



# Thought Leadership Playbook



## Mastering the Art of Panel Facilitation: A Strategic Guide for Conference Moderators

2nd Edition

### Our Contributors

Dr. Adrian Low  
Andrew Chan  
Chelsea Perino  
Ivan Yong  
Dr. Maryam Ramezani-Bartsch  
Michelle Mak  
Philip Chau  
Yasmin Dufournet

**Elevating Events with Purpose**

Prepared by:  
Zoe Lau Gungor  
Yunus Emre Dirice

[www.silkhawk.com](http://www.silkhawk.com)



# Foreword

#Moderator

Dear Reader,

I've spent years producing conferences and conversations, witnessing firsthand how skilled moderation can transform a simple discussion into something extraordinary. I've seen audiences captivated by conversations that felt like privileged glimpses into visionaries' minds. I've also watched panels that failed to ignite engagement. The difference? Almost always, it came down to moderation.

This playbook embodies a philosophy that panels deserve to be as dynamic and impactful as any keynote. In a world where attention spans shrink and information overwhelms, facilitation has never been more crucial.

What you're about to discover isn't just about asking good questions. It's about orchestrating genuine connection, catalyzing meaningful conversations, and serving both speakers and audience with equal dedication.

I invite you to see moderation not merely as a skill, but as a craft to master. Whether you're new to the role or refining years of experience, remember: when done with intention and heart, moderation becomes an act of service – to speakers whose insights you'll amplify, to audiences whose time you'll honor, and to ideas that deserve depth and nuance.

I extend sincere gratitude to the distinguished speakers from East and West who have shared their expertise for this playbook.

May this guide serve as your practical companion and inspiration as you shape conversations that matter.

With warmth and anticipation for the discussions you'll lead,



**Zoe Lau Gungor**

Founder, Silk Hawk

Conference and Community Curator



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# Executive Summary



Forget boring panel discussions! In today's event world, moderators are no longer just question-askers - they're the maestros orchestrating an intellectual symphony!

A stellar moderator bridges worlds, unlocks hidden gems from panelists, juggles time like a pro, and transforms standard discussions into electrifying conversations. This playbook isn't just another guide - it's your secret weapon to becoming the moderator everyone remembers. We'll reveal the insider techniques, mindset shifts, and practical magic needed to command the stage with confidence. And yes, we've packed this guide with ready-to-use resources and templates at the end, giving both speakers and organizers everything needed to turn ordinary panels into extraordinary experiences!

# Why Moderating is Your Career Superpower

Ready to level up from panelist to maestro? Here are 10 reasons why moderating isn't just the next step, it's your speaking career's secret weapon!

## 1

### Command the Conversation

You're no longer just a voice, you're the conductor! Direct the discussion flow while juggling multiple personalities and perspectives.

[www.silkhawk.com](http://www.silkhawk.com)

## 2

### Become the Topic Ninja

As moderator, you need to understand ALL angles, not just your own. It's like going from playing one instrument to conducting the entire orchestra.

# 3

## Master the Communication Matrix

Listen actively, redirect smoothly, synthesize brilliantly; all in real-time. It's conversational chess, and you're the grandmaster.

# 4

## Build Your Network on Steroids

Why connect with one person when you can bond with five experts and an entire audience simultaneously? It's networking multiplied!

# 5

## Enjoy the Spotlight Longer

Panelists get their 5 minutes of fame. Moderators? The entire show belongs to you!

# 6

## Flex Your Mental Muscles

Connect seemingly unrelated ideas, create aha-moment transitions, and showcase your intellectual agility - all without breaking a sweat.

# 7

## Become the Value Multiplier

Don't just deliver your expertise, amplify everyone else's too. You're not just a contributor; you're a catalyst!

# 8

## Show Off Your Professional Range

Being versatile makes you invaluable. Moderators are the Swiss Army knives of the speaking world, endlessly useful!

# 9

## Create Meaningful Connections

Engage with both speakers and audience members in dynamic conversations that spark relationships, not just business cards.

# 10

## Wield the Power of Subtle Influence

Shape the narrative through artful question framing without imposing your views. It's like being the wizard behind the curtain!

# A Note of Thanks

This second edition of our playbook would not have been possible without the generosity, insight, and thoughtful contributions of our contributors.

Each perspective shared here reflects real experience, careful reflection, and a willingness to openly explore the challenges and opportunities shaping moderation today. Your ideas have not only strengthened this edition, but have also helped deepen the relevance, clarity, and practical value of the playbook for moderators around the world.

We are grateful for the time, trust, and intellectual honesty you brought into this work. It is a privilege to learn from you and to feature your voices in this evolving conversation.

Thank you for being part of this journey.

# Our Contributors

## Dr. Adrian Low

Dr. Adrian Low is an Associate Fellow and Chartered Psychologist from the British Psychological Society, featured in NBC, CBS, FOX, and Channel News Asia. As President of the Hong Kong Association of Psychology and advisor to Mental Health for World Leaders, he specializes in workplace psychology and cross-cultural communication dynamics.



