knowledge. It could be the persistent critic who challenges your premises. Or it could be the hesitant seeker who keeps demanding further information. However, with tact, good judgement and the following steps, you can sail through disruptions with confidence:

- **Be Attentive:** If you're dismissive of your questioners, you risk damaging the positive impression you have made. Hear out even the nondescript guy at the back of the room – he may turn out to be the audience's decision-maker!
- **Check Smart Alecks:** If an attention-seeker disputes your statements, quickly observe the audience's non-verbal cues. If you sense public sentiment is with him/her, tread carefully. A sarcastic put-down may set the audience against you. Explain why you have a different perspective and answer to the best of your ability, refusing to be drawn into an argument.
- **Stay Focused:** When a question is wordy or rambling, politely request the interjector to be brief as others may be waiting to speak. Don't spend too much time on questions that take your discussion into tangential issues. If you don't know the answer, admit it. Offer to check and get back or ask if anyone in the audience knows.
- **Re-word Questions:** Don't panic if you're thrown off-balance by a tough query – nervousness makes us perceive threats where there are none. Repeating the question in your own words allows you to buy time – and come up with a suitable response.

These tactics will help you disarm critics – and enable you to manage conversational disruptions smoothly!

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The Higher Education series offers weekly insights on improving public communication skills