HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW

**Digital Article** / Negotiation Strategies

# How to Deflect Difficult Questions in an Interview or Negotiation

Research shows there can be costs to telling the truth, refusing to answer, and lying. *by Brad Bitterly and Maurice Schweitzer*

Published on HBR.org / November 18, 2019 / Reprint H05A9O

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**“Do you have any other offers?”**

Whether it’s in interviews or negotiations, we are frequently asked questions we would rather not answer. An honest answer might weaken our position, compromise our privacy, or disclose sensitive corporate information. But how we respond can impact both our economic outcome and our relationship with the person asking.

Prior research has considered three common strategies for answering direct, difficult questions. 1) You could answer honestly. We do tend to view people who disclose information (especially costly information) as trustworthy and likable, but this approach can be economically costly: saying "No, I have no other offers" might lead to a lower offer on the table. 2) You could decline to answer the question, by saying something like "I would rather not answer that." But this tack can cause relational (and often economic) harm, since people tend to dislike and distrust individuals who decline to disclose information even more than those who reveal negative information about themselves. 3) You could lie, but deception is very risky: we dislike, distrust, and often retaliate against people who deceive us.

We were curious about another approach that might reduce some of these social and economic costs. In our research, we studied deflection — responding to a direct question with another question that shifts the conversation back to the other person. For example, after being asked, "Do you have any other offers?" you could deflect with, "Are you intending to make me an offer?" We found that deflection enables individuals to avoid disclosing costly information in a way that leads to better outcomes than simply declining to answer the question and is less reputationally risky than deception.

**The benefits of deflecting direct questions**

In five experimental studies, we had more than 2000 participants play the role of art sellers tasked with selling a painting that was part of a collection. Participants were paired with art buyers, who were actually research assistants following a pre-determined script. We informed sellers that they could command a higher price for the painting if the buyer had other pieces from the collection. As a result, our participants almost always asked the buyers if they had other pieces of the collection. In the ensuing negotiation over the price of the art

piece, we had buyers respond to this question in different ways and we assessed what happened.

In our first two studies (N = 1126), we compared deflection (e.g., in response to the seller's question about whether or not the buyer had other pieces, the buyer replied "How much do you want for this piece?") to honest disclosure (e.g., "I did purchase the other pieces in the collection.") and refusing to disclose (e.g., "I'm not prepared to discuss my collection right now."). We discovered that deflection was highly effective in redirecting the conversation; 76.9% of sellers answered the deflection question (e.g., "How does 10,000 sound?"). We found that buyers who honestly disclosed information about their collection were liked and trusted the most by participants, but they also paid the highest prices. In contrast, refusing to disclose led to better economic outcomes (a lower price) for the buyer than an honest disclosure, but harmed the extent to which the sellers liked and trusted the buyer. Buyers who deflected struck a balance. They achieved lower prices than honest buyers, and they were better liked and trusted than buyers who declined to disclose.

In our next two studies (N = 480), we compared the economic and interpersonal effects of deflection to deception. We used a similar experimental paradigm and manipulated deception by having buyers respond with a lie: "I do not have any other pieces in the collection." In these studies, lying enabled buyers to obtain better outcomes than deflection—but only in the near-term. We had sellers provide initial ratings of trust and liking of their counterpart, and then we revealed that their buyer *did* have the other pieces in the collection. We then had participants rate their counterpart a second time. The extent to which participants liked and trusted their buyer dropped significantly after learning that they had been deceived, compared to after they had

experienced deflection, and participants were significantly less likely to want to negotiate with their partner again.

Why does deflection work so well in response to tricky questions? In our next study (N = 600), we had participants rate the extent to which they felt that their counterpart was trying to (a) hide information, and (b) learn information. We found that, compared to declining to disclose or deception, deflection made sellers think that their counterpart was seeking to learn information rather than trying to hide information. It seems that because we generally like people who are curious and open, deflection can boost trust and liking compared to declining to disclose or deception.

In our negotiation settings, we found deflection to be very effective. But we suspect that the two-person nature of the exchange in our studies may be important. When we are asked a direct question, we feel compelled to answer it — even if this causes us to lose track of our initial question. In some situations, however, other people may be observing the conversation. This might be true during interviews or larger group negotiations. Observers may be more likely to spot deflection than participants were in our studies, and quite possibly, the benefits of deflection may be diminished in larger groups.

### How to deflect

Deflection can clearly be a useful tool when negotiating or interviewing. When asked a tricky question, it can help you avoid suffering economic or social penalties that might come with being honest, declining to answer, or lying. However, deflection does not come naturally for many people. So here are some suggestions for effectively deflecting direct questions:

**Anticipate the difficult, direct questions you are likely to be asked.** There are times when we are asked questions we don't want to or

cannot or should not answer. For example, in an interview we may be asked questions about our relationship/marital status, age, or political affiliation. Think about questions you don't want to answer so that you can formulate responses to them.

**Develop deflecting questions.** The best deflecting questions stick to the same subject of the question that was initially posed (this helps to maintain the flow of the conversation) and focus on your counterpart (people are often keen to talk about themselves). Deflection questions that are humorous can also be particularly disarming. For example, in response to the question, "When do you plan on having children?" which by the way is illegal for employers to ask in the U.S., the deflection could be: "Do you have any children?" Or a humorous response might be: "At least 9 months apart. Is there a different norm at this company?" A little humor can pivot the conversation to a different topic and signal that you want to create a pleasant interaction.

**Practice deflecting questions.** Inventing deflection questions on the spot can be difficult. By anticipating questions you are likely to be asked and preparing different deflection responses, you will be well positioned to redirect a conversation. For important discussions, consider rehearsing a conversation with a colleague or friend. For example, provide a colleague a list of questions you are likely to be asked that includes one or two difficult questions you would like to avoid answering. Then, without letting your colleague know that you plan to use deflection, try deflecting the target question to redirect the conversation.

**Anticipate responses to your deflection questions.** We find that the conversational norm to answer a direct question is surprisingly strong. This means that you may need to exert effort to avoid answering a direct question, but it also means that your conversational partner too is likely

to feel compelled to answer your question. If you respond to a direct question such as, "What are your outside options?" with "What's your initial offer?" you should recognize that your counterpart will feel the psychological tug to answer your question. Consider how you might use additional questions or comments to develop and steer the conversation from there.

**Prepare to defend against deflection.** If *you* are the one keen to gather critical information, you should anticipate that deflection is difficult to detect — and that you are likely to feel compelled to answer deflection questions. As you prepare for your negotiation or meeting, prepare a list of key questions you plan to ask and star the ones that are particularly important. During the meeting, keep notes on the responses you receive paying particularly attention to your key questions. In our studies, most people not only answer the deflection question, but also never return to their original question.

We are often asked direct, difficult questions. Because the compunction to answer a direct question is so strong, many people offer responses in the moment that they later regret, from revealing costly information to telling a lie. By focusing on how to deflect difficult questions, we can guide a conversation and protect our interests. The next time that you are asked a difficult question, consider posing a new one.

*This article was originally published online on November 18, 2019.*

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