



## ***Moderating a Panel—Some Creative Approaches***

Whether for an industry conference or in-house workshop at your company, one day you may have to moderate a panel. You might think it's a ridiculously simple job – just read a few introductions and you're done. But the role of moderator requires many skills. As host for the session, how can you communicate engagingly and leave a positive impression, without stealing attention from the panelists? How can you keep a question-and-answer period on track, encouraging thoughtful discussion that leaves everyone satisfied?

### ***Setting the Scene***

One of your principal responsibilities will be to set the scene by effectively introducing each participant. Powerful, succinct introductions are important. Ask each panelist for copy ahead of time, and consider editing it. Add a human element. As Ty Boyd says, "People want to know your qualities without becoming bored by your qualifications." Don't simply read a panelist's job title and awards -- mention the panelist is father of three boys and a backyard gardener who specializes in hot peppers. Create some dimension to the person.

If you're so inclined, it's very appropriate to use humor. But don't let your humor upstage your panelists. Once you've set up the purpose of the panel and introduced everyone, your role shifts to that of traffic cop - keeping everything organized.

### ***Question & Answer***

Which brings us to the Q&A. The moderator must be a very skillful listener. The moderator also sets the parameters of the discussion, and becomes the timekeeper in many instances. Some strategies for moderating the Q&A:

- In case the Q&A doesn't become vital and alive automatically, be prepared to start it with your own insightful questions. Have at least one question for each panelist.
- After an audience member asks a question, repeat it so everyone can hear.
- Use a panelist's full name occasionally to remind the audience of who is on the panel.
- When appropriate, invite other panelists to answer a question directed at another panelist.

- If someone poses a question that's too elementary for the rest of the group, see if you can rephrase it in a way that deepens it, without embarrassing the asker.
- Sometimes one person tries to dominate a Q&A by asking numerous follow-up questions or arguing with panelists. It's your job as moderator to create balance in the meeting, and, in some instances, to protect the panelists. Sometimes, you may have to cut off debate when it goes afield or becomes detrimental to the mission of the panel. To keep things on track, the moderator may have to be the bad guy.
- Monitor a watch or clock. Always know how much time the panel has left.
- At the end, summarize what's been covered and help the audience draw conclusions. That's a more rewarding ending than letting the Q&A trail off.

Prepare for your role as a moderator, just as panelists will prepare for theirs. Rehearse your introductions so you can maintain eye contact with the audience. Be well versed and well informed on the topic. A panel is not a monologue; it's a dialogue. And it begins with you.

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