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## Andrew Chan

Andrew has over 20 years of professional experience in Risk Management, Compliance, Auditing and Finance across a diverse range of industries. Qualified in Australia with Big 4 firms, Andrew moved to Hong Kong over a decade ago and since then has worked in global risk roles at Hong Kong Shanghai Hotels, Dairy Farm, PCCW and most recently at China Light and Power (CLP). A believer in giving back to the community, Andrew was the 2022 Chair of CAANZ Hong Kong Council. He is currently serving as Governor, Board of Directors at the Institute of Internal Auditors, Hong Kong. He has been awarded Fellowship of Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand (FCA).



# Our Contributors

## Chelsea Perino

Chelsea Perino is a global brand strategist, AI futurist and speaker who presents around the world about organizational culture, leadership, AI, and the future of work. With extensive experience helping brands cultivate meaningful connections through storytelling and culture, Chelsea believes that dynamic, inclusive and collaborative workplaces combined with smart technology, drive innovation and community. Chelsea also serves on multiple boards and committees dedicated to advancing equity and inclusion in the workplace and beyond. She is an adjunct professor and author, with articles published in multiple academic journals ranging from marketing to AI. Learn more about her publications, events, and training programs at [chelseaperino.com](https://chelseaperino.com).



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## Ivan Yong

Ivan Yong is an Organizational Psychologist, Author, Coach, and Engineer with extensive experience across the Asia Pacific region. With a background spanning pharmaceutical engineering, senior sales leadership, and entrepreneurship, he helps organizations strengthen culture, develop leaders, and drive sustainable growth. An Adjunct Professor at UNITAR International University and a published author with global publishers, Ivan is widely recognized as a dynamic speaker, mentor, and business strategist.



# Our Contributors

## Dr. Maryam Ramezani-Bartsch

Dr. Maryam Ramezani-Bartsch is a customer insights and AI leader, moderator, and speaker with over 20 years of global experience leading analytic and data science teams. She helps organizations uncover true customer needs and turn insights into strategic decisions. She facilitates executive panels and roundtables on customer insights, business analytics, marketing technology, and innovation.

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## Michelle Mak

Michelle Mak is Head of ESG and Enterprise Learning at Dun & Bradstreet Hong Kong, where she builds cross-sector partnerships for a greener future and led D&B HK to become the first office globally to join the UN Global Compact. A Kellogg-HKUST EMBA graduate, she co-founded social enterprise Make The Change and is a multiple award-winning ESG leader, committee co-chair, and active board member.



# Our Contributors

## Philip Chau

Philip Chau is the Regional Director of Marketing Performance & Operations, Asia at Sun Life Insurance, leading ROI-driven marketing strategies across Asia. Formerly Head of Group Marketing at Regal Hotels and Great Eagle Holdings, he has led large marketing teams and driven marketing transformation across hospitality, real estate, insurance, and start up sectors. With over 20 years in digital innovation, performance marketing, and analytics, Philip combines strategic vision with hands-on leadership to deliver measurable business growth across diverse industries.

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## Yasmin Dufournet

Yasmin has over 18 years' experience in consumer insight. She is currently Director of Consumer Insight at Salomon, having begun her career in management consultancy at Ernst & Young in Warsaw before moving into senior insight roles at 3M in the UK. Passionate about understanding consumer behaviour, she also lectures in behavioural science. Yasmin serves as a board member for several NGOs and is a sought-after chairperson and moderator, frequently called upon to lead discussions at industry events. She regularly features on trend and consumer insight panels, contributing expert perspectives on consumer behaviour, innovation, and future-facing insights.



# Creating Psychological Safety: The Psychology Behind Effective Panel Moderation



*by Dr. Adrian Low*

*Associate Fellow & Chartered Psychologist, British Psychological Society  
President, Hong Kong Association of Psychology*

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As a psychologist who has moderated panels across diverse cultural contexts—from corporate boardrooms in Hong Kong to international conferences—I've learned that the most impactful discussions emerge when participants feel psychologically safe to share authentically, even when discussing controversial or sensitive topics.

The key lies in understanding that every panelist carries invisible psychological baggage: fear of judgment, imposter syndrome, cultural communication styles, and varying comfort levels with public vulnerability. During a particularly challenging panel on workplace mental health in Asia, I noticed one expert—a respected CEO—becoming increasingly withdrawn as the discussion touched on personal struggles with anxiety. Rather than pushing for participation, I created what I call "graduated disclosure spaces."

# Creating Psychological Safety: The Psychology Behind Effective Panel Moderation

*by Dr. Adrian Low*

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I began by sharing a brief, appropriate personal insight about my own research journey, then asked panelists to reflect on "what surprised them most in their professional experience" rather than demanding personal revelations. This technique—psychological scaffolding—allows participants to choose their comfort level while still contributing meaningfully. The CEO eventually shared powerful insights about leadership vulnerability, but only after feeling the emotional safety of the space.

