

Ep #14: How to Design Your Q&A for the Biggest Impact



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With Your Host

Michelle Barry Franco

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You are listening to the *Beyond Applause* podcast episode number 14.

Welcome to *Beyond Applause*, a podcast for mission-driven leaders, coaches, and creatives who are ready to share their expertise and stories through public speaking. Here's your host, Michelle Barry Franco.

Hello, my speaker friends. I'm excited about today's topic because this concern comes up so often with clients and people in my workshops who are working on presentation style talks. You know, where they need to oftentimes share their expertise or share the status on something, or they're going to be part of a panel. Really, it's any time a discussion is a part of this experience that they are facilitating.

So we're going to talk about the Q&A and how to design and approach your Q&A in a way that creates the best experience for your audience overall as well as the people who are asking the actual questions. And I'm going to share with you the most important thing that you can do to be sure that your audience walks out with the impact that you intended.

So we're going to talk about that in just a moment. But first, I want to do a shoutout to RB. Hey, RB. I got to meet RB in person tonight at an event hosted by Megan Flatt. And RB and I have been in communication via email recently - we got to meet live in person, which is always so delightful, and RB mentioned the podcast on how to tell your story in a way that serves, and she just said that it was a super useful podcast for her, that it really helped her think about framing her own story. Not just in the way that she knows it's a powerful story, and she also knows that it represents experiences that people she serves also have. But the episode itself really helped her think about how to share that story in a way that's useful.

So if I could just point you back to that episode, if you also want to use your own story as part of your thought leadership out in the world, so thank you so much for that feedback, RB. I love hearing that kind of thing and I'd love to hear your feedback. So again, you know I'm going to mention the whole iTunes thing. If you could head over to iTunes and give me a review, that

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would be awesome. This is actually a request not just for RB but for any of you listening.

But also, I'd love to hear from you any way that you want to share with me, any questions you have, any topics you want me to cover, any feedback about the podcast overall, I'd love to hear from you. So send me an email or smoke signal or whatever.

Alright, let's dive into today's topic, and talk about how to make your Q&A as awesome as possible. So it was probably 20 years ago I was standing in a college classroom, a relatively new teacher, and I'll never forget. It had to be the first class of this semester, and at the time, I was thinking a lot about credibility and establishing credibility. I was new to teaching, I was new to kind of the formal aspects or elements of great speaking.

And so I was focused on this topic of credibility and I was using myself as an example, sort of like, let's talk about credibility, you know, what makes me credible to stand up here and share all of this with you. Now, there are all kinds of things about that now that I would do differently, but what I remember most distinctly is the moment when one of the women in the class who I did not yet know was already quite frustrated with the class before it ever began said to me, "Are we just going to stand up here and talk about you for the rest of the semester?"

And I was totally taken aback by this and luckily somehow, I kind of like, found my grounding. I think it was sort of like this moment of desperation and I said, "No, actually, since we're talking about credibility, we ended up talking a lot about me here," but then I just sort of like, somehow turned it - at least this is the way I recall it. Maybe everybody in there would describe my reaction to it quite differently.

But you know, we sort of turned it around to okay, so how do you know when you've established your credibility well enough and what does credibility mean and like, I just felt like I'd just wiped this giant, like, swathe of sweat off of my forehead.

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But it was super uncomfortable, and it definitely was not the way that I wanted to set up the rest of the semester. So I've had lots of different experiences with Q&As going kind of sideways or wonky, and sometimes even quite awry. And I think that is the reason - maybe we've all seen that happen. And that's what makes it really nerve-wracking when we know that we need to facilitate a Q&A.

Now, I will say, since then, Q&As have become some of my most favorite elements of presentations or panels that I do, or when I teach a workshop or teach in the college classroom. So there really is a way to come at them so that they enrich the experience tremendously for your audience and really for yourself. Because a Q&A is a beautiful time to learn what your audience is really needing and wanting.

But you do need to approach it in a way that maximizes the benefit for the overall group and you want to preserve the goal, the promised outcome for the session overall. And so that is why you need to be very strategic about when you do the Q&A. So that's definitely one of the things we're going to talk about is when to do the Q&A so that you make the greatest impact and you stay on message.

We're also going to talk about what to do when someone asks you a question you don't know how to answer, which by the way, is the thing that most people - that I hear most frequently that people are afraid of happening. And we will also talk about how to really help your audience feel awesome, even more awesome than they did before because of your Q&A. And actually use that to make the learning for everyone in the room even better.

So that's how we're going to approach making your Q&A awesome. So first of all, let's talk about when to do the Q&A. Most of the time, the default approach to Q&A seems to be to do the Q&A at the very end. So oftentimes build the content, and people will even say, "I'm going to ask you to hold your questions until the very end." I would like to suggest to you that you actually never do that.

