

After “I don’t know,” what’s next?

We recently heard about an inspiring professor who taught at a top-rated business school. He began one of his courses with this assignment: in the coming week say “I don’t know” at least once, and mean it. Many of his students described this as the most difficult assignment in the course, but also the most powerful.

It’s easy to see why the use of “I don’t know” is one of the most difficult aspects of Precision Answering. If we imagine ourselves meeting the eyes of a colleague, a potential customer, or an executive in our own company, we might start to think: isn’t it crazy to say something that makes us appear less than perfectly prepared? That is an important question. Almost every day we face the temptation to exaggerate, speculate, or create the illusion of knowing more than we do. Before yielding to these temptations, it helps to remember several things.

- It’s widely assumed that understanding a problem equates with knowing a lot about it. In fact, knowing exactly what we know and exactly what we do not know usually shows a much higher level of understanding.
- Without knowing our unknowns, it’s impossible to judge risk. We can’t be clear about which holes need to be plugged, if any.
- Many people assume that hiding unknowns helps them build credibility. In fact they are putting their personal credibility at risk, and perhaps also the credibility of their team or even their company.

On the subject of “I don’t know,” Precision Answering teaches a crucial lesson: when phrased correctly, an “I don’t know” can be both credible and constructive. Here’s how.

This Month’s Practices

PRACTICE 1: Try the professor’s homework assignment. For an entire week, honestly admit “I don’t know” at least once per day. Look into the person’s eyes, and mean your answer. What do you notice about yourself? At the end of the week: what have you learned about your ability to admit when you don’t know something?

The business school professor taught his students the first step: be willing to say “I don’t know.” Precision Answering teaches the second step: in a concise way, take the unknown to the next level. Both steps require practice.

PRACTICE 2: This month, when you aren’t totally confident about an answer, try giving an “I don’t know” plus a follow-up action or a concise analysis of knowability. What impact does this have on discussion? Does it help move the work forward? Does it encourage other people to be honest about what they don’t know?

1. USE A FOLLOW-UP ACTION

When you follow an “I don’t know” answer with an action, you convey that while you may not know the information, you know exactly how to find it. It might sound like this: “I don’t know. I will use the human resources website tools to find out. I’ll have an answer by Friday morning.”

2. CONVEY THE REASON WHY YOU DON’T KNOW

Using one short sentence, offer a very good reason why you don’t have an answer. If the reason is good, you open the space for dialogue about the process, time, and effort involved in finding an answer. It might sound like this: “We don’t know. The team hasn’t been able to find a valid technique for estimating.”

3. CONVEY WHY YOU DON’T THINK IT IS KNOWABLE

Sometimes knowledge isn’t possible or isn’t feasible, given the available resources. When you are working with complex issues, you may find times when you recommend moving forward without full information. It might sound like this: “I don’t know. Getting an answer from our consultant is going to cost \$10,000 and delay things by two weeks. The statistical validity of their results is probably going to be too low to be useful, given their small sample size. Our recommendation is that we move ahead and treat this as a potential risk.”

We’re here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com.

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