

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Answer What's Asked ▶ 09/18/08

Are your answers too long for your listeners?

As head of pediatrics for a major metropolitan hospital, Robert believed fiercely in being precise with his language. "People have to know exactly what I mean. And I have to say exactly what I mean. There is no margin for error here."

But feedback from people in the hospital was clear: they couldn't stay focused on what Robert was saying because of his habit of answering simple questions with endless expositions. His boss said to me, "I dread asking him a question because half an hour later he's still talking and I don't have a clue what he's telling me."

Robert read the feedback in his report and then debated the issue with me. Like Todd, the CIO in the Tip, *Being Concise*, Robert felt that anything less than complete disclosure was not merely negligent but dangerous.

Because he had such a super-charged, scientific mind, Roger loved to learn. He especially loved models. I asked if I could draw him a picture. He leaned forward with interest. Here's what I drew.





There are only four types of questions

"These four circles," I said, "represent the only questions you'll ever hear in English." He raised his eyebrows. "Above the line are the three types of close-ended questions. 'Yes/No,' 'Either/Or' and 'Short Answer.' In school we used to call those 'Fill in the Blank.' The bottom circle represents all open-ended, or 'Essay,' questions. That's it. That's all there are."

He was silent a moment. I felt he was trying to come up with other questions that might prove my model false. Finally he nodded, okay.

"I want to talk about close-ended questions, Robert, because I think that's where your feedback is targeted. You feel you have to tell people everything in your head because there's so much at stake if there's a misunderstanding, right?"

He agreed.

"But are you sure there's no misunderstanding if you're telling them information in a way that makes them stop listening?"

Realizing he'd possibly been contributing—unintentionally—to an outcome he didn't want, he said, "But, people frequently ask me a yes/no question that can't be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Are you saying I should shorten my answers even if that makes the answer incorrect?"

"Not at all," I said. "I'm saying you should answer in a way that will keep them listening. I'd like to teach you how to do that. But before I do, I'd like to give you an image of what I think happens when you over-answer a close-ended question."

When your answers are bigger than your askers expect, you've lost them

"First, picture a warehouse with thousands of little slots. Each slot is designed to accept one specific item and nothing else. When people ask you close-ended questions, a slot opens in their heads and, just like that warehouse, only certain things fit in their slot. If you start your answer with lots of qualifying data instead of what they're expecting, they think it doesn't fit. And guess what? The slot closes up! They stop listening. But you're still talking. This can't be good for anyone."

He smiled a little sheepishly. "I've had that experience. There's one nurse who always over-stuffs my slot. I rarely listen to her all the way through."



"Well, that's what people are saying happens when you answer *their* questions. You're jamming in all this stuff that doesn't fit. And they're not listening to you."

"So what do you prescribe, doctor?" he asked genially.

Use four simple steps when you answer a close-ended question

"There are four steps to do this effectively." He took the cap off his pen and prepared to write.

"Step one for answering a close-ended question?"

- 1 Answer what's asked. Say 'yes' or 'no' up front. Or fill in the blank. Before anything else, you should fill your listeners' slots with whatever it is they're expecting. Do that first."

He looked up before writing a word. "Do you mean if they ask a yes/no question, I have to say simply 'yes' or 'no'? And stop talking? Surely not!"

"No, you don't have to only say 'yes' or 'no,'" I said. "That's actually step number two:

- 2 Match length. That means however long they take to ask the question is about how long you get to answer it."

"Okay," he said, writing as he talked. "Answer what's asked and match length. So what's three and four?"

- 3 "Three is 'Check for satisfaction.' Ask them, 'Did I answer your question?' Or just look at them. A lot of the time you'll see them nod. But sometimes you'll see a new question form in their head. If they're not ready to move on, don't. Stick with them until you've answered what's in their head."

"Because if I don't," he said enthusiastically, "they won't be listening!"

"Exactly so. Which gets me to step four.

- 4 'Then add your stuff.' Once their slot is filled and they're satisfied, they're ready to hear all your qualifying data. So that's when you can tell them your shades of grey.



Here's what the four steps sound like

"So here's the quick recap," I said. "A colleague asks you, 'Are you going to support Susan Smith for the Fellowship?' You recognize that you're being asked a very short yes/no question. So you say, 'Yes, I liked her a great deal. She's my top candidate.' Your listener nods, indicating satisfaction, so you add this, 'I still have two questions about her that aren't completely answered but I think I'll have my answers by the end of the week.'"

"The person you're talking with might want to know what questions you have in your head. But maybe she doesn't. If she asks, great, you tell her and a whole new series of questions and answers begins. But in this case, you were short and succinct. You answered what was asked and your listener is a satisfied customer. And you didn't over-answer the question."

"Yes," said Robert, "because I was strangling myself, trying to control the impulse to babble like I usually do." More seriously he added, "Do you know what I imagine? I imagine that for years people have been coming up to me extending a little teacup asking for a dainty little drink and I've been drenching them with a fire hose. No wonder they're not listening."

I nodded and waited for him to go on.

"Well, now you've got my curiosity up. How do you advise I answer an 'Essay' question?"

That, I told him, was a completely different lesson. And I'll cover it in a subsequent Tip. For now, when you hear a close-ended question, practice using the four steps:

- 1 Answer what's asked.
- 2 Match length
- 3 Check for satisfaction
- 4 *Then* add your stuff

Good luck!

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