

3 Ways to Unload a Loaded Question

By DIANNA BOOHER SEPTEMBER 22, 2020



Let's assume an angry reporter doesn't confront you every day to ask why your organization has committed some scam or why you're improperly handling employees during the COVID-19 crisis. But that doesn't mean you don't get loaded questions that demand your response.

Those loaded questions might come from your boss, your clients, or your coworkers:

- *Are you enforcing COVID-19 guidelines any better this month than last?*
- Based on the devastating decline our organization experienced last year, are you anticipating staff changes this quarter?
- With so many clients complaining about our poor customer service, is our leadership team going to continue to ignore the understaffing?

At some point you're going to need to respond to such "Have you stopped beating your kids yet?" questions, and neither a "yes" or "no" response conveys what you intend.

3 Best Responses to Loaded Questions Aimed to Trap You

No matter how confrontational the person asking the loaded question is, keep in mind that if you lose your composure and respond in kind, you lose. Listeners respond to tone, volume, and body language as much as or more so than the actual words you choose.

Given your ability to keep your cool, the following three techniques can help you turn the confrontational question into a matter-of-fact message.

Option 1: Never repeat a negative. State your positive.

In this case, the negative is the loaded word or phrase. Negative words always trump positive ones. So to respond to the loaded question, “With so many clients complaining about our poor customer service, is our leadership team going to continue to ignore the understaffing?” ignore the negative premise about “our poor customer service.”

Simply state your positive opinion in the situation: “Actually, Jason, our customer service ratings link more directly to product dissatisfaction than to how our reps handle calls.” You’ll note that this response doesn’t address or agree with either of the asker’s premises — that “so many clients” are complaining or that the leadership team “continues to ignore understaffing.”

The best response: Ignore the wrong or negative premise. Simply state your opinion in a positive way.

Option 2: Reconfirm your position and clarify.

On occasion, the questioner is not actually being confrontational. They’re offering agreement and making sure *others* know they agree with you. But the problem: This “supporter” has misunderstood your message! They’ve gotten what you said all wrong.

For example, in supporting what they think you said, they offer a comment like this: “You’re right. Our leadership team has adjusted the headcount to meet demand. It’s just that our reps don’t seem to be up to speed on our products.” Wrong, wrong, wrong! That was not the point of your last exchange.

Yet it sounds rude and ungrateful to say, “Wait a minute, Kristy. That’s not what I said a moment ago.”

A better response: “Let me clarify my position. Obviously, I wasn’t clear earlier. Here’s what I think is generating some customer complaints. On occasion, customers feel that the product still has bugs that need to be worked out. They’re buying it, but disappointed with their results.”

With such a statement, you haven’t made the supporter wrong. But you’ve made the message clear!

Option 3: Call attention to the faulty premise and disagree with it.

Yes, this approach comes across more forcefully (or confrontationally) than the first two options. But it’s the right option if you think others listening to the question might miss the subtle phrasing and negative premise.

So to our example question above, consider this response: “Armand, I disagree with your premise. My point is that our product needs to be updated.” Notice that the response does *not* say, “I disagree with your premise that we’ve had so many client complaints and that our leadership team is understaffing.”

That phrasing would be repeating a negative — even if *denying* that negative. Every repeat of the negative phrasing simply drives that thought deeper into memory. Wrong move.

Be a minimalist here. Call attention (generally) to the faulty premise, then state your point positively.

Aim to unload the loaded questions. Never repeat the negative assumption buried in the question. Simply state your position positively and move forward.



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