

## Giving bullet-point answers in response to list questions

The challenge of Precision Answering is to think before we speak so that we can structure what we say. As a result of this structuring we communicate more effectively and our credibility is higher. Learning to give bullet-point answers is classic Precision Answering, forcing us to become more disciplined in how we think and how we communicate.

In the Precision Q+A workshop you were introduced to the idea of a list question: "What's causing it?" or "What's the downside?" List questions are easy when the correct answer is a single item: there's only one cause, only one downside. The challenge is how to be clear, crisp, and concise when, to be accurate, an answer should include multiple items.

The manager asks: "Any new risks to the schedule?"

After a pause, the person replies: "Two risks entered the picture this week. There could be a delay in materials because of a possible railroad strike. Also, one of our key production people is now on medical leave. It looks like he has a broken wrist."

This answer starts with a header, which announces the number of items that will appear on the list. That's good form. Headers keep everyone - answerer included - from getting lost in the details. When there's a header, the questioner can focus on the content of the list, rather than worry about how long the list will be.

The key to answering list questions is to avoid grabbing the first thing that pops into mind. Before answering, we pause - not an uncomfortably long time but longer than normal. In the silence of this pause, we ask ourselves: "Anything else? Anything else?" An amorphous set of bullet points starts to crystallize in our mind. That's the foundation for our answer. If the list is so clear to us that we can start with a header, that's ideal.

In the rush of everyday discussion this process of reflection is short-circuited. As a result we tend to handle list questions with surprisingly low accuracy. This is typical:

The manager asks: "Any new risks to the schedule?"

The reply is instantaneous: "Delay in materials! I called the supplier yesterday and found out that..."

Before speaking, the answerer didn't think about other risks. He started with the first thing that came to mind because that's what kept him up last night, or that's what he was thinking about just before he came in the door. This solo bullet point is an act of unconscious simplification, and it's dangerous. Perhaps there are other new risks that, at the moment, feel less urgent but will ultimately prove to be more difficult to manage.

From the precision questioner's point of view, there's another problem with single item answers; they raise credibility flags.

The manager asks: "Are you on schedule?"

The reply is quick: "No. We slipped over the holidays. A key person left the company. We are adding someone to the team next week."

One slip? One cause? One fix? Perhaps, but in a complex world, a picture like this is apt to give the impression of simple-mindedness and not just simplicity.

From the Precision Q+A workshop you might remember the rule of thumb we practiced: in response to a list question, aim for three bullet points. Giving one bullet point suggests that we are just saying the first thing that comes to mind. Giving a lot of bullet points suggests that we haven't done a good job figuring out what is important. Three is a reasonable target. But don't forget: this is just a rule of thumb; it's not a mandatory template for analysis. If accuracy requires giving two items, or four items, or just one item, so be it!

### Exercise 1

Look at an email thread in which you answered a lot of questions from your manager, a customer, or a colleague whose work depends on yours. Identify the first five list questions. In how many cases did you give a single-item answer? How many of these should have been bullet-point answers?

### Exercise 2

Once a day, for the next week, give a bullet-point answer in response to a list question. As you will soon discover, doing this in email is easier than face-to-face, so you might start there.

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