My approach centers on three psychological principles:

- emotional contagion (your calm energy spreads),
- social proof (one person's authenticity encourages others), and
- cognitive load management (reducing mental pressure allows deeper thinking).

I watch for micro-expressions, changes in posture, and vocal patterns that signal discomfort, then adjust my questioning style accordingly.

The breakthrough moment comes when you shift from being a moderator who extracts information to becoming a psychological facilitator who creates conditions for genuine human connection. The audience doesn't just hear expert opinions—they witness authentic human experiences that resonate long after the panel ends.

# The Moderator's Core: Authenticity Over Orchestration



*by Andrew Chan  
Governor, IIA HK & Chartered Accountant*

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For twenty years moderating global risk conversations, I've learned that audiences forgive imperfect questions but reject a disingenuous heart. The most powerful tool a moderator possesses is not a clever framework, but the courage to be authentically, unguardedly themselves. This is where Bruce Lee's philosophy finds its purest application: to "be water" is to shed the persona of the performative host and become a clear, responsive conduit for truth. Authenticity isn't a moderation style; it is the foundational ethic that makes genuine dialogue possible.

It begins with the moderator's own authenticity —the abandonment of performance. We must resist the trap of needing to be the smartest person in the room. Authentic power lies in the courage to be one's truest self. Ask the big burning questions that the profession needs and not be afraid to challenge the status quo. This authenticity is gravitational. It signals that the space is safe for real, unpolished thinking, pulling panelists out of rehearsed statements and into a shared, present-moment exploration. You stop being a distant conductor and become a fellow traveler.

# The Moderator's Core: Authenticity Over Orchestration

*by Andrew Chan*

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This authentic presence naturally demands honesty as your compass. It means listening beyond words to the unspoken tensions and avoided truths, then giving them a respectful voice. It is the gentle but direct observation:

The highest expression of this approach is the authentic intercept—a spontaneous, heartfelt response to a prepared position. This question arises from genuine curiosity about lived experience, not a script. It bypasses the generic to touch the human story beneath, honoring complexity over simplicity.

Ultimately, moderating from this core of authenticity transforms the ecology of the conversation. It builds a container of trust where risk-taking, nuance, and discovery thrive. It models the integrity we claim to seek: transparency, accountability, and courageous truth-telling.

# The Moderator's Core: Authenticity Over Orchestration

*by Andrew Chan*

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So, forsake the illusion of flawless orchestration. Your preparation should focus not on scripting brilliance, but on clearing internal clutter—ego, the need for control—to listen and respond with clean awareness. Your greatest gift to an audience is not a slick production, but a genuine connection. Be the authentic instrument, and you will conduct not just a discussion, but understanding itself.

Finish with the advice from my life long mentor Bruce Lee - “Honestly expressing yourself...it is very difficult to do. I mean it is easy for me to put on a show and be cocky and be flooded with a cocky feeling and then feel like pretty cool...or I can make all kind of phony things, you see what I mean, blinded by it or I can show you some really fancy movement. But to express oneself honestly, not lying to oneself...now that, my friend, is very hard to do.”

# The Importance of Storytelling in Panel Moderation



*by Chelsea Perino*  
*Marketing Executive & Speaker*

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Moderating a panel is often seen as a matter of mechanics—pose the right questions, manage time efficiently, and ensure everyone gets equal airtime. But the best moderators know that their true craft lies not in facilitation, but in storytelling. A great panel isn't a collection of answers; it's a narrative journey. The moderator's role is to paint a picture for the audience inspired by individual insights, one that depicts a cohesive and collective story that builds meaning and connection—turning a set of perspectives into a shared exploration that resonates beyond the panellists themselves.

## **The Moderator as Storyteller**

In any good story, there's a beginning, a middle, and an end—a narrative arc that draws the listener in. The same should be true for a panel discussion. The beginning sets context and creates curiosity. The middle introduces complexity, differing viewpoints, and debate. The end offers synthesis and resolution.

# The Importance of Storytelling in Panel Moderation

*by Chelsea Perino*

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Take, for example, when I moderated a session on The Future of the Workplace in APAC. The panel featured an investor, a developer, a corporate occupier, and a head of leasing—each with deep expertise in their domain. My role wasn't to compete on knowledge; it was to connect their insights into a story that made sense for the audience. I didn't need to be an authority on office leasing metrics or ESG—what mattered was understanding the contours of the conversation: the shifting expectations of employees, the pressures on landlords, and the region's cultural nuances influencing workplace evolution. By identifying those perspectives early, I could shape the discussion around a unifying narrative: the office not as a static asset, but as a living ecosystem adapting to change. As the developer spoke about the changing investment models and the occupier discussed employee well-being and the impact of workplace design on talent attraction and retention, I built narrative bridges—"So, if we're reimagining offices as adaptive ecosystems, what ingredients are essential to make them thrive in markets as diverse as Tokyo, Singapore, and Sydney?" That connective framing helped transform a technical discussion into a shared exploration of vision and value.

