

Stronger Precision Answering

Last month we made the case for a revived view of self-management as a key to thriving as a knowledge worker. Effectively directing our own thoughts, feelings, and activities—the essence of self-management—involves creating habits that consistently support simplifying and clarifying in the midst of complexity to convey precisely what we mean.

Precision Answering (PA) is one of the best self-management tools available, because it forces us to be simple and clear. The strength of our Precision Answering provides a gauge for the clarity of our thinking.

THE THINKING-ANSWERING LINK

Imprecise answering is often the product of imprecise thinking. Precision Answering rests on the idea that our work is “finished” when we can distill it to its smallest possible essence. Remember back to your days in school, when it was easier to write a really good 5-page paper than a really good 1-page paper? That’s the same principle we convey with Precision Answering. It’s easier to give a long answer with a lot of extra information than to do the additional work of distilling our thinking down to its essence. Precision Answering hinges on conveying only the information that is absolutely necessary. Precision Answering is an indicator of the depth and clarity of our thinking, because we can only be truly concise when we have considered an issue deeply enough to compress our ideas into a few words or sentences.

CORE ANSWERS STRENGTHEN THE THINKING-ANSWERING LINK

In the Precision Q+A workshop, we emphasize “core answers” as part of learning how to engage in Precision Answering. Core answers provide a structure that we can rely upon to strengthen precision, similar to a spinal column for the mental activity of answering questions. Our thinking is clear when we can easily choose a core answer to convey the essence of what we mean.

Core answers include:

- Yes
- No
- Number
- Single point
- Bullet points
- I don’t know
- I don’t know plus a next step

One easy way to strengthen our Precision Answering is to insist that we always begin with one of these core answers in response to any question. For example, one client in our coaching program faced the question: “Are you meeting regularly with Roger?” She answered: “We met about the budget and we met about the strategic plan, but we didn’t meet about the upcoming offsite agenda.” What was the core answer? It’s still unclear, even after she has conveyed all of that extra information. To strengthen her Precision Answering, she needs to begin with a core: “No. But, we have met about...” or “Yes. But we haven’t discussed...”.

SELF-COACHING FOR STRONGER PRECISION ANSWERING

Coaching ourselves for precision in our answers depends on becoming aware of ourselves as answerers. Many of us think aloud as a habit, making our inner monologue public in response to questions. We need to become aware of our first impulses when someone asks a question. This awareness helps us build more control and precision in our answering.

FEEL THE IMPULSE TO THINK ALOUD

What does it feel like to think aloud? Try an experiment: in the car, begin saying whatever comes into your mind. Become familiar with what it feels like to think aloud, or to turn your inner thoughts into speech. Begin watching situations where people are asking questions, and feel the impulse to think aloud. Then resist that impulse. As we become more familiar with this state, we can catch ourselves when we are thinking aloud. We can gain more choice about our actions, and give better answers in situations where we need to pause and organize our thoughts.

INSIST ON BULLET POINTS

When we hear a question, we often begin answering with the first thing that comes to mind—even if we aren't thinking aloud. A very brief pause in our thought process—sometimes imperceptible to the other person—can make a huge difference in our capacity to answer precisely. Instead of beginning with our first thought, we formulate multiple points and rank them. We know our thinking is more clear when we can generate and rank multiple points.

One Precision Q+A client recently commented that she knew Precision Q+A was helping her organization deepen its analytical thinking because she now quite often hears the phrase: “There are three main reasons...” in her meetings. We can coach ourselves for more precision by using phrases like this to structure our answers. If we are off track, we can self-correct with phrases such as: “Allow me to rephrase: I meant to point out three things: ____, ____, and ____.”

This Month's Practice

Use stronger Precision Answering to create stronger thinking. If imprecise thinking = imprecise answering, then precise answering = more precise thinking. You will know your analytical thinking is deeper when you can more easily give structured, concise answers. Use Precision Answering and the “core answers” as the backbone of your practice.

PRACTICE 1

Set a goal for becoming more precise in giving answers in one type of answering situation. For example, in one-on-one meetings with your manager, or in status review meetings.

- During those discussions, actively monitor your ability to use core answers. For each question, start with a core answer: yes, no, number, date, single point, bullet points, or “I don't know” plus a next step.
- After the situation, immediately offer yourself a mental grade, such as: great, not so great, poor, or dismal. In addition to the grade, give yourself one good tip about how to give better answers in the next situation.

- If you catch yourself talking aloud because you don't know an answer, stop immediately. Revise your answer in the moment. Use this phrase: “I need to stop there. The correct answer is I don't know. Let me get back to you.”

PRACTICE 2

Think of the hardest issue facing you in your work right now, and formulate a question about it. In response to this difficult question, craft two answers:

- Answer 1: You can talk for 3 minutes.
- Answer 2: You can talk for 30 seconds.

Strive to make the two answers equally strong. Aim to convey the

important information in both answers. Notice which one is more difficult to create. Give yourself some general lessons about the challenge of distilling down a complex situation into a short answer.

We're here to help. If you have questions, comments or suggestions for future topics, email us at QuestionMaster@vervago.com. You may also join our LinkedIn group for Precision Q+A alumni by visiting us here at [LinkedIn](#).