

Exposing Corruption Exploring Solutions
Project On Government Oversight

**Congressional Oversight Training Seminars
April 2007**

Framing Questions:
What to Ask, How to Ask It, and How to Follow Up

- **Be prepared.** If you have a lot of time you can ask for a GAO or CRS report before the hearing to make sure you have all the background information. Look at academic studies on the issue. When the time comes for the actual hearing, write your questions out in advance as well as alternative follow ups and possible answers. Also, take your time constraints into consideration. Your hearing should be practically scripted beforehand.
- **If possible, bring in people from other disciplines.** Different people interpret things differently. People from different backgrounds can potentially help you see things in documents you weren't aware of, or help you draft questions you wouldn't have otherwise considered.
- **Know about your witness ahead of time.** From preliminary interviews you can tell a lot about how a person will act in a hearing. If they are fearful you will know to be gentle and help them answer questions cautiously/regretfully. If they are uncooperative you will know to be more aggressive.
- **Remember that you are trying to tell a story.** From the title of the hearing to the opening statement, you want to make sure that the point of the hearing comes across. This will help make sure that your hearing stays on topic and will hopefully help draw interest from the press and the public.
- **Remember that hearings are based on...hearing.** This is different than reading where people can go back and forth over it to discern what you are trying to say. You want it to be so clear that you are practically hitting people over the head with the information. Repetition and clarity are key.
- **Be aggressive, B-E aggressive!** If you want the best information you're going to need to ask tough questions. You need to be willing to make uncooperative government and corporate witnesses feel uncomfortable sometimes.

- **Don't ask questions in a hearing which you don't already know the answer to.** If you don't get the answer you are expecting, ask them why they had told you differently earlier or why their own documentation contradicts what they just said.
- **Keep it simple: Keep your questions short and sweet.** Ask one question at a time instead of lumping multiple questions together. Also, don't use jargon or overly technical language.
- **Beware of overly broad or open-ended questions.** You don't want to give them wiggle room or allow them to waste time. Ask specific questions to get real answers. If you have to ask a broad question, make sure that you have specific ones for follow up.
- **Use "gotcha questions," though do so sparingly.** This will make sure that the hearing is interesting. At the same time, you probably don't want the entire hearing to be "gotcha questions" because it could come off as bullying.
- **Build up your questions.** If you start with easy non-controversial questions and lead up to "gotcha" questions you not only build the suspense to keep people engaged, it may also help keep your witness more lucid and more likely to cooperate.
- **Make sure your boss is running the show.** If the witnesses is still talking but not answering the question or not giving you what you want you have every right to cut them off.
- **Cater your questioning to their responses.** If they take a long circuitous route to answer simple questions, start asking yes or no questions and interrupting them when they try and justify the answers. This will make sure you get the information you are looking for and will help make up for lost time.
- **If it is important to your boss but he isn't on the committee, work with their staff.** If your boss has something he wants addressed in a hearing of a committee he is not a part of, contact the committee staff and let them know about your concerns. It can't hurt to ask committee staff if you can draft questions for them to include.