The point is that great moderation isn't about mastery of content, but mastery of connection—helping panellists collectively tell a story greater than the sum of their parts.

# The Importance of Storytelling in Panel Moderation

*by Chelsea Perino*

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## Weaving the Threads

Effective storytelling in moderation requires deep listening. A skilled moderator listens not just for what is said, but for the themes beneath it—where panellists' ideas echo, diverge, or challenge each other. When those moments arise, they become narrative bridges.

Oftentimes panellists offer seemingly opposite views; for some this might seem challenging to navigate and the instinct is to avoid. DON'T! Rather than move on, draw the contrast into the story. Ask leading questions with the purpose of understanding, and more importantly help the audience to understand the value in hearing two sides of the story. That reframing can transform a disagreement into the central drama of the discussion—and this kind of tension is what keeps the audience engaged.

## Crafting Emotional and Intellectual Resonance

A great panel story doesn't just inform—it moves the audience. That emotional connection often comes from moments of vulnerability or surprise. As moderators, our job is to cultivate those moments—to allow data to meet humanity, and insight to meet emotion. We are not just timekeepers or facilitators; we are narrators guiding an experience.

# The Importance of Storytelling in Panel Moderation

*by Chelsea Perino*

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When you moderate as a storyteller, the audience doesn't just consume information—they experience a story with structure, tension, and resolution. And when that story lands, it doesn't end when the panel does. It continues in the conversations, ideas, and actions that follow.

That's the true power of storytelling in moderation: transforming expertise into experience, and discussion into lasting impact.

A moderator who masters storytelling transforms a panel from a momentary exchange into a catalyst for ideas that live on beyond the stage.

# Moderating is a Curation of Experience for the Audience



*by Ivan Yong*  
*Author & Founder, Agnitio Global Executives*

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As an author, organisational psychologist and engineer, I view my role as storyteller weaving in multiple threads of a story when moderating panel discussions. The story however is one that consists of multiple characters, the panelists who will add to the story during the discussion. Whilst each character (panelist) is given the freedom to express their narration to the story, the moderator controls the trajectory and the tempo of the discussion.

My very first task is to understand the characters (panelists) well. I have to be familiar with their personality, their values, and above all their expert opinions on the subject being discussed. Due diligence is therefore a must.

Next, I begin the panel discussion by setting the scene, painting a relevant present day scenario of the topic of discussion. Discussing about masks for Covid-19 is no longer relevant but continued vaccination as a preventive measure of another pandemic is highly relevant.

# Moderating is a Curation of Experience for the Audience

*by Ivan Yong*

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Each panel will then be invited to express their opinions within the set scenario. The rule of thumb is that each narration must move the story forward. As the storyteller, I begin to look for opportunities to lead the story down a certain path that may be relevant to the audience.

Now, in the event if the discussion is going around in circles, the moderator can then pause the storytelling by bringing new information or redirect the questions to a choice panel who can refocus the discussion.

Finally, the desired outcome is for every audience to be involved in the discussion as an active participant, much like how one reads a fiction. One does not engage in the activities written in the fiction but are involved through mental images while reading. Another desired outcome is for the audience to continue the discussion beyond the panel discussion.

Ultimately, if viewed through the lens of a storyteller, a panel discussion can be turned into a fun, and engaging discourse for all who are present.

# Designing the Conversation Before It Happens: Pre-Engagement, Shared Intent, and Live Audience Signals



*by Dr. Maryam Ramezani-Bartsch  
Founder & Lead Moderator, Natural Intelligenes*

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Great panels rarely succeed by improvisation alone. The most impactful ones are largely designed before anyone steps on stage. One of the most overlooked moderator skills is engaging speakers in advance to align on a coherent message and then using real-time audience input, such as polls, to keep the conversation relevant and alive. When done well, the panel feels effortless, focused, and deeply connected to the room.

In my experience, the single most powerful question to ask panelists before the event is not about their bio or expertise, but this: “What is the one thing you want the audience to walk away believing or doing differently?” When each panelist answers this independently, patterns and contradictions immediately emerge. I then share a short synthesis back to the group often one page framing a shared narrative where the panel will start and what the collective takeaway should be. This doesn’t script answers; it creates intentional coherence. Panelists feel safer, more generous with their insights, and less inclined to repeat or compete.

