

MODULE

13

Values, Blocking and Gotchas

Answer the why, take over the interview,
and survive your own past

WHAT THIS MODULE COVERS

Three techniques that between them decide how you come out of any hostile conversation. The first tested higher and faster than anything in twenty years of research.

Value answers. Studying interviews with leaders worldwide, Steve's team noticed that people answer policy questions with policy. Asked about healthcare, they give a five-point plan. Tested, audiences said: I do not know what any of that means. People have children and jobs. They do not follow policy.

So they tried something. Instead of answering *what* you would do, answer *why*. One American political figure said: babies are dying in America because they cannot get a vaccination that costs eleven cents. Millions of seniors — your parents, your grandparents — have to decide whether to eat today or pay for their medicine, whether to heat the house or pay for their medicine. That is unacceptable to me.

Tested, audiences said "**I love his healthcare policy.**" He never gave a policy. He gave a value. This tested higher and more quickly than anything in twenty years. If you have time, follow the value with the how. But start with why.

Blocking and bridging. When a question is one you should not answer on their terms, you shift it. "What I think is more important than that is this." "I understand the question, but here's another thing to remember." "What I have said is..." Steve used it himself on *Meet the Press* — Tim Russert asked the same question three times, Steve gave the identical answer three times, and Russert had to move on or look like a bully. The caution: use it sparingly. Do it on every question and the audience decides you are dodging.

Gotcha questions. Steve's company tested **269 potentially embarrassing things** a person might have in their past. **Only two were disqualifying** in the public's mind: abuse of children, and using a senior position to coerce someone junior. Everything else, people forgave — because they are human too and have made similar mistakes. What sinks people is not the fact. It is the handling.

269embarrassing things
tested**2**that were actually
disqualifying**#1**value answers:
fastest-testing finding**3x**Russert asked; 3x the
same answer

KEY CONCEPTS

The value answer

Answer why you hold a position before, or instead of, what the position is. Audiences connect to the value and conclude the policy must be good. Sometimes you never get to the substance and it does not matter.

Blocking and bridging

Refusing to answer on their terms without refusing to answer. Reframe, redirect, and take the conversation where you need it. Use it on the one question that could really damage you, not on every question.

Character attacks must be answered

A policy disagreement can sometimes be let go. A character attack cannot. John Kerry stayed silent on a \$250,000 ad buy because his staff thought responding would feed it. It became \$62 million in ad buys, and by the time he responded nobody believed him. People assume silence means it is true.

Take ownership

The tested answer to a true gotcha is ownership. One political figure put it well: "I will not let my life be judged by one moment of it. My life is the sum of all its parts. I am human, I made a mistake, and I take ownership."

FROM THE VIDEO**Ted Kennedy, 60 Minutes, 1979**

Kennedy's team called CBS and said he would announce his presidential run on their programme. A significant coup for the show. Roger Mudd asked the obvious first question: why do you want to be president?

Kennedy paused far too long, then said: "Well, I'm — were I to make the announcement, to run, the reasons that I would run is because..."

If I were to run. He had told them he was running. Shown to test groups, people said immediately: this man does not want to be president. He could not offer a rationale, and audiences made up their minds on the spot.

Steve blames the staff, not Kennedy. They should have run a mock interview, heard that answer, and cancelled the appearance. Years later a student came to his office after this lecture and introduced herself as Kennedy's stepdaughter. She thanked him — he was the only person she had heard who did not blame her stepfather.

REMEMBER

- Answer the why, not the what. The value is what people connect to.
- Block and bridge on the one question that matters, not on all of them.
- Silence in the face of a character attack reads as confirmation.
- Of 269 embarrassing things, only two are disqualifying. It is the handling that kills.

PRACTICE

Exercises

Type directly into the shaded boxes below and save the file. Come back to your answers after you have practised — this is your record of what changed.

EXERCISE 1

Convert policy answers into value answers

This is the single highest-return exercise in the course.

Write out the standard answer you give when someone asks what you or your organisation does. The what.

Now write the why. Not the plan — what it does for people, and why that matters to you.

Read both aloud. Which one would you rather hear?

EXERCISE 2**Prepare your blocks and bridges**

You know which question you do not want. Prepare for that one now, before someone asks it.

What is the one question you most dread being asked?

Write three different bridging lines that move you somewhere better.

Where are you bridging to? What do you want to be talking about instead?

EXERCISE 3**Handle your gotcha**

Almost nothing is disqualifying. But it has to be handled, and handled in advance.

What in your past are you most afraid of being asked about?

Is it true or false? If false, write the direct denial with real energy behind it. If true, write the ownership answer.

Say it out loud five times until it stops making your voice change. What happened by the fifth?

Tick each one once you have done it:

- ☐ Identified my hardest question
- ☐ Wrote the answer out
- ☐ Said it aloud five times
- ☐ Had someone ask me cold and answered it

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

One thing from this module I will use the next time I speak:

When and where I will use it:

