



**IN THE LINE
OF
FIRE**

How to
Handle Tough Questions—
When It Counts

Second Edition

J E R R Y W E I S S M A N

Author of Bestselling *Presenting to Win*

Praise for *In the Line of Fire*

“In my role at Cisco Systems, I am 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?*

“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, 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

“Jerry Weissman helped prepare my management team for our recent IPO. I sat in on some of the sessions and was most impressed with Jerry’s innovative ways of teaching and optimizing effective executive communication methods. This training, encapsulated well in his new book, *In the Line of Fire*, paid off handsomely during our numerous road show presentations.”

Ray Dolby, Founder and Former Chairman, Dolby Laboratories, Inc.

“Whether you’re a classroom teacher or the President, this book will help you be an effective communicator. This book is so insightful, reading it feels like cheating. Tough questions no longer test my limits.”

Reed Hastings, Founder and CEO, Netflix

“Even the greatest start encounters tough questions. Read Jerry’s book before you need it, or you’ll be in deep sushi.”

Guy Kawasaki, author of the bestselling *Enchantment, Reality Check, and The Art of the Start*

“Have you ever been faced with a tough question? Jerry Weissman shows how it’s not necessarily what the answer is. It’s how you answer that will allow you to prevail and win!”

Tim Koogle, Founding CEO, Yahoo!

“Jerry’s technique is both masterful and universal because it finds common ground between audience and speaker, hard questions and direct answers, all with a very simple principle: truth.”

Pierre Omidyar, Founder of eBay and Omidyar Network

“I’ve been asking tough questions for half a century and listening to variously brilliant, boring, evasive or illuminating answers. Jerry Weissman’s book will help anyone...anyone...answer even the toughest questions.”

Mike Wallace, Senior Correspondent, 60 Minutes, CBS News

In the Line of Fire

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In the Line of Fire

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Tough Questions—
When It Counts

■ ■ Jerry Weissman ■ ■

Author of

Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story

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About the Author

Jerry Weissman, the world's #1 corporate presentations coach, founded and leads Power Presentations, Ltd. in Burlingame, California. His private clients include executives at hundreds of the world's top companies including Intel, IBM, Microsoft, and Cisco Systems.

Weissman coached Cisco's executives before their immensely successful IPO roadshow; afterward, the firm's chairman attributed at least two to three dollars of Cisco's offering price to his work. Since then, he has coached the IPO road shows for nearly 600 companies, helping them raise hundreds of billions of dollars. Among them were Yahoo!, Intuit, Dolby Laboratories, eBay, and most recently Trulia, the real estate search engine company, whose shares jumped more than 40 percent during its first day of trading.

Weissman is author of the global best-selling *Presenting to Win: The Art of Telling Your Story*; *The Power Presenter: Technique, Style, and Strategy*; *Presentations in Action: 80 Memorable Presentation Lessons from the Masters*; and *Winning Strategies for Power Presentations* (all published by FT Press/Pearson Education).

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INTRODUCTION

Universal Challenges, Universal Solutions

In the eight years since the publication of the first edition of this book, the United States has gone through two contentious presidential elections that put the candidates squarely in the line of fire of tough questions—from their opponents in debates and from the media in interviews. The manner in which those candidates handled those questions had a direct impact on their candidacies and on their ultimate fortunes. Although the political arena has its own rules and idiosyncracies that set it apart from most other walks of life, the manner in which *any* person handles him- or herself in *any* challenging exchange has an impact upon their ultimate fortunes.

And so while this updated second edition, like the original, contains many political examples (because they are more familiar to more people), they have the same dynamics as those many other walks of life: business, finance, government, science, academia, job interviews, and even interpersonal relations. The new examples in this edition represent the same universal challenges as in the original, and so the same universal solutions still apply, demonstrating their staying power.

The universal dynamics of Q&A extend into *all* aspects of *all* presentations, if not *all* communications—a fact supported by the opinions of leading practitioners in other fields of communications. I have studied and collected the advice of experts in literature, cinema, theater, advertising, media, as well as politics,

in two other books, *Presentations in Action* and *Winning Strategies for Power Presentations*, and related them to the entire spectrum of presentation skills. Taken together with my three original books, *Presenting to Win*, about the fundamentals of story development and graphics design, *The Power Presenter*, about the fundamentals of delivery skills, and this book about the fundamentals of handling tough questions, they form a thorough methodology to help you or any presenter succeed.

■ ■ Handling Tough Questions Counts

This comprehensive methodology arose out of my 40 years in the communications trade, which ranged from the control rooms of the CBS Broadcast Center in Manhattan to the conference rooms of Silicon Valley's hottest startups and the boardrooms of some of America's most prestigious corporations. In those rooms, I have heard—and have asked—some very tough questions. As a result, I came to fully understand the potential upside—and downside—impact of how presenters handle challenging exchanges.

