

## **Call and Response: Use This Popular African American Preaching Technique to Deliver a Dynamic Presentation**

In the African American church, many preachers are fond of a tradition that encourages the congregation's oral response to sermons. In this tradition, the sermon is more than just a message, the preacher is more than just a sender, and the congregation is more than just a passive recipient. The sermon belongs not just to the preacher, but also to the entire congregation, which joins in by standing up, moving around, raising their hands, and, of course, speaking back. The assumption is that when people gather to worship, they seek sermons less for information than for inspiration and celebration.

This talk-back technique, known as call and response, is not limited to use in church services. It surfaces in a wide variety of meetings, speeches and presentations. But it is often misused. Here's how to use the technique to have a successful dialogue with your audience:

- First off, remember that any attempt at direct involvement with the audience entails some risk. You risk off-beat, irrelevant or distracting responses, or no responses at all. Either could shake your confidence, especially at the opening of your presentation – a crucial point – when you most want (and need) success.
- Nevertheless, asking direct questions is one approach favored by many speakers. It's particularly effective when speaking to small groups because you can address audience members directly and they can answer. If the group is larger, ask the questions of everyone, and look and listen for responses – nods, smiles of recognition, “uh-huhs.”
- Ask rhetorical questions. In effect, conduct your own Q&A. Introduce each new segment of your presentation with a question: “Why is this so important? Let me tell you . . .” “What will happen if we don't? Here's what will happen . . .” “Does this approach make sense in today's world? You bet it does...” This form of dialogue is a logical reflection of the structure of your talk and works well when your objective is to persuade.
- Give a directive. For example: “There are four absolutes when dealing with the media. Here they are. Write them down.” Or, “Don't worry if you need help. It's available. Here's a toll-free number that's answered 24/7. You might want to jot it down.”
- Distribute something - a sample, a brochure, etc. Just keep in mind that some people get so engrossed in the handouts, you may lose their attention. Decide carefully when to distribute the handout. Do it at a time when you and the audience can examine it together.
- Ask your audience to do something physical – to get up, shake hands with people around them, stretch, etc. A word of caution: proceed carefully. Know your audience; think carefully about what, exactly, you are asking them to do. Some people hate audience participation.

· Call and response is particularly well suited for use in events such as sales meetings, where the goal is to inspire people to action. But follow these guidelines:

- Don't overuse the technique. If there are multiple speakers or presenters and each one uses it, the technique will probably lose its effectiveness.
- Timing is critical. Generally, it's unwise to ask for a response at the beginning of a meeting. For example, the first in a series of speakers may ask the audience to commit to increasing sales by two percent. But that's too early on in the program. At that point, about the only response you can logically expect from the audience is that they're happy to be there – nothing more. Later in the meeting (after they have seen the new products, and have been given more information and new tools), they will be inclined to respond meaningfully to more substantive requests. Similarly, call for a response toward the end of your presentation rather than at the beginning.

A CEO or some other speaker may have no trouble getting the audience to respond regardless of timing, but the audience may be responding in order to be polite, because of the speaker's position, or because the company is paying for all or part of the expenses associated with the event. When you call for a response, what you really want is a commitment that's active (spoken), public, voluntary and genuine.