

THIRD
EDITION

IN THE LINE OF FIRE

*How to Handle Tough Questions—
When It Counts*



JERRY WEISSMAN

Author of *Presenting to Win*

Praise for *In the Line of Fire*

“In my role at Cisco Systems, I was confronted with challenging questions from customers, government leaders, press, and analysts on a daily basis. The techniques used in this book, *In the Line of Fire*, are spot on; providing straightforward ways to be on the offense in all communications situations.”

—**Sue Bostrom**

Former SVP Internet Business Solutions Group and
Worldwide Government Affairs, Cisco Systems

“In an era where businesspeople and politicians unfortunately have proven their inability to be honest with bad news, I believe this book should be prescribed reading in every business school and for every management training session. In fact, I hope it is read by a far wider audience than that. It’s just what our society needs right now.”

—**Po Bronson**

Author of the bestselling *What Should I Do With My Life?*⁹

“Jerry Weissman tells the tales of the makings of presidents and kings, the dramas of the dramatic moments of our time, and in each episode he uncovers the simple truths behind what makes great leaders like Ronald Reagan and Colin Powell loved and trusted. Great truths made simple and compelling for any leader to use.”

—**Scott Cook**

Founding CEO, Intuit

“Jerry’s book is a must-read for any presenter facing tough and challenging questions from their audience. This book provides the fundamental foundation on how to prepare, be agile, and take charge no matter how difficult the question.”

—**Leslie Culbertson**

Former Corporate Vice President Director of Corporate
Finance, Intel Corporation

“During one of the most important periods of my career, Jerry used the concepts in *In the Line of Fire* to prepare me and my team for the EarthLink IPO road show. He helped us field tough questions from the toughest possible audience—potential investors—but the same skills are necessary for every audience.

—**Sky Dayton**

Founder EarthLink and Boingo Wireless, CEO SK-EarthLink

Now let's see how Ross Perot responded.



(Video 11) *Bush, Clinton, Perot: The Second 1992
Presidential Debate*
<https://youtu.be/eg7-QJrJZV0?t=2904>

When Marisa finished asking her question, Perot volunteered:

May I answer that?

Simpson approved:

Well, Mr. Perot, yes, of course.

Perot asked:

Who do you want to start with?

Marisa explained:

My question is for each of you, so...

Perot took the floor:

It caused me to disrupt my private life and my business to get involved in this activity. That's how much I care about it...I want these young people up here to be able to start with nothing but an idea like I did and build a business. But they've got to have a strong basic economy and if you're in debt, it's like having a ball and chain around you.

At that moment, the camera cut to an image of Marisa nodding as Perot continued:

*I just figure, as lucky as I've been, I owe it to them and I owe it to the future generations and on a very personal basis, I owe it to my children and grandchildren.*⁶

Despite Perot's succinct, empathic, and completely relevant answer, Bush took his turn next with an answer that was far enough off target to invite her interruption and, after four tries, created the perception that he wasn't listening.

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It got still worse for Bush. Following his rambling answer and awkward exchange, Clinton's turn came. As the incumbent headed back to his stool, the challenger rose from his and walked toward Marisa, addressing her directly:

Tell me how it's affected you again.

His approach put Marisa at a momentary loss for words:

Um...

Continuing toward her, Clinton prodded her memory:

You know people who've lost their jobs and lost their homes.

She agreed:

*Well, yeah, uh-huh.*⁷

"Well, yeah, uh-huh." She could just as well have said, "You *were* listening!" In that one pivotal moment, Clinton became the complete opposite of Bush. In that one pivotal moment, the die was cast for the dark horse challenger's victory at the expense of the incumbent.

The moment was a long time in the making. Clinton's movement, eye contact, and body language were intentional. As Clinton's campaign manager, James Carville, described in his memoir:

*We did practice having the governor get off his stool and walk down to make contact with the man or woman asking the question...we would always remind him, "Go talk to that person. Be engaged in what he has to say."*⁸

As soon as Clinton heard Marisa say, "Well, yeah, uh-huh," he seized the initiative and ran with it:

Well, I've been governor of a small state for 12 years. I'll tell you how it's affected me. Every year Congress and the president sign laws that make us do more things and gives us less money to do it with.

Now Clinton shifted into overdrive. He made his entire point of view identical with that of the young woman:

I see people in my state, middle class people—their taxes have gone up in Washington and their services have gone down while the wealthy have gotten tax cuts. I have seen what's happened in this last four years when—in my state, when people lose their jobs, there's a good chance I'll know them by their names. When a factory closes, I know the people who ran it. When the businesses go bankrupt, I know them.

And I've been out here for 13 months meeting—in meetings just like this ever since October, with people like you all over America...

When Clinton said, “people like you,” the camera cut to Marisa nodding her head silently. She could just as well have leaned into the microphone again and said, “You were listening!”

Clinton rolled on:

...people that have lost their jobs, lost their livelihood, lost their health insurance. What I want you to understand is the national debt is not the only cause of that.

Even though Simpson had, during Bush's answer, tactfully and tacitly corrected the young woman's confusion of the national debt and the recession, Clinton took the opportunity to repeat the young woman's original words, “the national debt,” and, in doing so, he validated her rather than correct her. Then he continued:

It is because America has not invested in its people. It is because we have not grown. It is because we've had 12 years of trickle-down economics. We've gone from first to twelfth in the world in wages. We've had four years where we've produced no private sector jobs. Most people are working harder for less money than they were making ten years ago.

