



MONDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2017

NEW STRAITS TIMES

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MODERATING A PANEL DISCUSSION

by ROWENA MORAIS

ONE of the most important things to realise about the role of a moderator is how critical it is to the success of the session. A moderator is not the star of the show. Her role is to help others shine and bring the session together. It is a show because while there are things to discuss and learn, the element of entertainment and to some degree, excitement, is important in retaining the audience's interest. This can come from the topic itself or the panellists. The stars, therefore, are the panellists.



If you see yourself running a panel discussion anytime soon, you may find these tips useful. They are as applicable to hosting conference panel sessions as they are breakfast meetings and roundtable discussions with parties from different organisations.

Maintaining a balance between sharing a viewpoint and hogging the limelight

Your task, as a moderator, is a tough one. You need to maintain an equilibrium of viewpoints and ensure that all guests are given enough airtime. At the same time, you want to manage the pace of the session. Since you are not

doing much talking, the guests themselves affect the pace. Your ability to change the pace is through your questioning of the guests, how often you interject and how you move between the guests. Sometimes, guests will belabour a point. You will need to keep it brief by cutting in either to clarify, ask a question or redirect to someone else.

Understand your role

If you are a subject-matter expert on the topic for discussion, there is a danger that you may want to air your views. But, as a moderator, you've been called, not so much to share your opinions

as to moderate. At times, it may be useful to share brief commentary, rearticulate or summarise what a panellist has said to clarify.

Preparation is key. This can best be achieved through the following:

1 Understand the subject matter for discussion. A moderator need not know the A-Z on the subject. However, awareness of fundamental issues is useful. Being prepared by way of more questions than answers is as good a way to begin.

2 Familiarity with the panellists. Find out from the organisers who the members of the panel are and obtain background information. Familiarise yourself with their profile, do basic research online and take time to introduce yourself to them once the session has been confirmed. This way, you may have months or weeks to get to know the panellists better.

3 Acquaint yourself with the event details. It may seem obvious but these small things matter. Being sure about the venue location will prevent trouble on the day. Arriving early with plenty of time to spare ensures you start with a good impression and gives you time to assess the audience. You will also have the opportunity to meet the panellists prior, which is important to ensure everyone is acquainted and prepared for what is ahead.

Being early also allows you time to take note of the logistical details. Find out how the session will take place, what the seating arrangements are and the audio visual equipment you will be called upon to use. All these little things make a big difference. Like the nagging pain caused by a tiny pebble in the corner of your shoe that you cannot remove, it can be uncomfortable when you make assumptions about things you ought to check instead.

4 Have lots of questions. I find it better to be prepared with more questions than necessary. The reality though is that you will go through fewer questions if you are able to get everyone to contribute to the discussion.

5 Be prepared that you will run out of time. Any presentation, whether individual or group-led, takes time to develop. This means people have to warm up to the task ahead, the discussion starts slowly and then begins to get deeper. At times, people may veer off topic as

well or take more time to explore an idea. Some topics may get members of the audience sharing feedback or posing questions. In such a dynamic environment, it's easy to lose track of time. As a moderator, time is of the essence and you must guard it like a hawk. You should have a handle on the flow of the session, which means making decisions as to which questions to leave out, who to cut into or how to speed up certain sections up etc.

6 Have a time-keeper present. The best piece of advice about moderating panels I received was from my dad who mentioned the importance of a time-keeper. You need a timer that is loud enough for the panellists, the audience and yourself and it needs to be managed by someone other than yourself. The timer functions in three ways. First, it tells panellists when it is time to wrap up and then, when to stop talking. Use the timer as a warning of a session end and then at session end. Second, it helps you do your job. You focus on the things that matter - running the show, tracking comments made and jotting down new questions. Third, it shows the audience you respect their time. A good moderator does her job well to complete her session as close to the desired timeframe because a delay has consequences on the rest of the conference. In this age, where time is the scarcest of commodities, managing time is the minimum we should accord to all concerned.



This article is a shorter version adapted for this column. The original article which provides more tips for on-the-day preparation, things to avoid and the role of the moderator can be found at rowenamora.com.

Editor and programme director at VerticalDistinct.com, a media and learning organisation, **Rowena Morais** is an entrepreneur, communication and content specialist, editor and LinkedIn profile writer. She supports human resource and technology professionals in their career development through articles, podcasts, interviews and a range of internationally accredited, in-demand technical and professional courses offered throughout Asia Pacific and the Middle East. A ghostwriter, she can be found at rowenamora.com. **Rowena tweets at @rowenamora**.

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