

# Staying cool and confident under pressure

"So, Susan, your report indicates you support forging ahead with the expansion but have you considered the impact this will have on our customers? Surely you remember the fiasco in Dallas last year when they tried the same type of project?"

Yikes! If you're Susan, you're likely feeling under pressure! You have to answer the question and allay the CEO's concerns about the disruption to customers. What do you do? What do you say? How do you say it? What if you can't think of anything to say?

This is not an uncommon situation. Whether you are put on the spot while attending a meeting, presenting a proposal, selling an idea, or answering questions after a presentation, articulating your thoughts in unanticipated situations is a skill. Thinking on your feet is highly coveted skill and when you master it, your clever and astute responses will instill immediate confidence in what you say.

When you can translate your thoughts and ideas into coherent speech quickly, you ensure your ideas are heard. You also come across as being confident, persuasive, and trustworthy.

Confidence is key when learning to think on your feet. When you present information, give an opinion or provide suggestions, make sure you know what you are talking about and that you are well informed. This doesn't mean you have to know everything about everything, but if you are reasonably confident in your knowledge of the subject, that confidence will help you to remain calm and collected even if you are put unexpectedly in the hot seat.

The secret of thinking on your feet is to be prepared: learn some skills and tactics, and do some preparation for situations that might put you under pressure. Then when you do find yourself faced with unexpected questions and debate, you'll be ready to draw on these tactics and preparation, and so stay poised while you compose your thoughts and prepare your response. Here are some tips and tactics:

1. Relax  
This is often the opposite of how you are feeling when you're under pressure, but in order that your voice to remain calm and for your brain to "think", you have to be as relaxed as possible.

Take deep breaths  
Take a second and give yourself a positive and affirming message  
Clench invisible muscles (thighs, biceps, feet) for a few seconds and release.

**2. Listen**

It comes as no surprise that listening is critical to thinking on your feet. Why do you need to listen? To make sure you fully understand the question or request before you reply. If you answer too soon, you risk going into a line of thinking that is unnecessary or inappropriate. To help you with your listening remember to:

Look directly at the questioner  
Observe body language as well as what is being spoken

Try to interpret what is being suggested by the question or request. Is this an attack, a legitimate request for more information, or a test? Why is this person asking this and what is the intention?

**Tip:**

Remember that the person is asking a question because he or she is interested. Some interest is positive - they simply want to know more - and some is negative - they want to see you squirm. Either way they are interested in what you have to say. It's your privilege and pleasure not to disappoint them!

**3. Have the Question Repeated**

If you're feeling particularly under pressure, ask for the question to be repeated. This gives you a bit more time to think about your response.

At first glance people think this will only make them look unsure. It doesn't. It makes you look concerned that you give an appropriate response. It also gives the questioner an opportunity to rephrase and ask a question that is more on point. Remember, the questioner may well have just "thought on his or her feet" to ask the question, so when you give them a second chance, the question may well be better articulated and clearer to all.

By asking to have the question repeated you also get another opportunity to assess the intentions of the questioner. If it is more specific or better worded, chances are the person really wants to learn more. If the repeated question is more aggressive than the first one, then you know the person is more interested in making you uncomfortable than anything else. When that's the case,



the next tip comes in very handy.

**4. Use Stall Tactics**

Sometimes you need more time to get your thoughts straight and calm yourself down enough to make a clear reply. The last thing you want to do is blurt out the first thing that comes to your mind. Often this is a defensive comment that only makes you look insecure and anxious rather than confident and composed.

Repeat the question yourself. This gives you time to think and you clarify exactly what is being asked. It also allows you to rephrase if necessary and put a positive spin on the request. "How have I considered the impact on customers in order to make sure they have a continued positive experience during the expansion?"

Narrow the focus. Here, you ask a question of your own to not only clarify, but to bring the question down to a manageable scope.

"You're interested in hearing how I've considered customer impacts. What impacts are you most interested in: product availability or in-store service?"

Ask for clarification. Again, this will force the questioner to be more specific and hopefully get more to a specific point. "When you say you want to know how I've analyzed customer impacts, do you mean you want a detailed analysis or a list of the tools and methods I used?"

Ask for a definition. Jargon and specific terminology may present a problem to you. Ask to have words and ideas clarified to ensure you are talking about the same thing.

**5. Use Silence to your Advantage**

We are conditioned to believe that silence is uncomfortable. However, if you use it sparingly, it communicates that you are in control of your thoughts and confident in your ability to answer expertly.

When you rush to answer you also typically rush your words. Pausing to collect your thoughts tells your brain to slow everything down.