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*by Dr. Maryam Ramezani-Bartsch  
Founder & Lead Moderator, Natural Intelligenes*

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A concrete example: while moderating a cross-expertise panel on data quality in MRMW, I noticed in prep calls that speakers were unconsciously talking to different audiences and having totally different definitions of data quality in mind. One thought of panel data and had agencies as audience in mind, another thought about CRM data and had enterprise leaders in mind and another thought of broader data and had policymakers as audience in mind. Left unaddressed, the panel would have felt fragmented. Instead, we aligned on a single audience promise: “By the end, attendees should have a clear understanding of data quality, know how to measure it and what they can do to improve that although each panelist talks about different aspects of the topic.” On stage, this allowed me to actively connect responses, and stay focused on the shared goal. The result was clarity, not complexity.

# Designing the Conversation Before It Happens: Pre-Engagement, Shared Intent, and Live Audience Signals

*by Dr. Maryam Ramezani-Bartsch  
Founder & Lead Moderator, Natural Intelligenes*

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To extend this alignment beyond the stage, I used live audience polls, as strategic signals to direct our conversation on what the audience truly cares about. A simple opening poll (“Where are you struggling most right now?”) instantly reframes the panel around the audience’s reality, not the speakers’ assumptions.

Actionable takeaways for moderators:

- Engage panelists early around audience outcome, not content alone
- Share a short, consolidated “panel intent” before the event
- Design 1–2 purposeful polls tied to decision points in the discussion
- Use poll results to challenge, pivot, or deepen the conversation in real time

Ultimately, strong moderation starts long before the microphone turns on—and succeeds when the audience feels seen, heard, and guided.

# Reinventing the Role: A Masterclass in Owning the Room



*by Michelle Mak*  
*Head of ESG and Enterprise Learning, Dun & Bradstreet*

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Let's be honest: the word "moderator" is painfully dull. It suggests a polite, neutral facilitator, a human metronome keeping time. I've always rejected that label. I am the Panel Chair. My role isn't to facilitate; it's to ignite. It's to conduct an orchestra of intellects and egos, transforming a staid discussion into a memorable, high-stakes performance. The true art of moderation lies in becoming the audience's proxy on stage—their champion, their skeptic, their voice. It's about having the courage to challenge, provoke, and seduce both the panel and the crowd into a bolder conversation.

This seduction begins with control. I insist on curating my panels, hand-picking speakers not for their politeness, but for their potential for brilliant friction. In my pre-brief, I lay down the law: no self-promotion, no mutual admiration. We are here to build something new, and that requires tension. My goal is to orchestrate a dialogue so compelling that the audience feels they are part of an exclusive, electrifying exchange. I create psychological safety not through gentleness, but by signaling that this is a space for brave ideas.

# Reinventing the Role: A Masterclass in Owning the Room

*by Michelle Mak*

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My background as a debater since high school to university taught me that a great argument needs structure and stakes. I recently put this into practice while chairing a fiery debate on ESG vs. AI. Instead of just managing time, I gamified it, putting a clock on each speaker to create a sense of urgency and competitive pressure. The energy was electric. As the official "debater" in the room, I didn't just ask questions; I framed the conflict, challenged assertions, and provoked both sides, causing the debate to spill from the stage directly onto the floor as the audience began to chime in. For the grand finale, I turned the power completely over to them. I ran a live poll, declaring, "You are the judges. Not me, not the panel. You decide." The engagement was explosive. By transforming the format and empowering the audience as the ultimate arbiters, we didn't just have a discussion; we created a shared, unforgettable intellectual sport.

# The Moderator's Edge: Mastering the Science and Soul of Panel Leadership



*by Philip Chau*  
*Marketing Leader*

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A successful panel discussion is much more than a series of answers to predictable questions—it is a catalyst for new ideas, meaningful dialogue, and genuine connection. The best panels inspire thought, spark debate, and encourage audiences to continue the conversation long after the session ends. As a moderator, achieving that level of impact begins long before the event itself.

The first and most essential step is to deeply understand your panelists. This goes beyond skimming their LinkedIn profiles or reading their short bios. It means delving into their publications, interviews, speeches, and creative work to truly grasp their viewpoints, tone, and intellectual depth. By doing so, you uncover the unique perspectives each panelist brings and can anticipate how their ideas might converge—or clash—on stage.

# The Moderator's Edge: Mastering the Science and Soul of Panel Leadership

*by Philip Chau*

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Equally important is developing one or two core concepts that define the heart of your discussion. These should be bold, distinctive, and thought-provoking—ideas that challenge assumptions and invite reflection. Too many talking points dilute the message; clarity and focus amplify it. When the discussion concludes, those few powerful takeaways should linger in the audience's minds, prompting them to think, question, and engage further.

In moderation style, I believe in a dynamic and interactive approach rather than a heavily scripted one. Flexibility allows for authentic exchanges and organic moments of insight. However, even within spontaneity, it's crucial to subtly guide the conversation back to your key themes. I often mix in tough or even slightly controversial questions to push boundaries, balancing them with a touch of humor to keep the tone engaging and human.

Ultimately, great moderation is about creating an atmosphere that is both intellectually stimulating and enjoyable—a space where ideas come alive, where bold perspectives are welcomed, and where the audience leaves not just informed, but truly inspired.

