

How to soften impact without losing precision

Suppose we are meeting with a customer to understand their requirements for a solution to a complex problem we are trying to solve for them. As Precision Questioners, going into the situation we know two things: once we understand the big picture, most of our questions will need to be precise, and we will often need to ask follow-ups. In a situation like this, there's a third parameter. When a working relationship isn't firmly established, it's also important to preserve rapport and perhaps even build new layers of trust. So here's the issue: how can we be as precise as our work requires and, at the same time, do our best to preserve rapport?

That's the focus of this Skill Sharpener. This matters for two reasons. Over and over, our effectiveness in team meetings depends on our ability to be socially astute and, at exactly the same time, intellectually precise. This combination of abilities is also crucial to our success as managers.

Try using short preambles

When we are on social terrain that isn't stable, preambles can help clear a pathway for our questions.

"Sorry to interrupt. I didn't phrase that very well. Let me ask the question differently."

"That's interesting. I'd like to understand your last point better. Are you saying...?"

"Thank you, that's helpful. It brings up another question. Do you have...?"

Keep it brief. A long preamble can make a question harder to understand, not easier. When communicating face-to-face, this relationship-building might be nothing more than a nod of the head, brief eye contact, or a simple "OK."

Understand the hidden dangers of extreme conciseness

As Precision Questioners many of us prefer to word our questions as concisely as possible, like this: "How did you structure your sample?" Rather than this: "What steps did you take to make sure that, in such a diverse domain, your sample was truly representative of the group as a whole?" It's the same question either way. Even so, many of us assume that the fewer the words, the greater the clarity. Maybe; maybe not.

What we need to understand is that, in many situations - particularly when we are communicating across cultures or talking into a speakerphone - a question that is worded concisely can be extremely difficult for an audience to hear and to interpret correctly. The conciseness catches them by surprise. Above all we need to understand that when a question is super-concise, on the receiving end it will often feel like a poke in the ribs. All that verbiage in "what steps did you take to make sure that..." sometimes serves a real purpose. Like a preamble, it softens the question without erasing the precision.

Slow down

When an audience isn't on our wave length, the worst thing we can do is to think and speak like a machine gun. It's not a justification to say "well, it's my natural communication style." What about their "natural style" as listeners? The faster we ask, the more impatient we sound, and the more angry. This starts a downward spiral of mutual misinterpretation, which ends up creating relationship issues that might be more challenging than the work itself.

Sacrifice precision? Only as a last resort

Let's go back to that meeting with a customer where our priority is clarifying requirements. Given the complexity of the situation, it's possible that, at some point in the discussion, we might decide it's better to keep our questions open-ended and drop any expectations we might have had for Precision Answering. Perhaps that's the best we can do. But how do we know? How do we know we aren't just following the path of least resistance? How do we know we aren't missing an opportunity to take the work - and the relationship - to a higher level?

Here's the test. After the meeting is over, we ask ourselves: Was I actively trying to improve the discussion? What specifically did I try? What will I do differently the next time? When is the next time? Reflective questions like these help us deepen our social as well as our intellectual abilities.

Practice doing your best to soften impact without losing precision

In the coming week, identify one meeting in which you need to do a better job at Precision Questioning but, at the same time, it's very important for you to be tactful. For instance: you need to ask questions to a peer and you want to minimize the awkwardness, or you need to question your manager and you don't want to sound disrespectful. In advance of the meeting, write down one or two specific things you intend to try (using more preambles, being less concise, slowing your pace). After the meeting, write down several lessons you learned that you can apply to other meetings. Do this for one meeting a week, for a month. Don't forget: these same skills can be practiced in email!

We're here to help. If you have a question or comment, e-mail us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com