**6. Stick to One Point and One Supporting Piece of Information**

There's a high risk that, under pressure, you'll answer a question with either too much or too little information. If you give too short an answer, you risk letting the conversation slip into interrogation mode. (You'll get another question, and the questioner will be firmly in control of how the dialogue unfolds). When your reply is too long, you risk losing people's interest, coming across as boring, or giving away things that are better left unsaid. Remember, you aren't being asked to give a speech on the subject. The questioner wants to know something. Respect that and give them an answer, with just enough supporting information.

This technique gives you focus. Rather than trying to tie together all the ideas that are running through your head, when you pick one main point and one supporting fact, you allow yourself to answer accurately and assuredly.

**Tip:**

If you don't know the answer, say so. There is no point in trying to make something up. You will end up looking foolish and this will lower your confidence when you need to think on your feet in the future. There is (usually) nothing wrong with not knowing something. Simply make sure you follow up as soon as possible afterwards with a researched answer.

**7. Prepare some "what ifs"**

With a bit of forethought, it's often possible to predict the types of questions you might be asked, so you can prepare and rehearse some answers to questions that might come your way. Let's say you are presenting the monthly sales figures to your management team. The chances are your report will cover most of the obvious questions that the management team might have, but what other questions might you predict? What's different about this month? What new questions might be asked? How would you respond? What additional information might you need to have to hand to support more detailed questions?

In particular, spend some time brainstorming the most difficult questions that people might ask, and preparing and rehearsing

good answers to them.

**8. Practice Clear Delivery**

How you say something is almost as important as what you say. If you mumble or use "umm" or "ah" between every second word, confidence in what you say plummets. Whenever you are speaking with people, make a point to practice these key oration skills:

Speak in a strong voice. (Don't confuse strong with loud!)

Use pauses strategically to emphasize a point or slow yourself down

Vary your tone and pay attention to how your message will be perceived given the intonation you use

Use eye contact appropriately

Pay attention to your grammar

Use the level of formality that is appropriate to the situation.

**9. Summarize and Stop**

Wrap up your response with a quick summary statement. After that, resist adding more information. There may well be silence after your summary. Don't make the common mistake of filling the silence with more information! This is the time when other people are absorbing the information you have given. If you persist with more information, you may end up causing confusion and undoing the great work you've already done in delivering your response.

Use words to indicate you are summarizing (i.e. "in conclusion," "finally") or briefly restate the question and your answer. So - what did I do to analyze customer impacts? I reviewed the Dallas case files in detail, and prepared a "What if" analysis for our own situation.

**Key points:**

No one enjoys being putting on the spot or answering questions that you aren't fully expecting. The uncertainty can be stressful. That stress doesn't need to be unmanageable and you can think on your feet if you remember the strategies we just discussed. Essentially, thinking on your feet means staying in control of the situation. Ask questions, buy time for yourself, and remember to stick to one point and make that single point count. When you are able to zoom in on the key areas of concern, you'll answer like an expert and you'll impress your audience, and yourself, with your confidence and poise.

[mindtools.com](http://mindtools.com)

## Learn effectively by understanding your learning preferences

Have you ever tried to learn something fairly simple, yet failed to grasp the key ideas? Or tried to teach people and found that some were overwhelmed or confused by something quite basic?

If so, you may have experienced a clash of learning styles: Your learning preferences and those of your instructor or audience may not have been aligned. When this occurs, not only is it frustrating for everyone, the communication process breaks down and learning fails.

Once you know your own natural learning preference, you can work on expanding the way you learn, so that you can learn in other ways, not just in your preferred style.

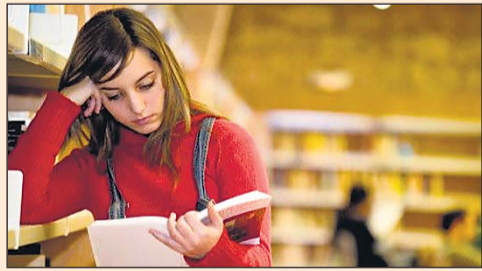
And, by understanding learning styles, you can learn to create an environment in which everyone can learn from you, not just those who use your preferred style.

Whenever you are training or communicating with others, you have information and ideas that you want them to understand and learn effectively and efficiently. Your audience is likely to demonstrate a wide range of learning preferences, and your challenge is to provide variety that helps them learn quickly and well.

Your preferred teaching and communication methods may in fact be influenced by your own learning preferences. For example, if you prefer visual rather than verbal learning, you may in turn tend to provide a visual learning experience for your audience.

Be aware of your preferences and the range of preference of your audiences. Provide a balanced learning experience by:

Sensory - Intuitive: Provide both hard facts and general concepts. Visual -



Verbal: Incorporate both visual and verbal cues.

