

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



971 How to Respond to Worker Questions

When a worker asks a question, a manager has options on how to respond. I'm Jerry Roberts, and we'll talk about what those are, next, on The Extra Point.

You're a manager, and one of your team members asks you a legitimate question. How can you respond. A recent article in Forbes magazine suggests there are three options. I think there are more. I'll give you a breakdown of the Forbes' side, sliding my thoughts in as we go.

Forbes says:

1. Answer the question
2. Tell them that you don't know, but you'll find out.
3. Tell them that you can't tell them

Response # 1 is easy, just answer the question.

Response # 2, tell them that you don't know, but you'll find out. The scenario Forbes used was that too many managers and leaders have the mindset that they need to be seen as perfect, so they should have every answer at their fingertips.

Then they took a confusing turn, saying that when leaders admit they don't know everything, they're being honest and vulnerable. That vulnerability supposedly sends a message that the leader cares more about being truthful than being seen as perfect.

First, let's get off the path to perfection and vulnerability. Even the worst of the worst managers I worked for and with, including two who were elected to the Jerk Boss Hall of Fame, didn't try to make me feel like they had every answer.

Both did something that took me back to my days of working for Big Ed, my first boss and

mentor. They would sometimes answer my question with a question. What was my point in asking the question? What information was I after? What would I do with the information once I got the answer?

At first, this was frustrating, but I quickly caught on to the beauty of what they were doing. They were forcing me to think things through before I asked a question. It helped me to ask better questions, and sometimes, while asking myself questions, I came upon the answer without having to go to my manager.

Therefore, my number two would be to answer the question with a question. After going through that, if the worker still has a question I can't answer, then I'll go with what Forbes had, saying I don't know but will find out.

I've known managers who will come up with an answer that is half-right, or simply wrong, because they feel they should say something. Avoid doing this. Saying you don't know but will check into it, is far better than coming up with something that is off-base, and results in people not trusting you.

Response # 3 from Forbes, is that you say you can't say. Having owned a business with a team of employees, I know there are details about business deals that are time-sensitive, and can't be discussed until completion. There are personnel issues, financial issues, decisions about company direction that aren't finalized, and more that you don't want to disclose — at least for a while, and maybe never.

The answer to give is not, "I can't tell you." The better response is something like, "There are circumstances that require privacy which I have to honor..." or "Proper business practice here is that we keep a lid on certain information until it can be released. I appreciate your question, but I can't talk about it."
(Con't.)

It's even better if you add, "Even though I can't give you the exact information you want, can I ask why you want to know, and is there something else I can help with?"

This gets at the person's reason for the question. Are they only curious, or is there a specific purpose to the question, one which can be addressed if we dig a little further.

That's the Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

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