

6 Ways to Say “I Don’t Know” With Confidence, Credibility, and Class

(<https://www.tlnt.com/6-ways-to-say-i-dont-know-with-confidence-credibility-and-class/>)

Many professionals fear speaking to their boss or a roomful of strangers not because of the planned presentation, but for the unplanned: “What if they ask me a question I can’t answer?”

Even professional speakers can be so fearful of questions that they leave no time for Q&A sessions during their programs. Yet there’s nothing that builds credibility and showcases your expertise like responding to questions with confidence.

The first step is a confident mindset: Understand that no one has all the answers to every question on *any topic*. Ask any philosopher, scientist, theologian, or attorney. They can always point you to someone who can and will argue “the other side.” And some answers are unknowable; they can only be predicted, imagined, or hoped for.

So when faced with a situation where you can’t answer a question, never fear looking stupid or unprepared when you don’t have a ready response. (That’s not to say, of course, that you shouldn’t be well prepared on topics, concerns, or issues you know your audience will expect you to discuss. C-suite executives will consider lack of preparation a bad career move!)

That said, here are at-the-ready responses I offer my coaching clients:

Humor: “If we knew that, we could all quit our day jobs!” This humorous response implies the answer is unknowable and only anyone’s best guess. (Example: “If we knew how to stabilize the price of oil permanently, we would all be billionaires.”)

The Facts: “I don’t have that answer. Here’s why…” You give a logical reason why you can’t answer the question. (Example: “Actually, HUD collects that information, but doesn’t break it down by individual corporations.”)

No Access: “If only I knew that!” (*Said with a playful look.*) This comment implies you can’t be expected to know because that information is privileged information that you can’t access. It’s a hopeful comment, not defensive or aggressive.

The Stir: “Your question raises a great point. That’s one of several things we just don’t know about X.” Your around-the-world response lets you take off in several other directions. You can toss out other issues and questions and then transition to any tangent you’d like to talk about related to the question.

Wishful Thinking: “I’d love to know more about that!” (*Said with delight.*) You can always agree with a questioner that poses some a blue-sky proposition and asks your opinion on an unfamiliar matter. (Example: “I haven’t read anything on the study you’re referring to, but I’d love to know more about those possibilities. In fact, if I had a couple extra million dollars lying around, I’d invest immediately in that scenario and research!”)

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The Relay: “I don’t know, but maybe someone else does.” Then ask others in the room if they would like to respond to the question. You look confident, gracious, and generous in sharing the stage with others. As a facilitator of knowledge to be shared, the group still gives you credit for “finding the answer” and making sure it gets shared for the benefit of all.

Remember: Intelligent people say “I don’t know” with confidence, credibility, and class.

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