# Orchestration, Not Control: Managing Personalities on Live Panels



*by Yasmin Dufournet  
Consumer Insights Director, Salomon*

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Managing personality dynamics across a panel is one of the most nuanced challenges moderators face. Even when panelists are well-prepared and thoroughly briefed, the live environment introduces variables that cannot be scripted: ego, energy, disagreement, and differing communication styles. The moderator's role is not simply to ask questions, but to actively shape the environment so that individual perspectives come together as a coherent, engaging conversation that serves the audience.

One of the most overlooked tools in a moderator's kit is positioning. Where panelists sit matters. Strong, confident personalities who are comfortable taking airtime are often best placed closer to the moderator, allowing for direct eye contact and subtle cues when it's time to move on. More reflective or reserved experts benefit from central seating, where they are visually and conversationally anchored into the discussion. Balanced positioning helps prevent dominance at the edges and encourages a sense of equality across the panel before the conversation even begins.

# Orchestration, Not Control: Managing Personalities on Live Panels

*by Yasmin Dufournet*

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It is important to assume that the right preparation and briefing have already taken place. That groundwork is essential, but it does not eliminate the need for active moderation. Once the discussion begins, personalities naturally surface. Divergence between participants should be welcomed rather than managed away. Healthy disagreement adds credibility, texture, and audience interest. A panel where everyone agrees rarely sparks insight. The moderator's task is to frame differences as exploration, not confrontation—highlighting contrasts, inviting clarification, and ensuring that opposing views are treated with respect.

Equally important is remembering that part of the moderator's job is to make every participant look good. This means setting them up with clear questions, redirecting rambling answers with grace, and reinforcing strong points when a panelist undersells their own expertise. When participants feel supported rather than managed, they contribute more generously and authentically.

# Orchestration, Not Control: Managing Personalities on Live Panels

*by Yasmin Dufournet*

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Reading cues and body language is essential to maintaining flow. Leaning forward, raised eyebrows, or an intake of breath often signal a panelist eager to respond. Crossed arms, repeated glances away, or visible restlessness may indicate disengagement or frustration. A skilled moderator adjusts in real time—inviting quieter voices in, softening dominant ones, or shifting topics when energy drops.

Finally, staying on point is an ongoing discipline. Panels naturally invite tangents, especially when expertise runs deep. Gentle course correction—summarizing an answer, restating the core question, or linking comments back to the theme—keeps the discussion focused without shutting anyone down.

Managing personality across a panel is about orchestration, not control. When done well, individual voices remain distinct, tensions feel purposeful, and the conversation serves what matters most: delivering clarity, insight, and value to the audience on the subject matter at hand.

# 1. The Moderator's Magic: Transforming Panels from Blah to Brilliant!

Forget being just another talking head! Today's rockstar moderator is part mind-reader, part traffic controller, and part conversation alchemist. Your superhero mission includes:

## → Set the stage with sizzle!

🔥 Kick things off with energy: "Welcome to the future of fintech—where our experts will blow your mind in the next 45 minutes!" Your introduction should make people put down their phones and lean in.

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## → Master the art of conversational traffic control!

🚦 - Direct the dialogue runway with expert precision and timing. Keep the momentum flowing, cut off ramblers with grace, and ensure every panelist gets their spotlight moment. When someone goes off-topic, smoothly guide them back with "That's fascinating, and I'd love to connect that point to our main discussion about..."

## → Extract unique insights and push for depth.

Don't settle for surface-level conversation! Ask the follow-up questions others miss: "Let's dig deeper into that point..." or "What's the counterintuitive truth here that most people overlook?" Be the treasure hunter who unearths the golden insights buried in your panelists' expertise.

## → Engage the audience meaningfully.

Break the invisible wall between stage and audience. Use real-time polls, invite targeted questions, and create moments for audience insights: "Let's see what our room thinks—quick show of hands on this question..." Remember, engaged audiences remember content 58% better than passive listeners!



### Why It Matters

Panels can quickly turn into a series of monologues or lose energy. A skilled moderator makes a panel:

- Informative, not repetitive.

Bring out new angles rather than letting speakers echo each other.

- Dynamic, not chaotic.

Maintain flow and structure while keeping it lively.

- Accessible, not elitist.

Break down jargon and connect concepts to the audience's world.

## 2. Preparing Like a Pro

### Research Deeply

- **Know the topic in depth from your professional lens**

Read articles, reports, and other panel discussions with related topics to understand the nuances.

- **Understand each panelist’s perspective, background, and communication style.**

Example: A data scientist and a policy advisor will approach the same topic very differently—know how to frame questions for each.

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### Align with Organizers

- **Clarify objectives: educational, inspirational, or decision-making?**

Example: “Should the audience walk away with tools, motivation, or consensus?” Knowing the aim shapes your approach.

