



# When you hear crickets during a meeting

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You finish your meeting or presentation. You turn to the audience and ask, “does anyone have any questions?” or “what do you think?”

But no one responds. People start squirming. Shuffling papers. Giving you blank stares.

You finally end their misery by saying, “Well, if no one has any questions, you can have a few minutes of your day back...” and end the meeting. And then you crawl inside your own head, and start dissecting the lack of engagement.

But hold up. This story isn’t actually about you, the speaker, or your feelings (valuable as they may be.) This story is about the audience and how to encourage them to actually participate when you open up the floor for questions.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned having been on both sides of the aisle, it’s that audience members—not just presenters—get performance anxiety too. Some of the thoughts that prevent people from raising their hands?

What if:

- My question doesn’t interest anyone else?
- My question is too complicated?
- My question is too obvious?
- Everyone else probably knows the answer
- I end up looking stupid or confused?

Remember, one of the core tenants of vitality is the ability to tackle any topic with a deep sense of curiosity – and curiosity starts with asking questions.

When you kick off your Q&A session and all you hear are crickets, it doesn’t mean your presentation or meeting was a flop. Here are 7 ways to encourage audience members to speak up.

### **Get more specific in your request**

Instead of asking people, "Do you have any questions" ask them if they have questions about particular areas of your presentation. Or ask for questions in a more inviting way, like, “Who would like to open with the first question?”

### **Be prepared to wait**

This is tough, but train yourself to wait an uncomfortably long period of time (10 seconds or more) before deciding there really are no questions. Some people are shy and need a little bit of

time to work up the courage to participate. So, be comfortable with the silence and just wait. People hate a vacuum...and someone will eventually speak up to fill it.

### **Come prepared with sample questions**

Come with one or two questions in your back pocket. You can say something like, “A question I’m frequently asked is ....” Or, “A question you may be thinking is...” This could get the ball rolling. You can also try a little humor to break the ice. “If no one has the first question, does anyone have the second one?”

### **Plant a question in the audience**

Ask a friend or colleague if they would be willing to offer up a question if no one jumps in. Don’t worry. It’s not cheating. You’re just priming the pump. No one likes to go first. But once someone kicks off the Q&A, more people may chime in.

### **Provide an alternate way to ask questions**

This doesn’t just help the introverts in the room. Maybe your presentation or meeting is on a sensitive subject. Or someone will think of a great question after the meeting ends. Either way, giving people an alternate way to ask questions, either via email or Instant Messenger, may provide a welcome outlet.

### **Don’t praise questions**

Avoid saying “That was a great question,” or “Good question.” If the next person asks a question and you don’t offer that same kind of positive affirmation, it could backfire and actually stifle others from asking further questions.

### **And finally, look like you want questions**

Maintain eye contact with the audience and also recognize people in remote locations. And also, avoid closed body language (like crossing your arms, for example), or shutting down your laptop.

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