

## Do new chief executives need a different approach to media training if they expect hostile questions, asks Carly Chynoweth

It's not what you say, it's the way that you say it. When chief executives and other senior managers speak in public they are judged not simply on the accuracy of their statements but on whether they come across as people who can lead a successful business.

That can mean unlearning — or at least adapting — habits picked up when dealing with the media as a junior executive or a technical expert.

"When working with people below chief executive level it tends to be a bit bish-bash-bosh, get the message across at all costs," said Tom Maddocks, founder of Media Training Associates and a former BBC journalist.

"I have heard media trainers tell people that it doesn't matter what the question is, just get the message out, which of course upsets the journalist and drives people potty.

"I remember once on the Money Programme I was interviewing a FTSE 100 boss and I could get hardly anything out of him. It was just little sound bites whatever question I asked."

That might be a safe route for less senior people, in that sticking to the corporate message should make it easier to avoid traps, but top managers cannot afford to sound like corporate robots.

"If you are a chief executive or a director it has to be much more subtle. Journalists are looking for the whole person, not just a few key messages. They will want to know about you, your experience, your vision — not just three points about the business."

In these situations, journalists are looking for much more than facts. They are trying to get a sense of the executive as a person and a leader.

"They are asking themselves, 'Can he inspire shareholders and his people?' rather than 'Has he

dotted all the right Is and crossed all the Ts?'"

Journalists' judgments about your character will come across in how they present the story, Maddocks said. "If they get the feeling that they wouldn't touch you with a bargepole then even if all the key messages are right, the article will not come out the way you like."

Jonathan Haslam, co-founder of Pitch-Perfect, a presentation training company, cites Bob Diamond's recent performance before the Treasury committee as a good example of how a chief executive should communicate, especially as the Barclays chief executive is fairly new to his job.

"He took two-and-a-quarter hours of intensive questioning and he did not roll over," said Haslam, who was John Major's press secretary. "People might not like what Diamond said but the way that he said it was very well handled. I do not think that anyone could have anything but respect for the way in which he conducted himself."

Maddocks advises all newly appointed chief executives to include media and presentation training in their induction programmes. "It will help them to focus on what journalists will want to talk about in their new role," he said. Even experienced leaders benefit from regular refresher courses.

People moving from a technical role into a broader leadership position are likely to find communications training particularly valuable, Haslam added, to help them to build rapport with different audiences — the media, analysts, employees or other important groups of people — by thinking about what they want and need rather than simply rattling off facts and figures.

This reflects the way in which senior leaders need to be able to take a strategic overview rather



Bob Diamond's recent performance before MPs was a good example of how a chief executive should communicate

than thinking only about one particular area or specialism.

Rather than just telling people this, however, he has joined forces with Paula Roberts, an executive coach, to offer a programme that combines presentation training with one-on-one coaching.

The idea is that the executive coaching element helps participants overcome psychological barriers while Haslam teaches the practicalities of getting it right.

"The coaching challenges the way people think about themselves. That's the key," Roberts said. "Quite often people have the job title but there is a bit of psycho-

logical time lag before they promote themselves into the role."

That may be one reason why people from some professional backgrounds can fall back into the habit of giving overly detailed technical answers when under pressure, even though they know that as a senior leader they need to offer more context and strategy.

George Nazi, president of global network and computing infrastructure at BT, found the combination of coaching and presentation training very useful. His technical background meant that he had plenty of experience of presenting at conferences and was

confident in interviews with technology journalists but was much less comfortable when reporters' questions moved into more controversial areas or issues that related to the business more broadly.

"I had not mastered the art of dealing with hostile journalists," he said. "I was used to interviews with people who were seeking knowledge rather than trying to trick me or catch me out by asking about other things in the business like pay cuts, or saying 'The chief executive has done this or that, what do you think about it?'"

This was made worse when Nazi completed a different media

training programme just before starting work with Haslam and Roberts, and the instructor told him he had failed.

"I am a president and I look after 3,000 people but it really brings you down when someone says you have failed," he said. "I shared that with Paula and she said nobody fails in these things. You are training. You can only improve."

The coaching, combined with Haslam's training on how to handle difficult or unexpected questions, has given him much more confidence in his ability to communicate, he said.