



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Moderator Steals the Show

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You've been asked to moderate a session at the Society of Actuaries' Spring Meeting, at a local actuarial club or any other panel presentation. How do you see your role?

Do you envision yourself as the next Tom Brokaw, Jim Lehrer or Gwen Ifill? All three managed time equitably to ensure fairness in the 2008 presidential debates. Or are you the main leader to move your group toward decision making? Moderators of focus groups or meetings of strategic planning groups such as the SOA Board, need to be results-oriented and drive their groups through a highly structured agenda.

Being a moderator is an odd job. It isn't all behind the scenes, but neither are you the main feature. Just as really good framing and perfect lighting can influence your perception of a piece of art, your contribution to the overall outcomes are more subtle. Your overall effectiveness as session moderator will have a lot to do with what information you have in hand prior to the session.

PLAN, PLAN AND PLAN SOME MORE

Did you develop the session you are moderating, or have you been asked to help out simply because you are already attending the event? What have you actually agreed to do? Work this out with your presenters in advance of the presentation. No matter how multi-faceted your role, your minimum assignment is to introduce your panel. Reading their resumes out loud is not enough! Your introduction needs to engage the audience and your panel members as well.

Like a Space Shuttle flight, have redundancies. In other words, be prepared. Get all the information you need ahead of time. Find out both what is expected of you in general, and what your panel/presenters expect:

- Who has the PowerPoint slide deck, and who is setting up the equipment?
- Are there handouts?
- Who is responsible for bringing them to the meeting, and how and when do they get distributed?
- Do they want you to field questions at a particular point in the program?

Ask your speakers for at least two questions they would like to answer. An effective moderator should help integrate the session and be able to summarize key points for the audience. Ideally you can have a dry run with your panelists—schedule a conference call. Or, better yet, invite those involved to a face-to-face meeting. Avoid having disconnected lecturers (and the audience wondering why you are there at all)!

SET A SOUND STAGE

Get to the room early—at least 30 minutes ahead, if possible. Be familiar with your speakers' requirements and assess if the room is set up properly. Find out where to get help if you need it. Sweat the small stuff. How and who is advancing the slide presentation? Are the speakers going to move around the



room or stand at the podium? Take it upon yourself to resolve any set up or technical difficulties. That's not to say you fix them all yourself. Find the right people to get all the logistics in place so your presenters can stay focused on presenting.

FACILITATE WITH FLAIR

- Welcome people as they arrive.
- If you want a robust discussion, provide some audience members with questions to ask to get the conversation going.
- Smile. (If that doesn't come to you naturally, write reminders to yourself in your notes).
- As part of your introduction, motivate the audience by telling them what they will learn and when they can participate.
- If you know people by name, address them.
- For really large groups, consider a different way to submit questions such as letting people write them down on sticky notes. Many people may feel intimidated to ask questions in front of a large group.
- Remember, any special props you need like sticky notes, etc. should be supplied by you.

Besides helping the audience, help your presenters. Don't let them stand in the projection of their own slides. Make sure they can be heard. People not used to working with microphones often turn away from one when they speak. You won't turn a bad speaker into a great one, but you can help your presenters be the best they can in the moment.

KEEP TRACK OF TIME

Part of your job is to manage time effectively. Nothing derails a session faster than panelists going over their time allotments. Work out a communication process with your speakers to let them know what time is remaining in their session. And have a plan to handle dominant or negative individuals.

Know when your meeting is getting 'hijacked', and do something about it:

- Suggest more conversation after the session.
- Establish a 'parking lot' of ideas to return to.
- Provide an e-mail address, but keep the meeting moving forward.
- If you are familiar enough with your panelists and their presentations, you might be able to make recommendations where they can summarize their remarks if pressed for time.

As moderator, your goal should not be to steal the show, but to ensure that everything runs smoothly. The moderators of the presidential debates were not the stars, but they kept the show rolling efficiently and effectively—and we all noticed them because of how well they did that. By preparing for your assignments and executing well, you can make good sessions even better. Take advantage of these challenges and practice your skills! ●

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