At that moment, the camera cut to a close-up of Bush, agape, knowing that Clinton was scoring points with his words:

It is because we are in the grip of a failed economic theory. And this decision you're about to make better be about what kind of economic theory you want, not just people saying I'm going to go fix it but what are we going to do? I think what we have to do is invest in American

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jobs, American education, control American health care costs, and bring the American people together again.

Clinton heard both of Marisa's concerns loud and clear. He addressed each Roman Column, beginning his answer with the first: how the "national debt" affected him:

Well, I've been governor of a small state for 12 years. I'll tell you how it's affected me...

And concluded his answer with the second: his solutions, articulated by the action verb "do"—four ways:

I think what we have to do is invest in American jobs, American education, control American health care costs, and bring the American people together again.

Actually, Bush also acknowledged his empathy and offered his solutions at the very end of his answer:

I think in terms of the recession, of course you feel it when you're President of the United States. And that's why I'm trying to do something about it by stimulating the export, vesting more, better education systems.

But his "do" words came at the tail end of his one minute and ten-second answer—after his false start, after four bungled attempts, two interruptions, a tangential discussion, and a digressive ramble—by which time it was far too late. Clinton and Perot did not get to their solutions until the ends of their answers, either, but each of them started his answer in the first person, thereby empathizing with Marisa's concern about their abilities. Bush, on the other hand, began his answer by going global:

Well, I think the national debt affects everybody.

By generalizing, the president, in effect, distanced himself from the economic problems. Worse, in doing so, he ignored one of Marisa's Roman Columns, which evoked her fateful follow-on question and, in turn, sent the message that he wasn't listening. Imagine if Bush had *begun* his answer with his final words:

I'm trying to do something about it by stimulating the export, vesting more, better education systems.⁹

When Clinton came bounding off his stool toward Marisa to ask her, “Tell me how it’s affected you again?” he evoked her “Well, yeah, uh-huh,” response. And when, three sentences later, he began his answer with, “I’ll tell you how it’s affected me...” he sent the message that he had listened.

Emulate Clinton in your Q&A sessions: Listen carefully to your audience’s questions and evoke your own equivalents of “Well, yeah, uh-huh.”

■ Subvocalization ■

A remarkably simple method to enable your Active Listening is *subvocalization*. Under your breath, say to yourself the words you are hearing. Silently say the words that represent the Roman Column. “He’s asking about competition,” or “She’s concerned about the cost,” or “He wants to know about the timing.” By subvocalizing about the question, you will keep your mind from thinking about the answer.

As a matter of fact, Bush used a hybrid form of subvocalization in his third attempt to answer the question. Speaking aloud, he asked rhetorically:

*Are you suggesting that if somebody has means that the national debt doesn’t affect them?*⁹

That was only the half of what she was suggesting, so he did not get a “Well, yeah, uh-huh,” as Clinton did. Instead of continuing on to clarify the key issue, Bush gave up:

*I’m not sure I get—help me with the question, and I’ll try to answer it.*¹⁰

The lesson for you is to listen carefully for the Roman Column and to subvocalize. Silently say the Key Words—the one or two nouns or verbs that capture the questioner’s issue—until you crystallize the central idea. Avoid thinking about your answer until you are absolutely certain that you understand the Roman Column.

■ Physical Listening ■

Another important part of Active Listening is to physically express your attentiveness. Remember the exercise in the previous chapter where you saw the negative

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effect of slouching while listening silently? Avoid this trap by keeping all the elements of your outward appearance as focused on the person asking the question as your inner workings are focused on processing their words:

- **Eyes.** Your eyes are the most important factor in every human engagement. The Suasive term for this dynamic is *EyeConnect*® rather than eye contact. I explain the difference in *The Power Presenter*, but in brief, *EyeConnect* is a longer and more purposeful duration of engagement. Whenever you present in person, make *EyeConnect* by locking your eyes on the asker while they are posing their question. When you present virtually, make *CamConnect*™, which means look directly into the webcam so that the audience feels that you are looking right at them.
- **Stance.** Distribute your weight evenly on both your feet so you are balanced and stable. If you are seated when presenting virtually, do as your mother often reminded you: sit up straight.
- **Fingers.** The tension of being on the spot often causes a presenter's fingers to twiddle or fidget. If yours do, a simple remedy is to squeeze your fingertips together in a short burst of pressure to drain the tension.
- **Head.** Nod to show that you are in receive mode.
- **Voice.** Utter a few “Uh-huhs” or “Mm-hmms” to indicate that you are following.

Physical Listening in Action

Bill Clinton's intentional move to “get off his stool and walk down to” address Marisa was a clear expression of his engagement. Ross Perot stayed at his stool during his answer but spent most of his time speaking directly to her. Bush, although he spoke directly to the young woman, often turned away from her to address the rest of the audience.

For a positive role model of physical listening in the business world, we turn to David Rubenstein, the co-founder and co-executive chair of The Carlyle Group, a private equity investment company.



(Video 12) David Rubenstein | Full Address and Q&A |
Oxford Union
<https://youtu.be/wuzz3R2MUN0?t=1688>
