

## Sharpening Your Answering Skills

In the Precision Questioning workshop we often describe PQ as a way of learning how to get the question out of our mind and into our mouth. The challenge is making this happen at the speed of discussion. If we are too slow to formulate our question, then the opportunity is lost, or we end up asking a question that is poorly formulated.

Compared with the PQ Toolkit, the PA Toolkit might look simpler to apply, but the challenge is essentially the same: at the speed of discussion, how can we express ourselves precisely? The answer is: it takes practice. *Conscious* practice. The good news is that, in almost every hour of every work day, we are given obvious opportunities to practice Precision Answering.

Here are five ways to capture the lessons these opportunities can teach us.

1. **Pause first.** At certain moments you realize you are being asked a precise question. When that happens remind yourself: “pause first.” That pause makes it possible for three things to occur. You can make sure you understand the question. You can assemble your thoughts. And then you can verbalize a response that is clear, crisp, and concise. In simple terms: listen, think, and then speak. This habit of pausing is easiest to practice in email—and most important to practice in executive reviews!
2. **In email.** Email creates a perfect opportunity to practice Precision Answering in slow motion. Every time you are asked a precise question in email, before you hit “send,” run a PA check.
  - Did you answer the question(s) they asked?
  - Did you start with the core?
  - Did you keep it short?
3. **In meetings.** When you ask a colleague or one of your direct reports a precise question and you receive a long, rambling answer, paraphrase it back to them in PA terms. Be extremely crisp. “So you’re saying that the project is behind schedule for two reasons. 1)... and 2).... Do I understand you correctly?” A paraphrase can help you as much as it helps them.
4. **Listening to an interview.** On television or radio, you will often hear someone give a long, rambling answer in response to an interviewer’s question. Practice paraphrasing the person’s answer in crisp PA terms. If you can, you might even ask a follow-up question. “So it sounds like you see two different issues here: 1) the economic viability of different alternative fuels, and 2) the degree to which incentives for development of these fuels should come from the state vs. the federal government.” The follow-up question could be: “Which of these two issues are you more concerned about?”

5. **Focus on bullet points.** Bullet-point questions can be difficult to spot. Every once in a while, spend an entire day looking for them. In response to a bullet-point question, always consider giving a bullet-point answer.
- “What are the benefits?” (Obviously this is a bullet-point question.)
  - “How do you know?” (It could be for multiple reasons.)
  - “What caused it?” (There could be more than one cause.)
  - “What are you going to do?” (The plan may involve more than one action.)

Nobody was born a Precision Answerer. For everyone it is a learned skill. Mastery of any complex skill is built on a sequence of small lessons, almost all of which we give to ourselves. On the way to becoming a Precision Answerer, the steps might be small, but they quickly add up. Start today by applying one of the five suggestions above.