Active - Reflective: Allow both experiential learning and time for evaluation and analysis. Sequential - Global: Provide detail in a structured way, as well as the big picture.

**Key Points**

Learning styles and preferences vary for each of us and in different situations.

By understanding this, and developing the skills that help you learn in a variety of ways, you make the most of your learning potential. And because you're better able to learn and gather information, you'll make better decisions and choose better courses of action.

And by understanding that other people can have quite different learning preferences, you can learn to communicate your message effectively in a way that many more people can understand. This is fundamentally important, particularly if you're a professional for whom communication is an important part of your job.

Take time to identify how you prefer to learn and then force yourself to break out of your comfort zone. Once you start learning in new ways you'll be amazed at how much more you catch and how much easier it is to assimilate information and make sense of what is going on.

## Leading from the front

There are many different power bases that a leader can develop and use.

These include problematic ones such as the power of position, the power to give rewards, the power to punish and the power to control information. While these types of power do have some strength, they put the person being led in an unhealthy position of weakness, and can leave leaders using these power bases looking autocratic and out of touch.

More than this, society has changed hugely over the last 50 years. Citizens are individually more powerful, and employees are more able to shift jobs. Few of us enjoy having power exerted over us, and many will do what we can to undermine people who use these sorts of power.

However there are three types of positive power that effective leaders use: charismatic power, expert power and referent power.

This article teaches you how to build expert power.

Expert power is essential because as a leader, your team looks to you for direction and guidance. Team members need to believe in your ability to set a worthwhile direction, give sound guidance and coordinate a good result.

If your team perceives you as a true expert, they will be much more receptive when you try to exercise influence tactics such as rational persuasion and inspirational appeal.

What's more, if members of your team see you as an expert, you will find it much easier to guide them

in such a way as to create high motivation:

If team members respect your expertise, they'll know that you can show them how to work effectively;

If members of your team trust your judgment, they'll trust you to guide their good efforts in such a way that you'll make the most of their hard work; and

If they can see your expertise, team members are more likely to believe that you have the wisdom to direct their efforts towards a goal that is genuinely worthwhile.

Taken together, if your team sees you as an expert, you will find it much easier to motivate team members to perform at their best.

**So how do you build expert power?**

But just being an expert isn't enough, it is also necessary for your team members to recognize your expertise and see you to be a credible source of information and advice. Gary A. Yukl, in his book "Leadership in Organizations," details some steps to build expert power. A summary of these steps follows:

Promote an image of expertise: Since perceived expertise in many occupations is associated with a person's education and experience, a leader should - in a low key way - make sure that subordinates, peers, and superiors are aware of his or her formal education, relevant work experience, and significant accomplishments.

One common tactic to make this information known is to display diplomas, licences, awards, and other evidence of expertise in a prominent location in one's office - after all, if you've worked hard to gain knowledge, it's fair that you get credit for it. Another tactic is to make subtle references to prior education or experience (for example, "When I was chief engineer at GE, we had a problem similar to this one"). Beware, however, this

tactic can easily be overdone.

Keep informed: Expert power is exercised through rational persuasion and demonstration of expertise. Rational persuasion depends on a firm grasp of up-to-date facts. It is therefore essential for a leader to keep well-informed of developments within the team, within the organization, and in the outside world.

Recognize subordinate concerns: Use of rational persuasion should not be seen as a form of one-way communication from the leader to subordinates. Effective leaders listen carefully to the concerns and uncertainties of their team members, and make sure that they address these in making a persuasive appeal.

Avoid threatening the self-esteem of subordinates: Expert power is based on a knowledge differential between leader and team members. Unfortunately, the very existence of such a differential can cause problems if the leader is not careful about the way he exercises expert power. Team members can dislike unfavorable status comparisons where the gap is very large and obvious. They are likely to be upset by a leader who acts in a superior way, and arrogantly flaunts his greater expertise.

In the process of presenting rational arguments, some leaders lecture their team members in a condescending manner and convey the impression that the other team members are "ignorant." Guard against this - it can make you look very arrogant.

Act confidently and decisively in a crisis: In a crisis or emergency, subordinates prefer a "take charge" leader who appears to know how to direct the group in coping with the problem. In this kind of situation, subordinates tend to associate confidence, firm leadership with expert knowledge. Even if the leader is not sure of the best way to deal with a crisis, to express doubts or appear confused risks the loss of influence over subordinates.

Maintain credibility: Once established, one's image of expertise should be carefully protected. The leader should avoid making careless comments about subjects on which he or she is poorly informed, and should avoid being associated with projects with a low likelihood of success.