- **Know the audience: their level, roles, and expectations.**

Example: A room of startup founders needs different framing than senior government officials.

- **Maximize the value of the pre-event panel call**

Most of the time, the organizer would schedule a 30-45 minute call with all panelists 1-2 weeks before the event. Use this time to build rapport, clarify expectations, identify potential talking points, and ensure everyone understands their role in creating a cohesive discussion. This preparation dramatically improves panel chemistry and content quality.

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## Prepare the Flow

- **Create an arc: opening, exploration, contrast, resolution.**

Example: Start broad, explore details, compare views, and end with forward-looking takeaways.

- **Draft questions but stay flexible.**

Prepare smart prompts but be ready to adapt to the flow of conversation.

- **Plan transitions and handovers between speakers.**

Example: "David mentioned risk—Julia, how do you handle that in your sector?"

# 3. On-Stage Techniques



**Set the Tone**

**Listen Actively**

**Balance Participation**

**Keep the Audience Engaged**

## Set the Tone

- **Start with a warm, confident welcome.**

Example: "Welcome everyone, we're thrilled to explore the future of work today."

- **Share the purpose and flow of the session.**

Let the audience know what to expect in terms of content and structure.

- **Introduce panelists succinctly and with enthusiasm.**

Example: "Joining us is Leila, a pioneer in green finance who's led global sustainability projects."

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## Listen Actively

- **Listen more than you speak.**

Stay fully present so you can respond intelligently.

- **Pick up threads and dig deeper.**

Example: "You mentioned scalability—can you elaborate on what that looked like in practice?"

## Balance Participation

- **Politely cut long-winded answers.**

Example: "That's fascinating—let's bookmark it and come back if we have time."

- **Invite quiet panelists in.**

Example: "Ravi, you've had experience with this in emerging markets—what's your take?"

- **Manage dominant voices without causing tension.**

Use gentle redirection to ensure equity without embarrassing anyone.

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## Keep the Audience Engaged

- **Rephrase complex points.**

Example: "So what you're saying is, the main issue is regulatory clarity?"

- **Summarize insights.**

Helps retain key takeaways and maintain audience attention.

- **Allow audience questions where possible.**

Foster interaction and add spontaneous value.

# 4. Handling Challenges



## Common Pitfalls & Solutions

## Common Pitfalls

- **Off-topic diversions.**

Panelists may wander—be ready to refocus gently.

- **Jargon overload.**

Overly technical language alienates general audiences.

- **Panelist disagreement turning confrontational.**

Debate is good, but disrespect is not.

- **Technical issues.**

Microphones, slides, or Wi-Fi can all fail.

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## Solutions

- **Have soft redirects ready.**

Example: "That's an interesting angle—let's bring it back to the user impact."

- **Use humor and empathy to defuse.**

Light jokes or respectful affirmations can de-escalate tension.

- **Keep a backup question or segment.**

If a topic stalls, pivot smoothly to another area.

- **Collaborate with your AV team beforehand.**

Know how to handle a mic failure or timing hiccup without panic.

# 5. Post-Panel Value Creation

**Wrap Up with Purpose**

**Creating Lasting Value -  
Highlights the ongoing benefits  
generated from the discussion**



# Wrap Up with Purpose

## → End with a strong summary.

- Recap the most valuable insights in 30-60 seconds to solidify key messages in everyone's mind. Example: "The three breakthrough ideas we've uncovered today are..."

## → Offer key takeaways.

- Give them something specific they can implement tomorrow. Example: "One immediate step you might consider is updating your risk assessment framework based on what Elena shared."

## → Acknowledge all panelists and contributors.

- Express genuine appreciation for their expertise and time. A personalized comment for each shows you were truly listening.

## → Encourage Audience to connect with you and the panelists off stage

- Create pathways for ongoing conversation through social media, email, or in-person networking. Example: "We'll be in the reception area for the next hour and would love to continue this conversation."

## → Keep connection with your panelists to create future value

- Send follow-up emails, share positive feedback, and keep the professional relationship warm for future events or projects.

# Creating Lasting Value - Highlights the Ongoing Benefits Generated from the Discussion

- **Amplify key insights through strategic social media sharing.**
  - Transform key moments into shareable content with branded graphics, quote cards that extend the panel's reach beyond those who attended live.
  
- **Curate discussion highlights for newsletters or comprehensive reports.**
  - Compile the most valuable insights into digestible content formats that provide ongoing value to your audience and establish your organization as a thought leader in the space.
  
- **Establish clear pathways for continued connection and conversation.**
  - Create dedicated follow-up channels like LinkedIn groups, Slack communities, or email lists where interested participants can continue exploring topics raised during the panel.

# 6. Quick Checklist for Moderators

## 1. Research Panelists

Example: "I noticed that you recently published a piece on AI in logistics—can you share more about that angle?"

Understand their background, interests, and perspectives so you can draw out unique insights during the panel.

