



How to Stay Cool When You're Put on the Spot

By David Lancefield

"The best defense is a good offense" is an adage used in chess, sports, and military combat. It also applies in business. There are plenty of "high-stakes" moments in which people catch you off guard and make you feel defensive, whether by their choice of words or demeanor. A difficult client interrupts your pitch with a volley of unreasonable questions, a board member interrogates your investment case to the nth degree, or the boss dismisses your work on an important assignment out-of-hand.

You know that you should respond calmly and dispassionately. Expressing strong emotions rarely helps to address the challenge. It also leaves a bad impression.

Nevertheless, your imposter syndrome kicks in, making you feel vulnerable, sensitive, and less confident in your abilities. This is magnified if you're already feeling on edge from exhaustion, anxiety, and stress. Many of us are, whether from the trauma of the pandemic, feelings of job insecurity, or recent news events.

What does it take to maintain your composure so you can think clearly, express yourself with conviction, and come out strong? In other words, what does a "good offense" look like? The following four strategies will help you be proactive and persuasive in the heat of the moment.

Focus your mind after the initial shock

A strong or surprising statement from a client or colleague can trigger a rush of the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol as the brain's amygdala activates a fight-or-flight response. I've seen people go red in the face, appear stunned, and look tearful.

While it's hard to stop this immediate, biological response, you can recognize it for what it is and take time to center yourself, rather than letting yourself become more emotional.

Trigger your curiosity into what they're thinking about, focusing on the substance of their points. This can help you move your focus to them instead of yourself. Try saying: "Thank you for sharing your perspective. It's different from how I was thinking about the topic. Can you tell me more about your thinking?"

Rebecca,* one of my clients, started her sessions with the executive committee with a simple mantra: "What I'm proposing is going to be better once I've incorporated the insight, experience, and ideas of my colleagues." That shifted her focus from her own initial reaction to finding out about what they thought. She was also less precious about her own suggestions, which in turn helped her to manage her emotions.

Before your encounter, do your homework on the people you're engaging with. Think about their likely questions, issues, and challenges. Do the same for yourself. Work out which topics and individuals you're least comfortable with. Then explore how you can address them in advance (for example, by investing more time preparing answers or providing a briefing to the people you've identified) and how you can best respond to them at the time. Some executives I know rehearse different scenarios in their mind or out loud with a trusted colleague.

Then, use the following techniques to reign in your emotions and gain perspective in the moment:

Take some deep breaths, without making it too obvious to the other person(s).

Adjust your posture so that you're sitting up straight, with your feet to the floor. Both help you think more clearly.

Label the reaction in your mind: "I'm feeling [annoyed/anxious/angry]." This helps create some distance between yourself and the reaction.

Recall when you've managed other difficult moments well as a way to build your resilience and confidence (saying to yourself, "I've got this"). Keeping a "When I've been at my best in high-stakes moments" journal helps keep these memories fresh in your mind.

Trigger your "wise advocate" — your own voice or the voice of somebody you trust and respect — who reminds you of why it matters to keep a cool head. You might say to yourself, "I care a lot about this topic. It's important we find a solution. I'm not going to let my emotions get the better of me."

Don't make assumptions

When you're feeling under "attack" by someone, you often assume that they're challenging your authority, undermining your role, or looking to embarrass you in front of others. You overgeneralize, catastrophize, and personalize it into something bigger than it actually is. You soon become overwhelmed. For example, you might think, "This is not going well...I'm now not likely to get the raise/promotion I was looking for."

Anna, a senior executive in a global technology company I worked with, was a fast thinker. When challenged, her brain went into overdrive, as she made a whole host of assumptions about what the person thought of her. This reduced her ability to address the questions fully as she became overwhelmed and deflated. When we reflected on these situations, I invited her to consider the basis of each assumption she made. She

soon realized that it was her imposter syndrome speaking rather than anything the other person was saying or conveying.

There could be many reasons why a person might be argumentative, critical, or impatient. They could be having a bad day, or maybe that's just their style. Or they want to test the quality of your thinking, arguments, and evidence because they consider the topic to be important.

Do your best to hold off on making assumptions. There's plenty of time after the meeting to reflect on what's led them to intervene in this way and to judge whether it's personal. For now, focus your attention on listening to their perspective. Ask incisive questions and encourage them to make constructive suggestions: "What changes could we make to address your concerns?" or "Where would you start?"

Focus on the topic at hand rather than getting wrapped up in analyzing their body language or words. Use a structured approach to understand the strength of their perspective:

What are they telling me about the topic or point of view? What are they really saying?

What is the basis for their position? What is the balance between facts, their version of the facts, assumptions, or beliefs?

How convincing is their point, and how much does it challenge my proposal?

Start a dialogue

You might also be tempted to justify your perspective and defending your position. But this diminishes your stature. You resign yourself to losing the argument, saying less and less. I've seen people look physically smaller as they hunch their shoulders and lower their head.

Or, you might become aggressive, going on the attack. You challenge their logic, credibility, or personality. You let it become a personal matter as you think, "How dare they challenge my expertise in front of my colleagues?"

Consider this difficult situation a test. You want to show your ability to respond and engage confidently as if it was a negotiation. Specifically, this involves:

Identifying common ground with the other person(s). "Am I right when I say that we agree on [...]?"

Call out the points of difference so you can focus your attention on what's getting in the way. "From our discussion, I think we have different opinions about [...]"

Explore options or scenarios, reframing the problem from different perspectives. "Imagine if we tried this..." or "How would a customer or investor look at the same issue?"

Mike, a seasoned executive I worked with, prepared diligently for these high-stakes moments. He presented with conviction, confidence, and eloquence. It was close to being a performance. Therein lay the problem. When challenged, he felt uncomfortable and unhappy; it was as though somebody had taken the air out of his balloon. He looked crestfallen. Our work involved him realizing that the end of his presentation was not the end of his contribution — it was the beginning of a dialogue that might lead to a better outcome all round.

It's important to let go of an idea that doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Avoid being sentimental about your past work; it's a sunk cost. Instead, while it may feel uncomfortable, consider the discussion as an opportunity to develop yourself (and the matter at hand) by applying your growth mindset.

Close with confidence

You might be inclined to apologize if your audience pushes back on your work, even if they think the discussion has been productive. You might say, "I've worked hard to come up with this proposal and I'm sorry you don't like it" or "I'm sorry I couldn't respond fully as I wasn't expecting you to raise these points" (which is not a great endorsement of your agility).

By now, your colleague or client will have wrested control of the discussion from you. They close the meeting by summarizing what they heard and recommending a way forward.

Call out what happened in the meeting, whether in relation to the style of interactions or the substance of the points: "I can see you feel strongly about this matter" or "You came from a different perspective." Recognize the substance of the points made: "The questions you've raised and the points you've made have strengthened the quality of our proposal and shown that we have more work to do."

If you feel you've taken the discussion as far as you can, draw it to a close. Reassure them that you will work through their points and will follow up. Thank them for the discussion, and leave it with confidence, whether you're working in person or virtually — smile, hold your head up, and thank them.

It may have been a demanding discussion, but you're still in control of your thinking and emotions. Foster resilience by telling yourself that you're going to bounce forward

to something better. When you work on something complex and important, it often takes time to find a solution that has the backing of your colleagues and stakeholders. Business life is a “long game.” Focus on finding the next opportunity to take the discussion forward.

Work is full of difficult moments. It's hard to predict when they'll occur and how they'll play out, but you can prepare for them. This four-step framework gives you an opportunity to respond thoughtfully and confidently.

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