**When a Tough Question Puts You on the Spot**

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Summary.

Amidst the economic and global uncertainty that surrounds us, handling tough questions is an ongoing part of a leader’s job. In this piece, the author outlines strategies to answer difficult questions so that you can maintain the trust of your clients and colleagues, keep your relationships intact, and weather any storm.close

We’ve all experienced that moment when someone asks us a question and we’re caught unprepared. Maybe a direct report raises a challenging question about layoffs during a town hall meeting, or a client calls you unexpectedly and wants to know what is going to happen in the markets. How can you maintain relationships — and [trust](https://hbr.org/2022/03/to-win-over-an-audience-focus-on-building-trust) — when you don’t have the answers people are seeking?

I was introduced to this topic in an unforgiving way. Early in my career, I served as the director of public diplomacy for the Consulate General of Israel to New England. As an American citizen, I was responsible for explaining the policy of a foreign government during a time of extreme violence in the Middle East. One of the hardest parts of my job was fielding angry questions from both sides of the conflict, such as: Why was the government taking such harsh actions, or why wasn’t the government taking even harsher actions?

What I learned in that job became the basis of my methodology for handling difficult questions. You can use these strategies whether you’re an investment banker addressing the CEO of a billion-dollar company, an airport gate agent reassuring anxious passengers, or a small-business owner fielding questions from your team.

**How to Handle Tough Questions**

**1. Prepare in advance.**

You can usually anticipate many of the difficult questions you’re going to face. Before an all-hands meeting, look at the agenda and identify what questions might come up. Invite a few peers to role play: Have them ask you challenging questions and work on answers that feel comfortable and authentic to you. Put yourself in your audience’s shoes and ask yourself how they may feel in response to those answers.

You can do the same thing when preparing for tough questions from clients. Think about who in your organization truly has the pulse of your clients and can ask you the toughest questions to simulate a client conversation. This is an effective activity for anyone on your team who is fielding questions. The responses don’t need to be memorized, but you should be able to recall them as a result of your practice.

**2. Pause and breathe.**

Whenever we field tough questions, we often feel the need to jump in right away to answer. However, without complete information, we often throw in [filler words](https://hbr.org/2018/08/how-to-stop-saying-um-ah-and-you-know) (even though [they can actually be helpful](https://hbr.org/2019/08/why-filler-words-like-um-and-ah-are-actually-useful) in certain situations), ramble, and double-back on what we said. Because [clarity](https://hbr.org/2022/03/to-win-over-an-audience-focus-on-building-trust) is one of the key ways in which we build trust, fumbling can jeopardize credibility.

Before you answer, take a minute to pause and gather your thoughts. I recommend closing your mouth and breathing in through your nose — which forces you to stop talking — or calmly taking a sip of water that you brought for just this purpose. It’s an acceptable break that gives you a few much-needed seconds to think about your answer and ensure that your emotions don’t control you.

**3. Express empathy and honesty.**

Words matter, especially in difficult situations. Start by acknowledging the question through a transition phrase such as “That’s a critical question, thank you for asking,” and then use empathetic language, such as “If I were in your shoes, I would be asking the exact same question.”

I discourage people from saying “That’s a great question” because it’s a common pet peeve for our clients, and it usually means “I don’t know, and I need some time to make it up.” While those with media training have learned to pivot or bridge in order to avoid answering certain questions, exercise caution using that technique — your audience knows when you’re doing it. The more you use it, the more you erode their trust. So, what can you do instead?

**4. Acknowledge the uncertainty.**

When you have incomplete information, you can acknowledge uncertainty and use phrases such as “Here’s what we know at this point,” or, in more sensitive situations, use “What I can say is this” to share what information you do have.

You can confidently express uncertainty: Don’t be afraid to say “I don’t know,” or “No one has the answer at this point, but here’s what we’re doing to address it.” You can also confidently and objectively describe a situation. Provide an unbiased overview by saying: “I’d like to take a step back and look at the conversation we are having now. This is exactly the process we need to go through in order to understand all perspectives and arrive at the best course of action.” And then use, “What else is on your mind?” to decisively move onto the next question.

**When You Need to Take a Stand**

Sometimes acknowledging uncertainty isn’t enough, and you need to take a stand. You would do this, not because you are 100% certain it’s going to work, but because you are certain that waiting any longer to reply would cause irreparable damage.

When you need to take a stand on the spot, try using this [PREP](https://www.globalpublicspeaking.com/how-to-speak-off-the-cuff/) framework. It stands for:

* **Point:** State one main point.
* **Reason:**Provide a reason behind it.
* **Example:**Give an example that supports your point.
* **Point:**Before you start rambling, re-state your main point.

Here’s an example of PREP in action.

**Question**: Why aren’t we getting extra end-of-year bonuses?

**Acknowledge with empathy**: I know this is on everyone’s minds, and I appreciate you asking this question.

**Point**: We believe that bonuses must be tied to company performance.

**Reason**: It’s important that everyone feels a sense of buy-in without the pressure of it affecting their annual salary.

**Example**: During the pandemic, our revenue dropped precipitously, and we kept people’s salaries but did not pay a bonus. This year was a challenging year for other reasons [insert one reason].

**Point**: And that is why we are unable to pay extra end-of-year bonuses.

As you can imagine, there is an incredible amount of nuance that goes into crafting these answers. In fact, preparing for questions before a speech can take just as much time as crafting the speech itself. However, it is a critical use of time.

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Amidst the economic and global uncertainty that surrounds us, handling tough questions will be an ongoing part of our roles as leaders. Use the strategies discussed above to maintain the trust of your clients and colleagues, keep your relationships intact, and weather any storm.