## 2. Understand the Panel's Purpose and Audience

Example: "This panel is for mid-level professionals looking to advance in fintech."

Clarifying the goal helps tailor the conversation and keeps it relevant for attendees.

## 3. Structure the Discussion Logically

Example: Open with context, explore contrasting views, then end with future predictions.

A clear flow prevents a scattered session and helps the audience stay engaged.

## 4. Prepare Adaptable, Thought-Provoking Questions

Example: "What's one industry assumption you believe needs to be challenged?"

Good questions encourage deeper thinking and allow panelists to offer original perspectives.

## 5. Balance Panelist Participation

Example: "Let's hear from Maria on this point—we haven't had your take yet."

Managing airtime creates a more inclusive and dynamic conversation.

## 6. Craft a Strong Opening and Closing

Example: "Today, we explore how startups are redefining user trust—let's dive in."

A memorable start and close help anchor the audience's takeaway.

## 7. Prepare for Time and Disruptions

Example: Have a plan to skip or shorten questions if needed.

Stay flexible and calm to handle unexpected timing, tech, or speaker issues.

## 8. Engage the Audience Actively

Example: "By a show of hands, how many of you have implemented ESG policies?"

Use polls, direct questions, or callouts to turn passive listening into interaction.

## 9. Plan Post-Panel Engagement

Example: Summarize highlights on LinkedIn or in a follow-up email.

This extends the value of the discussion and keeps your presence active.

# Useful Resources

## 1. Emergency question bank

Versatile questions to use if discussion stalls or needs redirection

- What's one unpopular opinion you hold about this industry?
- How has your perspective on this topic evolved over the past year?
- What's a common misconception about this subject that you'd like to clarify?
- If you had unlimited resources, how would you approach this challenge differently?
- What's one prediction you have for this field that others might not see coming?
- Can you share a surprising lesson from a project that didn't go as planned?
- How do you see emerging technologies influencing this space in the next 3-5 years?
- What's one skill or mindset shift professionals in this field need to develop now?
- If you could change one regulation or standard practice in this industry, what would it be?
- What's a question nobody is asking about this topic that they should be?
- How does your approach differ when working with startups versus established organizations?
- What's the most effective way you've found to measure success in this area?
- Can you share an example of cross-industry inspiration that's influenced your work?
- What advice would you give to someone just entering this field today?
- How do global or regional differences impact approaches to this topic?

# Useful Resources (cont.)

## 2. Panel briefing document

Thank you for participating in our upcoming panel. This one-pager outlines format, expectations, and key discussion areas to ensure an impactful session.

### Panel Format & Flow

- Duration: 45-60 minutes total (moderator introduction: 2-3 min, panel discussion: 35-40 min, audience Q&A: 10-15 min)
- Format: Moderated discussion with prepared questions and impromptu follow-ups
- Seating: Panelists will be seated on stage with wireless microphones
- Visuals: No slides required from panelists; key points will be captured in real-time

### Panelist Expectations

- Arrival: Please arrive 30 minutes before the session for mic check and final briefing
- Introductions: Prepare a 30-second introduction about yourself (the moderator will handle formal introductions)
- Contributions: Aim for concise responses (60-90 seconds) to allow balanced participation
- Engagement: Feel free to respectfully build on or challenge other panelists' perspectives
- Examples: Prepare 2-3 concrete examples/case studies from your experience to illustrate points
- Language: Minimize jargon and explain technical terms when they must be used

# Useful Resources (cont.)

## Key Discussion Areas

- Current Landscape: The state of the industry/topic today and how we arrived here
- Challenges & Opportunities: Key obstacles and promising developments
- Innovation & Disruption: Emerging approaches, technologies, or methodologies
- Practical Applications: Real-world implementation strategies and lessons learned
- Future Outlook: Predictions, trends, and preparations for what's next

## Pre-Panel Preparation

- Research: Familiarize yourself with other panelists' backgrounds and recent work
- Reflection: Consider your unique perspective and value-add to this specific conversation
- Questions: Review the moderator's questions (attached separately) and prepare key points
- Connection: Join our optional 30-minute virtual meet-and-greet on [DATE] to connect with fellow panelists

# Connect With Us



**For any questions please  
contact:**

**ZOE LAU GUNGOR**  
zoe@silkhawk.com

**YUNUS EMRE DIRICE**  
yunus@silkhawk.com

**We look forward to a dynamic  
and insightful discussion!**

## Final Thoughts

At Silk Hawk, we believe the success of a panel is often in the hands of the moderator. With the right preparation, mindset, and stagecraft, you can transform panels from passive listening to memorable engagement.

For more resources or speaker coaching support, get in touch with us at [www.silkhawk.com](http://www.silkhawk.com)

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## About Silk Hawk

Silk Hawk is a premium event services company dedicated to curating meaningful, high-impact experiences. From panel coaching to full-scale production, we help companies turn ideas into unforgettable moments.