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So I would say you never end with the Q&A. And the reason for that is you want to end reinforcing the main idea, the main promise, and really the main contribution that you've made through this particular topic. So it might be that you are summarizing the content at the very end of your presentation and then ending with some kind of impact, or you might just be sort of restating the thesis and sending them off with a call to action of some kind, if a call to action is appropriate.

So if not at the very end, when should you do your Q&A? There are two ways that I suggest this, and it really depends on the audience and the kind of experience you're wanting for the audience. So one of the ways to approach this is to invite people to ask questions as you go.

So you can just say at the beginning of your talk, "I am looking forward to the conversation we're going to have today, I absolutely have content that I want to cover, and I want to make sure that I'm covering exactly what's most helpful to you. So if questions arise for you, feel free to ask them as we go. There will be times when I'll ask you to delay it a little bit just because I'm covering a certain section that I think might answer some of your questions, but feel free to raise your hand whenever the question arises so that we make sure this content is exactly the content that's going to serve you best."

So you can give them that kind of guidance around asking as you go. Or you can say, "We are going to do a Q&A session in a little bit, so I'm going to ask you to hold your questions until that portion because I think a lot of what might come up for you will get covered as we go through the material today or as I go through this talk."

And then what you want to do is invite for the Q&A session before you do the summary. So you're going to work through all three of your main points, assuming you have three main points, which is the best way to structure your talk. So you're going to work through all of those three main points and all the sub-points and everything and you're going to say, "Before we wrap up today, I'd love to know what questions you have," and then that opens up the Q&A.

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It also lets them know that you're going to do a wrap up later. Then when the Q&A goes all kind of different directions, it's fine, right? Because at the end of the Q&A, you're going to say, "I've loved getting to spend this time with you today, thank you for bringing such rich, awesome questions," assuming that's what they bring, I'm sure they will, and then you can say, "I want to remind you that or let's go back to the anchor of this talk or the point that I made in the beginning." Somehow bring them back around and anchor that in.

There may be some things you want to tie up from that Q&A. You know, it might be something like, "Obviously we can go in a lot of different directions with this, and I don't want to minimize all of the other things that we brought up today and I want to highlight and make sure we focus back in on what's most important, or what we were really focusing on for today," and then do your summary and your impactful close and or call to action. So that's the first thing I would say is just where you place your Q&A. Never end on the Q&A.

Now let's talk about what to do if someone asks you a question that you don't know how to answer. And I feel kind of like an expert at this because I feel like it happens often for me. I have many times where I'm facilitating a training or I'm doing a talk or when I was teaching college this would happen a lot that people will make assumptions about what they believe your expertise should be, or what they think your expertise should be. It might even be a belief, they just think you might know the answer to the question.

They toss the question out there and then as we hear the question, if we have this like, feeling in the back of our mind that maybe we aren't expert enough, or we shouldn't be standing up here saying that we're the one to take a stand for this, then any little thing that comes in to reinforce this lingering belief we have that says we're not good enough to be standing up here as an expert can start to take us down mentally.

So the first thing I want to say is that's just not accurate. And if it's happening for you, it's fine. That's what our brain does, right? Our brain has

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just all kinds of thoughts, and many of them are protection thoughts. Our brain is always trying to save our life, our brain is trying to protect us from getting hurt, ostracized from the tribe so that we aren't then left out to the elements and the enemies of the next tribe over.

So these are some of the fears we have around standing up and proclaiming to solve a problem or to be an expert on something. So I just want to remind you that those kinds of thoughts are really normal. There's nothing to do about them. You don't need to do anything. Recognize, oh, that's me thinking, that's what my brain does, and come back to I'm here to serve, I prepared well, I know what I came to say, and I know there are lots of other things that a person could have said that isn't my stand or isn't what I'm planning to cover today.

So all of that brings you back into the moment and reminds you that all that's happened is someone asked you a question. And your job is to answer it honestly. Your job is to serve them in the best way you can in this moment. And oftentimes it is by embracing the most beautiful three words, "I don't know." It is so wonderful to say, "I don't know."

Now, a lot of times I like to add something to the beginning of it, it just seems to kind of naturally happen, especially if I'm genuinely surprised that I don't know the answer to a question. So sometimes I'll say, "That's really interesting, I don't know." Sometimes I'll say, "Hmm, what a great question."

So you're affirming your audience, it's warm and cozy. You're not doing this inauthentically. Sometimes I'm doing that to buy a little time, right? Do I know the answer to that question? Do I feel like I should know the answer to that question? I have a little thought storm coming through that's saying I should know the answer. And then I can bring myself back to the present moment and say, "You know, I don't know the answer to that question."

