

Any Questions? Get More Value from Seminar Attendance

by Shelley Dunstone

The speaker speaks. The people listen. At the end of the seminar, the Chair asks “Any questions?” There are no questions. The audience squirms a little in embarrassed silence. Eventually the Chair comes up with a question to ask, or lamely says “Well, you must have covered everything very thoroughly, Joe. Thank you for taking the time to speak to us.” As you file out of the room, you think “There was nothing new for me in that. I’ve wasted my time. Again.”

I’m a frequent seminar attender. I’ve also planned and chaired a lot of sessions and sometimes I am the speaker. I’ve reached the conclusion that the audience shares responsibility with the speaker for making the session interesting. If I’m going to spend an hour or more of my time (and these days I pay for my own professional development), I want a return on that investment, and I make sure I get it. If you sometimes feel you got nothing out of a session, maybe you needed to dig a little deeper to find something of value for yourself. Prospecting for gold involves sifting through mud. At a seminar it means asking questions.

When I’m organising a seminar, I always brief the speaker in detail about the likely composition of the audience and the sorts of issues that audience members would be facing. Most speakers are very cooperative in tailoring their presentation to the perceived needs of the audience. They have professional reputations to maintain and want to provide useful content. Speakers present the material that they think will be interesting and helpful to the audience. But usually the audience consists of people working in a range of different situations, and it is impossible to cater specifically to their individual needs. The only way of doing that would be one-on-one coaching. It’s up to each person to think about how the information applies to them, and how they could use it. In the absence of feedback in the form of questions from the audience, speakers have no way of knowing whether or not they are hitting the mark. Once the evaluation forms are in, it’s too late to provide any further value to that audience. It’s a missed opportunity for everyone.

Television and the Internet have raised our expectations in relation to being informed and entertained. If a web site doesn’t provide the information we need, we just click onto another one. If a television program is boring, we grab the remote control and channel-surf. We can get up and go to the kitchen and grab a bite to eat. We’re used to having choice and control. So being stuck in a seat in front of a single presenter for an hour or more can be a bit of an ordeal. For some people, sitting in a seminar room may bring back unpleasant memories of being in school. It’s easy to find yourself thinking “Tell me what I need to know, and let me out of here”.

Sometimes we allow our first impressions of a speaker to get in the way of learning something from them. It’s natural to form an opinion of the speaker within seconds. It’s tempting to switch off because we don’t like the speaker, or because he or she is not from

our own industry, or is an academic or perhaps has a lower level of formal education than our own.

Different kinds of people bring different perspectives to a topic. There may be useful parallels between the speaker's industry and yours, but you might have to search for them. An academic might suggest a framework or model that provides a different way of looking at things. A person with little formal education might offer an insight that could change your outlook on life and work.

Why are people reluctant to ask questions or engage in discussion at seminars? Many people are too embarrassed to ask questions, either because of a fear of speaking in public, or for fear of revealing some ignorance. But no one knows everything, and others in the audience may be relieved that you asked. Often, seemingly naïve questions are very perceptive, and produce interesting answers and discussions.

Often, I suspect that people don't ask questions because they can't think of any. Coming up with good questions requires active listening. You need to stay awake and avoid the temptation to daydream. Before you can formulate a question to ask the presenter, you need to ask yourself some questions, such as:

- Why did you come along to this session? What sparked your interest?
- What are the challenges facing you in your workplace?
- What are the most unenjoyable aspects of your work, and how could they be improved?
- What experiments have you been doing at work, and what outcomes have you observed?
- What strategies are you considering implementing in your workplace?
- How does the speaker's view sit with your own experiences?
- How would people in various roles in the organisation view what the speaker is suggesting? How would other functions in the office be affected?
- What do you think would happen if you followed the speaker's advice?

Take notes throughout the session. I always think that I will remember what was said, but if I haven't taken any notes, by the end of the session I find it difficult to recall much detail. As well as writing down what the speaker says, note down your thoughts and the connections with your own work situation. You may find mind-mapping (linking the ideas in diagrammatic form) helpful.

What does it mean to "learn" something? If you define it narrowly, in terms of a new piece of information, you will fall prey to the law of diminishing returns. The more education you have had on a given topic, the less likely you are to encounter brand new information. Beyond the basics of a topic, I am looking for insights that I can apply. I always find it interesting and useful to hear about other people's opinions, experiences and ways of looking at things. I also observe and learn from the presentation style of the speaker, either good or bad.

Here are some types of questions you could ask:

- Seek repetition, clarification or explanation of a point.
- Ask for a recommendation, e.g. “What do you think is the best way to...?”
- Ask about the speaker’s experiences, e.g. “What happened when...”, “How do people react when you tell them...?”
- Ask a hypothetical question, e.g. “What would you do if...?”, “What do you think would happen if...?”
- Seek out the issues, e.g. “What factors should we consider ...?”
- Ask for an opinion, e.g. “What do you think about the idea of...?”
- Draw out assumptions, e.g. “What are your reasons for saying that?”

Some other tips:

- If you are going to ask a question, make it a question, not just a comment.
- Ask one question that the presenter can focus on, not several questions wrapped up together. If there are two parts to your question, say so.
- First write down your question, so that you can ask it clearly and succinctly.
- State your name and your organisation. This means that others can identify you and speak with you afterwards, and you could make some useful contacts amongst audience members.

I have often heard presenters say “If you get one useful thing out of today’s session, it will have been worthwhile”. Whilst that has become a bit of a cliché, I think it is still good advice. Whilst it is very exciting to come away with lots of new information and ideas, it makes it hard to decide what to try first. Aim to get one useful thing, and treat it like gold. Write down what you are going to do, before you leave the room, before the valuable idea escapes.