

The One Question You Have to Answer Correctly Every Time

By DIANNA BOOHER AUGUST 11, 2020



As an HR leader, you get questions every day; some serious, some trivial. “What else is the company going to do to protect us from COVID?” “What did you hear about the merger plans?” “How do I get access to my 401(k) account?”

Your answers may vary from time to time. And a wrong answer likely will not jeopardize your career.

But the *one* question that you have to answer correctly every time is this: “What are you working on?”

Giving the wrong answer to that question can deal a critical blow to your career plans — double the strength of that setback if your boss asks the question.

Why Is The Right Answer So Difficult?

For the most part, you and your team need to communicate details to run your project, department, or division. For that, you need metrics, charts, slides, spreadsheets, meetings, presentations, proposals. You accomplish things with these tools, and the associated data make perfect sense to you. The abbreviations, acronyms, illustrations, and other shortcuts save you time and ensure a common understanding among your HR team members.

You also tend to communicate with the same tools and in that same fashion to those outside your functional area.

But don't.

That jargon, those communication tools, and that level of detail won't make sense to people outside your functional HR area. They'll likely conclude that you don't know how to analyze, synthesize, summarize, and interpret how your work projects contribute to the organization's overall success.

Granted, habits are difficult to break. But they can hinder communication and halt your career growth.

How Should You Answer That One Key Question?

Put aside your complicated formulas and tools. Forget how many staff hours you've put into a project. Time spent does not equal value created. Instead, focus on these few things to answer that one big question:

- **Part 1:** We're working on solving X problem(s).
- **Part 2:** Here's why it matters to the organization...

- **Part 3:** Here are the outcomes we're working toward...
- **Part 4:** (Optional — depending on who asked the question.) This is how the work may affect the budget and timeline as far as you're concerned....

How Do You Educate Others Outside Your Functional Area?

You don't.

If you do, you'll be irrelevant. While coaching sales teams on presentations or sales proposals, I frequently hear such comments as: "We have to educate our customers on our product" or "Our customers really don't understand how best to use our process and the services we provide, so our real challenge is to educate them on exactly what we do."

I have to bite my tongue to keep from shouting, "How insulting to your customers!" That's like saying, "We need smarter customers." Very few customers will likely agree on that perspective.

Ditto with internal customers. They don't want to be "educated" about what *you're* doing. They want *you* to be educated about what *they're* doing and then translate what *you're* doing to support them. In other words, get aboard *their* train. That's critical when you're responding to the executive team!

So What's Your *Real* Job As a Strategic Communicator?

Think of yourself as a translator: "So what that means for you (for the organization, for our customers, for our partners, for our suppliers) is that ..."

Sort and analyze your data and details needed for your functional role. Then draw some conclusions about the bigger picture for employees as a group or your executive leadership team: How does your work benefit them? Their budget? Their deadlines? Their savings? Their profits? Their processes?

If you can't answer that, think harder.

To repeat: *How will what you're doing today make their job easier, better, safer, more profitable, or more productive?*

Communicate clearly an answer to this *one* question — “What are you working on?” — and if your answer is strategic (relevant, tailored, and timely), the listener will care.

That's relevancy. And staying relevant is an HR leader's primary responsibility.



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Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 48 books, published in 62 foreign-language editions. She helps organizations to communicate clearly and leaders to expand their influence by a strong executive presence — and often by their own published book. Her latest books include *Faster, Fewer, Better Emails*; *Communicate Like a Leader*; *What MORE Can I Say?*, *Creating Personal Presence: and Communicate With Confidence*. National Media such as *Good Morning America*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg*,

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