

3 Things To Say Instead of “I Don’t Know”

*What to say, when to say it and
why it works*



SCHOOL OF EXECUTIVE PRESENCE

You know the feeling.

That deer-in-the-headlights, frozen-in-your-tracks, everyone-is-in-slow-motion feeling.

Like when you've prepared your presentation for weeks. You perfected the slides. You memorized the talking points, but now it's time to answer questions at the end and the guy who made your friend cry after the last board meeting raises his hand.

Or maybe you've been called in to meet with a manager for your annual review, and she brings up something that you were not prepared to talk about.

How do you answer when you're not prepared with an answer?

Honesty is the best policy, and you shouldn't pretend you know something you don't. But if you want to establish credibility and influence at work, you need to be prepared with a more powerful response.

Something better than "I don't know."

Saying "I don't know" whenever you're asked a question that requires more research or time to craft an answer teaches people how to treat you. It teaches them to sidestep you when they're looking for real answers.

That stops today.

Even when you don't know the answer right away, you can use these three phrases in almost any situation when you start to feel that frozen-in-your-tracks feeling.

Teach people to come to you for answers by saying something besides, "I don't know."

Here's what to say instead...

What To Say When You Don't Know the Answer - #1

"I'm not sure, but
I'm happy to find out.
I know exactly
who to ask."

Why this works:

We know at first glance that it might seem like you're really saying "I don't know." But you aren't. This phrase works because you are showing that you have the wisdom to acknowledge you don't know everything, and that you will take action and solve the problem. Which is what your boss actually wants. It also lets your boss know that you're the kind of person who knows people in the office. You're already a leader and known among your peers and co-workers.

When to say it:

When your boss or colleague corners you in the hall after your presentation to try and stump you about something you said in the meeting, you'll have the perfect response with a built-in plan of action.

What To Say When You Don't Know the Answer - #2

“Based on what we know today, my thoughts are...”

Why this works:

First, by drawing attention to “what we know today,” you’re acknowledging that you’re the kind of leader who can form an opinion based on the facts. You’re not going to make stuff up, and you’re not going to assume based on outcomes that don’t exist. Even though you’re not completely sure of what the final outcome might be, you’re willing to share an informed opinion.

When to say it:

This statement can come in super handy during your Q&A session at the end of a presentation (where you’ve just presented all the facts you DO know) or even in the middle of an email chain when a project is being discussed.

What To Say When You Don't Know the Answer - #3

“I don't have the data at hand, but I'll get it to you later today.”

Why this works:

When you use this response, you're letting the questioner know again, that you're going to give good information based on the data. You're also signaling that you have the data in your possession, you know where to find it, and you'll be able to deliver the data and the answer in a timely fashion.

When to say it:

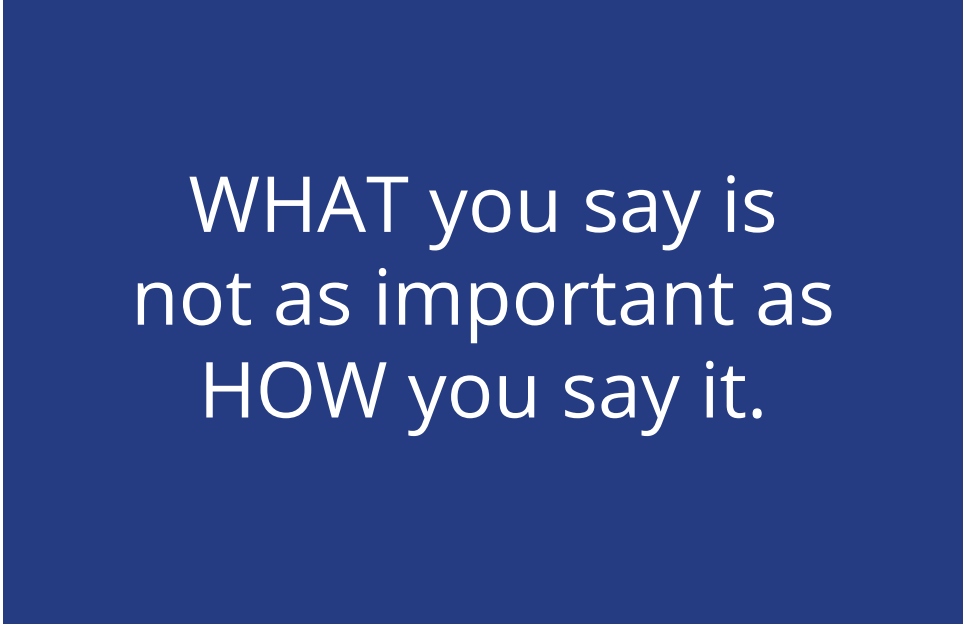
The next time your boss pops into your cubicle unannounced on a Friday right after lunch and wants you to drop everything and give a status report on your huge project, look right at him and smile and say this. If you want to be extra impressive, let him know you'll get it to him “in the next two hours.”

Hopefully, you can see that each of these statements can be used in a variety of settings - not just the ones we've suggested.

But now that we've got your imagination going, feel free to use them as much as you can. Be sure to practice saying them aloud in a mirror or practice with a friend so that you can automatically answer with one of these three responses instead of saying, "I don't know."

And here's one more piece of advice...

BONUS TIP:



WHAT you say is
not as important as
HOW you say it.

Why this matters:

Confidence is critical. And confidence comes with preparation and practice.

Having the opportunity to practice presenting and responding to difficult situations in a trusted group of peers is one of the best investments you can make in your career. Find a group of trusted friends to work with, or [join a coaching program or mastermind](#) and work on speaking with confidence.