That impact was best expressed by Theodore H. White, the noted political historian who chronicled the seminal presidential debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon in his classic book, *The Making of the President 1960*. Mr. White wrote that debates “give the voters of a great democracy a living portrait of two men under stress and let the voters decide, by instinct and emotion, which style and pattern of behavior under stress they preferred in their leader.” [I.1]

On one fateful late September evening in 1960, voters decided that they preferred John Kennedy over Richard Nixon as their leader. In that one night the challenger vaulted ahead of the favorite.

Forty-eight years later, another series of late September exchanges produced another political reversal of fortune. At the beginning of that month, Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, having been chosen as the Republican vice presidential nominee, delivered a powerful acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota. That one fiery speech electrified the country and vaulted Arizona Senator John McCain, who had been trailing in the public opinion polls, to a lead over then Illinois Senator Barack Obama. [I.2]

But later that month, Palin was interviewed by *CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric. Persistent journalist that she is, Couric pressed Palin on her qualifications to be vice president, particularly her foreign policy credentials. Palin was only able to offer her state's proximity to Russia but nothing more of substance.

The television critic of the *New York Times* reported that the "exchange was so startling it ricocheted across the Internet...it may be hard for Mr. McCain's running mate to recoup. It wasn't her first interview on national television, but in some ways it was the worst." [I.3]

The interview ricocheted into a skit on NBC's *Saturday Night Live*, in which actress Tina Fey, doing an uncannily accurate impersonation of Palin, mocked the remark about the proximity to Russia.

By the end of that month, Barack Obama vaulted back into the lead in the public opinion polls and held it until his victory in November.

Three years later, another September exchange produced another reversal of fortune. A month earlier, when Texas Governor Rick Perry formally announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination, he was late to the party: A large field of candidates had been engaging in a series of televised debates since May of that year. [I.4]

By the time Perry threw his hat into the ring, former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney had moved into the lead. But Perry had a rich array of assets. He had won three consecutive gubernatorial races, was the darling of the influential conservative wing of the Republican Party, and had an abundant war chest of campaign finances. Within one month after his announcement, he vaulted to the top of the public opinion polls.

But then on September 22, 2011, he participated in a live televised debate with the other Republican candidates. At one point, following Romney's discussion of how his current health care proposal related to the one he had developed while he was the Massachusetts governor, *Fox News* moderator Chris Wallace—seeking to create conflict—asked Perry to respond:

PERRY: I think Americans just don't know sometimes which Mitt Romney they're dealing with. Is it the Mitt Romney that was on the side of against the Second Amendment before he was for the Second Amendment? Was it—was before he was before the social programs, from the standpoint of he was for standing up for Roe v. Wade before he was against Roe v. Wade? He was for Race to the Top, he's for Obamacare, and now he's against it. I mean, we'll wait until tomorrow and—and—and see which Mitt Romney we're really talking to tonight. [1.5]

The convoluted ramble reverberated throughout the media; the video clip was replayed endlessly on YouTube and by the late night television comics who punctuated it with mocking commentary. Within two weeks, Perry's poll numbers plummeted to almost half of what they had been.

On November 9, he participated in another live television debate in which CNBC moderator Maria Bartiromo asked him what programs he would cut to reduce the deficit. Perry started his answer by saying that he would eliminate three agencies and named Commerce and Education but froze on the third. He

struggled for several painful moments to recall, and then gave up, infamously saying, “Ooops!” But by that time, his fate was virtually sealed.

Three months later Perry dropped out of the race. [I.6]

On April 20, 2010, BP’s offshore oil drilling platform in the Gulf of Mexico exploded, claiming 11 lives and causing massive environmental damage. The company’s CEO, Tony Hayward, whose annual compensation was \$4.5 million, when asked what he would tell people in Louisiana, said, “We’re sorry for the massive disruption it’s caused their lives. There’s no one who wants this over more than I do. I would like my life back.”

Hayward’s “I would like my life back” statement whipsawed throughout the media with the same speed and intensity as did Palin’s and Perry’s mishandled answers. Within days, Hayward was asked to step down, and four months later, he was fired. [I.7]

Very few people have to deal with a disaster as enormous as an oil spill, and very few people get to run for president of the country, yet few people on the face of this planet get to sail through life without being confronted with tough questions. The purpose of this book and its many real-life examples is to provide you with the skills to handle such questions—and only such questions. If all the questions you are ever asked were to be of the “Where do I sign?” variety, you could spend your time with a good mystery novel instead.

Forewarned is forearmed.