Now, you have some choices after that. One would be just to stop there. "I don't know, what an interesting question. I wonder where you could learn the answer to that." And oftentimes I'll say that when I really don't believe

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it's something that I should know, which is about a lot of things. But I might also say something like, "You know, I don't know the answer to that but I know that this person does." I know a good person to or a great book to look into or to read, or a great TED talk I can refer them to.

So sometimes it's just sending them to another resource. And then sometimes I will do what I'm going to offer as our third way to make your Q&A awesome, sometimes I'll put it out to the audience. Not uncommonly I'll put it out to the audience.

Now, you don't want to do this on everything because again, this is a way you can take your whole audience sideways because you don't want to ask people for expertise that they simply don't have. Because you will have people who pop up in the room sharing all of their like, great new ideas on that. Just because, you know, it can become a fun way to be involved, but it's not necessarily useful to the audience overall.

So if you believe that there is expertise in that room to leverage, this is an awesome opportunity to say, "You know, I don't know the answer to that but I know that there are people in here who do," and if you can name specific people and ask them if they have any insights they can share that might work, you know, of course you're always taking care of your audience. So be sure that whoever you're asking will at least feel comfortable with responding publicly to that invitation.

And again, you may just choose not to name anyone, but kind of look in the direction of some people who you think might have answers. So that's another way to handle the I don't know situation. Just - I think the thing I want to really round out about the what happens if someone asks a question that you don't know how to answer is feeling in you, really getting it inside you that your job is not to know all the answers. Your job is to bring what you do know and contribute from what you know and if it makes sense, to offer to be a resource to help them get the answer to that question, if it's something you believe you can help them with.

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And then you might just say, "Can you toss me an email?" I say this often in workshops and speaking events. I'll say, "If you send me an email, I will send you back a blog post or a resource or a person I know who could probably answer that."

Again, I'm not going to go spend three hours researching the answer to the question. If that's the case, then you know, just I don't know might be the right thing. It really is in how you deliver the answer to the question, how you deliver that I don't know. And of course, you do it with care always. We are stewards of our audience's experience, and we want everyone else in the room to know that this is a safe place to answer a question.

And then the third thing I'll bring to the table around how to facilitate a great Q&A session is back to this idea of leveraging the expertise in the room. And again, you want to do this strategically because I have absolutely been in the room, and I bet you have too, at times when probably the facilitator, maybe because they had one of those moments of, "Oh jeez, I don't know the answer to this, let's just like, take the attention off of me and put it out to the room to handle," and then it became kind of a discussion that really wasn't useful or on purpose for the intention of our gathering.

And you always want to be holding that in your mind. But that said, oftentimes, there are people in the room who can answer that question and it's a wonderful time to highlight those people, to sort of like, rise them up within the room. That actually can raise the vibration, the positive energy in the room overall, even for the people who aren't getting to share their expertise then.

But it can also get some of those questions answered in pretty beautiful ways and you get to learn as well as everybody else in the room gets to learn. So that's another powerful way to really make the Q&A great.

What I want to say to you is Q&A, when you sort of get the right mindset around it can be such a beautiful way to bring an up-leveled experience to your audience and really so much of it is about the way that you come at it inside you and really recognizing that it isn't about you showing that you

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know everything on a topic, that you can actually leverage the people in the room and leverage really tap into your own confidence in saying the next most useful thing, which might be, "Gosh, I'm really not sure, but I know where I can point you," or maybe some other people in the room will have ideas of where to point them.

And then just bringing everybody back to the purpose at hand. And of course, as I said in the beginning, placing that Q&A in the right place so that it doesn't close out your talk and you get to reinforce the main contribution you were bringing for this talk or workshop or whatever it is you're facilitating.

Alright, my friends, I hope you found this information useful and it helps you have an awesome Q&A, and really helps you embrace this beautiful aspect of great speaking and contribution and making your difference out there in the world. I've loved being with you here as always, and I already can't wait until next week.

If you enjoyed this tip and you want more really useful tips on how to get out there and start speaking and making a big difference in the world with your message, then you probably want to go to michellebarryfranco.com/start so that you can get the get started speaking guide, which by the way is not just a get started speaking guide. But it's also an uplevel your speaking guide. There's all kinds of stuff in there like the template for crafting your talk, like how to reach out and find the right kinds of speaking events.

There's just so many additional tips in that free guide that you can get at michellebarryfranco.com/start. Go get it now and I will see you next week. I cannot wait already. Meantime, get out there, make your difference. You are made for this, my friend.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Beyond Applause*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more, head on over to michellebarryfranco.com/start to get your free complete guide to stepping into leadership speaking right away.

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