

Unprepared for a Meeting? Here's How to Respond to Any Question

It's happened to all of us. You're making a big presentation to an important client, or participating in a high-stakes meeting with your boss, and suddenly, you're asked a question that you aren't prepared to answer.

So, what are you supposed to do?

First of all, you have three immediate goals to meet when you're asked a question by someone in the room during a meeting or presentation:

- **Make the questioner feel right for asking.** This means, you cannot respond with "You just threw me under the bus!" "Why are you bringing *that* up?" or "That's a ridiculous question"--as much as you might like to.
- **Maintain your credibility and confidence.** You may not know the answer to the question right this second, but you don't want to let a small setback undermine all of your hard work and overshadow everything you *do* know.
- **Keep the agenda moving forward.** As much as this moment may feel like the end of your presentation (or, if you tend to catastrophize, the end of the world), it isn't. There's likely more work to do and additional objectives to achieve. Keep going.

Second, even with those goals in mind, you're going to need to have something come out of your mouth in response. Ideally, it's something that sounds less like a gasp, moan or sob, and more like a polished, poised phrase that buys you some thinking time.

Here are 10 ways to communicate that you're considering what to say while keeping your cool.

1. It sounds like you're asking me to share my immediate impressions, is that right?
2. While I don't know for sure, I can speculate that ...
3. I don't know. I realize that I need some time to think about it/research it/find out. May I get back to you by end of day with an answer?
4. I'm happy to share my initial thinking, and I'd like to reserve the right to come back later with additional or different ideas. Will that work for you?
5. I haven't given this subject as much thought as I have other topics. I'm wondering if there's someone else in the room who wants to respond ...
6. That's a thoughtful question, and it deserves a thoughtful response. I'd like to get back to you later after I've had time to consider it.
7. While some folks prefer to "talk to think," I prefer to "think to talk." That's how I work best. I'd like some time to do that and get back to you.

8. Would you like my "off the cuff" response? If so, I can give you that now. If not, I'll need some time.
9. My gut says _____, and let me say that my gut response isn't always my final response.
10. If I had to answer right this second, I would say _____. But with a little time to think about it, I might come to a different conclusion.

While you may not always have the right answer ready, you should be prepared to show that you know how to think on your feet.