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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Answering Essay Questions ▶ 11/05/09

Essay questions are a trap

In the Executive Coaching Tip *"Sorting & Labeling,"* you read about Joseph. Like many technical experts, he struggles to give clear, concise summaries of complex information. The Sorting & Labeling tool is helping him.

At the beginning of a recent coaching session, I asked him, "How's it going with the execs during your weekly update?"

Seven minutes into his long, rambling answer, I finally held up my hand in surrender. He looked startled—he'd been deep in his own thoughts—then looked a little sheepish. "Oh. I did it again, didn't I?"

Indeed he had. He'd taken my open-ended essay question ("How's it going with the execs?") as an invitation to spill out all his thoughts in whatever random order they occurred to him. Not an effective style. So we began discussing how to answer essay questions crisply.

Don't take the bait

Over a year ago, an Executive Coaching Tip called *"Answer What's Asked"* laid out four rules for answering closed-ended questions. In that Tip I said a closed-ended question is like a specific slot in a warehouse: only certain things fit in it.

The problem with open-ended questions is that they seem to be the opposite of specified slots: they feel like big invitations to talk at length. Look at these three examples of open-ended questions:

"How did you end up with these numbers?"

"What are the pitfalls if we take this action?"

"What can we do differently next time?"

The bad news is that most people *accept* these invitations to talk at length and, like Joseph, respond with unstructured rambles. As listeners, when we find ourselves dunked into these streams of thinking, we strain to sort the ideas, decide which are most important, which relate to each other and which



needs a response. It's exhausting, so often we simply stop listening and wait for our turn to talk. Not a successful moment for the person answering the question.

If you don't want to be that sort of essay answerer, here's a three-step model for giving crisp replies to open-ended essay questions.

Step One: Start with a number

Here's what starting with a number sounds like:

QUESTION: "How did you end up with these numbers?"

ANSWER: "We looked at two different indicators..."

QUESTION: "What are the pitfalls if we take this action?"

ANSWER: "As we see it, there's one big possible trap if we go down this road..."

QUESTION: "What can we do differently next time?"

ANSWER: "I think our customer really had three complaints about this installation."

When I was first learning this style of answering, starting with a number felt terribly scary. "How could I possibly start with a number?" I'd think. "I don't know how many parts there are because I've never answered this question before!"

But I learned that if I could just slow down a bit and turn my focus inward for a second or two, I usually had a sense of how much information I had. Was there only one idea in my head or did I have a sense that there was a bigger answer rattling around in there?

Here's what I learned about starting with a number:

- ▶ First and foremost, starting with a number only works when I'm talking about something in my area of expertise. If I'm trying to answer a question that's outside my expertise, I begin by saying something like, "Let me talk out loud about that for a minute." I only begin with a number when I'm in my sweet spot.
- ▶ When answering a question I haven't heard before, I never use a number larger than three.
- ▶ I've learned to actually say the number "one," instead of simply talking about one thing without using the number. I'll say, "There's one big idea about that." And then give my answer.



- ▶ Starting with “one,” “two” or “three” makes me sound more credible than if I waffle and say, “There are a *few* ideas” or “I’ve got a *couple* thoughts about that.” (There’s a lot of research showing that your credibility goes up when you use numbers. And it makes sense, right? If you can use a number, we think you must be an expert!)
- ▶ If I get the number “wrong” (like if I said there are two points but I think of three), there were several ways I can rescue myself. These “rescues” are detailed at the end of this Tip.

If you can take the leap and start your essay answer by using a number, you’re more than halfway to an incredibly crisp answer because steps two and three aren’t nearly as challenging.

Step Two: Use a label

Labels are tags of one or two words. They aren’t explanations. They aren’t data. They aren’t even a sentence. They are just verbal markers you give your listeners as a point of reference. For example:

QUESTION: “How did you end up with these numbers?”

ANSWER: “We looked at two different indicators. The first indicator was the thirty-day trend.” (“*Thirty-day trend*” becomes the first of two labels.)

QUESTION: “What are the pitfalls if we take this action?”

ANSWER: “As we see it, there’s one big possible trap if we go down this road: resources, both human and capital.” (“*Resources*” becomes the one big label—with two sub-sets: human and capital.)

QUESTION: “What can we do differently next time?”

ANSWER: “I think our customer really had three complaints about this installation. Their first complaint was about schedule.” (“*Schedule*” becomes the first of three labels.)

I hope you noticed that there is no need to speak all your labels at once. When answering off the top of your head that would be almost impossible to do. All you need to do is toss out one label to get yourself rolling.

I hope you also noticed that the label has a feeling of standing alone. In other words, you don’t need to rush. Pausing after you speak the label actually helps the listener grasp the label as an important idea, and that makes you sound authoritative. It also gives you a little time to gather your ideas!

Once you’ve used your first label, you’re ready for the third and final step:



Step Three: Keep it short

Let's say you're answering that first sample question. You've said, "Thirty-day trend," the first of your two labels. Now you'll speak briefly about the thirty-day day trend. Three, four, maybe five sentences.

And, while you're speaking about the thirty-day trend, your brain is looking around for that second label.

This is when you need to trust yourself. That second label is in there somewhere. After all, this is your expertise, right? Don't seek perfection. Labels are just tabs or markers or handles. They aren't binding or sacred. And whatever label you come up with—even if it's not great—will be better than a ramble!

So then you cycle through Steps Two and Three (Use a Label and Keep it Short) until you've gotten through all your labels. And then you're done!

Here are the three steps:

- 1 Start with a number
- 2 Use a label
- 3 Keep it short

The benefits

If you can adopt this behavior . . .

- ▶ Your answers will become more concise
- ▶ Your answers will become more memorable
- ▶ Your listeners will stay tuned in
- ▶ You will be viewed as a more credible contributor
- ▶ You will sound like you're ready for a promotion
- ▶ You'll display *The Look & Sound of Leadership*™

What happens if I get the number "wrong"?

"What if I say I have three parts to my answer but can only think of two?"

If that happens (and it happens to me all the time!), after you've spoken about label number two, simply say, "Let me stop there." I promise, your listeners will be delighted.

"What if I say I have three parts to my answer but then think of a fourth?"



If that happens (and it happens to me all the time!) at some point in the discussion—perhaps immediately following your third point, but perhaps a bit later—say, “You know, I thought of a fourth point that I think is important, too.” I guarantee people will not point their finger at you and say, “No! You said you only had three points! You don’t get to say anything else!”

I worried about all these nuances of style. As I said earlier, to me, using a number to start answering a question I’d never heard before felt like jumping out of plane without checking to see if I was really wearing a parachute.

As with any new skill, I found that my discomfort was only really apparent to me. If I didn’t give away my secret, no one knew I was doing something new. And I got all those benefits that I listed above—even while I was still learning the style! If you want to polish your executive presence, I urge you to try on this skill.

Read related Tips:

[*Sorting & Labeling*](#)

[*Answer What’s Asked*](#)

[*Being Concise*](#)

[*Questions as Leadership*](#)

[*Staying on Track*](#)

[*Sounding Well-Spoken*](#)

[*Creating Clarity*](#)

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