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Royal Commission: How to survive a public grilling

by [Patrick Durkin](#)

Surviving a public examination has become an essential life skill for CEOs and top executives, who often arrive woefully unprepared, speech and body coaches warn.

From Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's recent [two-day grilling](#) to the Business Council of Australia's Jennifer Westacott and Grant King being confronted by protesters at an [antagonistic inquiry](#) into company tax cuts to bank executives and financial planners being interrogated at the [Hayne royal commission](#), public examination of our business leaders has become a virtual daily sport.

The fall-out can be brutal as Dover Financial's owner Terry McMaster learnt on Thursday after [collapsing](#) in the witness box. High-profile adviser Sam Henderson and others are facing the end of their media careers and a potentially devastating impact on their business, after having their [credibility questioned](#) in the stand.

AMP chairman Catherine Brenner is another feeling the heat over [allegations](#) aired at the commission and said to be struggling with journalists camped outside her house.

She has been forced to drive her children to school in a car with blacked-out windows to avoid photographs. Ms Brenner will have to face the media and investors at AMP's shareholder meeting on May 10 in Melbourne, presuming that she survives a crisis board meeting on Sunday to decide her future.

The impact is also being felt by some staff, with bank employees who travel on public transport reportedly taking to [hiding the logos](#) on their uniforms or badges so they won't face comments

from other commuters.

Nod, smile and gesture

How a CEO or executive stands up under public scrutiny has become crucial to protecting a company's reputation. Mr Zuckerberg's surprisingly [masterful performance](#) before the US Congress two weeks ago – despite obvious coaching to improve his past public appearances – contrasted starkly with the mixed efforts of local business leaders and bank executives, executive performance coach Louise Mahler said.

"Zuckerberg's attitude was one of neutrality that sent messages of respect for the question and a view towards educating the Congress – whether that was reality or not," Ms Mahler said.

Mr Zuckerberg kept his jaw relaxed, body straight, hands asymmetrical on the table with his blink rate slow and breathing low. His voice never faltered and he provided excellent acknowledgement of the questions, Ms Mahler said.

"That's a good question", "you raise a number of important points", "yes", "we look forward to discussing this", "that sounds like an important initiative" and "thank you, senator".

His only fault was a completely immobile face which could have been improved with more nodding, smiling and congruent gestures, Ms Mahler said.

Don't rush, show no fear

Body language and speech expert Michael Kelly – also asked to observe the banking commission witnesses by *AFR Weekend* – said showing no fear was key to surviving.

"Know that he or she who loses their cool, loses," he said. His key tips are to sit tall and alert, pause for a second or two before speaking, avoid rambling responses, speak simply in an un-rushed manner and omit needless words.

NAB's chief customer officer Andrew Hagger – the most senior bank executive to [appear before](#) the commission so far – scored good reviews for his seemingly honest, measured and straightforward responses. Straight eye contact and a lack of blinking helped and his knowledge of the documents and case studies meant he seemed one step ahead of counsel assisting Rowena

Orr QC, which negated any bombshells.

AMP head of advice compliance Sarah Britt – [questioned this week](#) on why AMP has not compensated or even informed hundreds of customers who suffered poor advice – tried her best to slow things down, asking to see and carefully reading each document, making her examination painfully slow.

Don't be robotic

Ms Mahler said while Ms Britt tried hard not to make a mistake, her approach made it sound like she was hiding material, evading questions and trying to confuse by omission. Ms Britt needs to work hard to avoid darting eyes, held breath, fast blinking, gulping and rapid nodding, Ms Mahler said.

Mr Kelly said that AMP's head of advice Anthony 'Jack' Regan – whose evidence triggered [significant revelations](#) against AMP – presented well by answering questions simply and with certainty, however his speaking delivery was too robotic and his face devoid of emotion.

"It was if [Mr] Regan was unconcerned for the harm his organisation had inflicted on customers," Mr Kelly said.

The financial advisers have even more work to do, Ms Mahler warned. Advisor Sam Henderson – who among [other revelations](#) failed to sack an employee who impersonated a client to obtain information – presented with a tight mouth which implied held emotion, looked down too often rather than addressing the interviewer and appeared to not speak freely.

"Understandable under the stress, but this is a professional communicator who should perform better," Ms Mahler said.

Mr McMaster from Dover – facing allegations their "client protection policy" was "[Orwellian](#)" – was particularly struggling shortly before his collapse.

Lifted, furrowed brow, eyes set on questioner, fast blinking, voice going weak, licking dry lips and leaning on one arm sent all the wrong messages as the pressure mounted. Answers like "I don't know what that has to do with it" made him seem aggressive and defensive.