One other forewarning: All the techniques you are about to learn require that you deploy them with absolute truth. The operative word in the preceding paragraph, as well as on the cover of this book, is “handle,” meaning how to *manage* tough questions. Although providing an answer is an integral part of that “handling,” every answer you give to every question asked of you

must be honest and straightforward. If not, all the other techniques will be for naught. With a truthful answer as your foundation, all these techniques will enable you to survive, if not prevail, in the line of fire.

CHAPTER

1

Agility Versus Force

■ ■ Challenging Questions

To understand how to handle tough questions, let's begin with the reason people ask such questions. Journalists such as Katie Couric and Chris Wallace (the son of the legendary provocative interrogator Mike Wallace) ask tough questions because, being familiar with the classical art of drama, they know that conflict creates drama. Aristotle 101.

One of the most regularly occurring examples of journalistic baiting is in presidential press conferences. Every U.S. president, regardless of party affiliation, periodically faces the slings and arrows of tough questions from the White House press corps. One such exchange took place on June 23, 2009. In a press briefing following violent demonstrations in Teheran, Iran, President Barack Obama said

The United States and the international community have been appalled and outraged by the threats, the beatings, and imprisonments of the last few days. I strongly condemn these unjust actions, and I join with the American people in mourning each and every innocent life that is lost.

He then opened the floor to NBC's Chuck Todd, who asked

TODD: Mr. President, I want to follow up on Iran. You have avoided twice spelling out consequences. You've hinted that there would be, from the international community, if they continue to violate—you said violate these norms. You seem to hint that there are human rights violations taking place.

THE PRESIDENT: I'm not hinting. I think that when a young woman gets shot on the street when she gets out of her car, that's a problem.

TODD: Then why won't you spell out the consequences that the Iranian—

THE PRESIDENT: Because I think, Chuck, that we don't know yet how this thing is going to play out. I know everybody here is on a 24-hour news cycle. I'm not.

TODD: But shouldn't—I mean, shouldn't the world and Iran—

THE PRESIDENT: Chuck, I answered—

TODD: —but shouldn't the Iranian regime know that there are consequences?

THE PRESIDENT: I answered the question, Chuck, which is that we don't yet know how this is going to play out. [1.1]

Another tense exchange occurred on March 1, 2013. In a press briefing following severe cuts made in the federal budget, President Obama said

None of this is necessary. It's happening because of a choice that Republicans in Congress have made. They've allowed these cuts to happen because they refuse to budge on closing a single wasteful loophole to help reduce the deficit.

He then opened the floor to the Associated Press's Julie Pace who asked

Thank you, Mr. President. How much responsibility do you feel like you bear for these cuts taking effect? And is the only way to offset them at this point for Republicans to bend on revenue, or do you see any alternatives?

In his response, Obama said

But what is true right now is that the Republicans have made a choice that maintaining an ironclad rule that we will not accept an extra dime's worth of revenue makes it very difficult for us to get any larger comprehensive deal. And that's a choice they're making. They're saying that it's more important to preserve these tax loopholes than it is to prevent these arbitrary cuts.

which prompted the reporter to repeat her question:

PACE: It sounds like you're saying that this is a Republican problem and not one that you bear any responsibility for.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, Julie, give me an example of what I might do.

PACE: I'm just trying to clarify your statement.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, no, but I'm trying to clarify the question. [1.2]

The President of the United States can dismiss Chuck Todd with, “I answered the question, Chuck!” or Julie Pace by turning her question back to her for an answer, but you do not have that luxury. In business, you must respond fully to your audience whether that person is a customer, an investor, or a manager.

To do that, you have to understand the reason business people ask challenging questions. Is it because they are mean-spirited? Perhaps. Is it because they want to test your mettle? Perhaps. More likely it is because when you are presenting your position, you are asking your opposite party or parties, your target audience, to change, which is just the case in almost every decisive communication in business—as well as in those other walks of life. Most human beings are resistant to change, and so they kick the tires.

You are the tires.

The most mission-critical of all business presentations is the initial public offering (IPO) road show, a form of communication I have had the privilege and opportunity to coach for nearly 600 companies, among them Cisco Systems, Intuit, Yahoo!, Dolby Laboratories, eBay, and most recently, Trulia, the successful real estate search engine company. In those road show pitches, presenters ask their investor audiences to change: to buy a stock that never existed. In fact, when a company offers shares to the public for the first time, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission mandates that they specifically state the risk in print. The offering company must make available a prospectus

containing a boilerplate sentence that reads, “There has been no prior public market for the company’s common stock.” In other words, *caveat emptor*—or, “Invest at your own risk.” As a result, when a company’s executive teams take their presentations on the road, they are inevitably assaulted with challenging questions from their potential investors.

Although the stakes in an IPO road show are exceedingly high—in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars—the character of the challenge is no different from that of potential customers considering a new product, potential partners considering a strategic relationship, pressured managers considering a request for additional expenditures, concerned citizens considering a dark horse candidate, a human resources manager considering a new employee, or even affluent contributors considering a donation to a nascent, not-for-profit cause.

The inherent challenge in these circumstances is compounded in presentation settings where the intensity level is raised by several additional factors:

- **Public exposure.** The risk of a mistake is magnified in large groups.
- **Group dynamics.** The more people in the audience, the more difficult it is to maintain control.
- **One against many.** Audiences have an affinity bond among themselves and apart from the presenter or speaker.

The result is open season on the lone figure spotlighted at the front of the room, who then becomes fair game for a volley of even more challenging questions.

How then, to level the playing field? How then, to give the presenter the weapons to withstand the attack?

The answer lies in the David versus Goliath match, in which a mere youth was able to defeat a mighty giant using only a stone from a slingshot. This biblical parable has numerous equivalents in military warfare. History abounds with examples in which

small, outnumbered, under-equipped units were able to combat vastly superior forces by using adroit maneuvers and clever defenses. Remember the Alamo, but also remember Thermopylae, Masada, Agincourt, the Bastille, Stalingrad, the Battle of the Bulge, Iwo Jima, and the Six-Day War. All these legendary battles share one common denominator: leverage, or the use of agility to counter force.

■ ■ Martial Arts

For our purposes, the most pertinent modern equivalent is martial arts, in which a skilled practitioner can compete with a superior opponent by using dexterity rather than might. Bruce Lee, a diminutive kick boxer, became an international star by virtue of his uncanny ability to prevail over multiple and mightier armed opponents using only his flying feet and hands. The martial arts, which evolved from Asian philosophy and religion, employ these six critical mental and physical skills:

- Concentration
- Self-defense
- Balance
- Agility
- Preparation
- Self-control

I've translated each of these martial arts skills into a set of best practices that you can apply in your mission-critical encounters so that you can succeed in your challenging exchanges. Deploy these pivotal dynamics against a sea of troubles and, by opposing, you can end them.

This overarching objective can be stated in one word: control. Although it will take 200 pages to provide you with the details, when you are confronted with tough questions, you can control

- The question
- Your answer
- The questioner
- The audience
- The time
- Yourself

■ ■ Effective Management Perceived

A synonym for the verb “control” is “manage.” Therefore, the subliminal perception of a well-handled question is *Effective Management*. Of course, no one in your target audience is going to conclude that you are a good manager just because you fielded a tough question effectively. That’s a stretch. But the converse proves the point. If your response to a challenging question is defensive or contentious, you lose credibility—and with it the likelihood of attaining your objective in the interchange. If your response is prompt, assured, and to the point, you will be far more likely to emerge unscathed, if not fully victorious.

The causal relationship between behavior and perception was eloquently expressed by David Bellet, the former Chairman of Crown Advisors International, one of Wall Street’s most successful long-term investment firms. As an early backer of many successful companies, among them Hewlett-Packard, Sony, and Intel, Bellet was solicited to invest almost daily. In response, he often fired challenging questions at his petitioners.

“When I ask questions,” he said, “I don’t really have to have the full answer because I can’t know the subject as well as the presenter. What I look for is whether the presenter has thought about the question, been candid, thorough, and direct and how the presenter handles himself or herself under stress; if that person has the passion of ‘fire in the belly’ and can stand tall in the line of fire.”

■ ■ Baptism Under Fire

I, too, was once in the business of asking tough questions. Before becoming a presentation coach for those nearly 600 IPO road shows, as well as for thousands of other presentations ranging from raising private capital to launching products, seeking partnerships, and requisitioning budget approvals, I spent a decade as a news and public affairs producer at WCBS-TV in New York. As a student of the classical art of drama and with the full knowledge that conflict creates drama, I became an expert at asking challenging questions.

My baptism under fire came early in my tenure at CBS when I was assigned to be the Associate Producer of a documentary series called *Eye on New York*, whose host was the then recently hired Mike Wallace. Although *60 Minutes*, Mike's magnum opus, had not yet begun, he came to CBS largely on the strength of the reputation he had developed on another New York television station as an aggressive interrogator on a series called *Night Beat*. Mike had regularly bombarded his *Night Beat* guests with tough questions and was intent on maintaining his inquisitorial reputation at CBS. He fully expected his Associate Producer to provide him with live ammunition for his firepower. Heaven help me when I did not.

Fortunately, I survived Mike's slings and arrows by learning how to devise tough questions. In the process, I also learned how to handle those same questions. This book is a compilation of those techniques, seasoned and battle-tested for 25 years in business with my corporate clients.

Expanding upon David Bellet's observation, the objective of this book is not so much to show you how to respond with the right answers as it is to show you how to establish a positive perception with your audiences by giving them the confidence that you can manage adversity, stay the course, and stay in control.

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