

# How to Answer an Unanswerable Question

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I recently watched a client of mine get bombarded with questions during a virtual town hall. He and his team had gathered their company to address questions about the pandemic, remote work, and stakeholder implications. Prior to the call, I had prepared my client to remain calm and not let other people's anxieties trigger his own. But some of the questions still caught him off guard.



When someone asked about whether or not their company was eligible for government stimulus funds, my client got defensive and nervously dismissed the question. Then, in an attempt to calm the restless crowd, he began offering reassurances with no factual foundations — fueling further confusion and fear among his listeners. By the end of the meeting, he recovered reasonably well, but not without taking responsibility for his mistakes.

## Further Reading

My client's experience is one that many leaders can relate to. The Covid-19 pandemic has [thrown us all into the unknown](#). Our anxieties have raised a barrage of new questions about what comes next, most of which are being directed toward the people in charge. In a genuine desire to appear helpful, [compassionate](#), and “in control,” those people often feel compelled to answer. With the best of intentions, however, they could actually be making things worse.

Whether you are a leader, a teacher, or a parent, you may be called upon to answer especially difficult questions right now, questions that have no satisfying answers. But this doesn't mean you can't form a helpful and honest response.

## Acknowledge your own anxiety.

If you are someone others are relying on through this turbulence, it's important to acknowledge that their expectations will intensify whatever anxiety you are already feeling. I've observed several leaders in denial of their own angst, unaware that their efforts to suppress it and to appear in control have only made them more frenetic and unfocused.

You can better manage yourself by recruiting a set of friends, colleagues, a coach, or a therapist, to vulnerably share your emotions with. It's important to explore the source of your anxieties. We are all metabolizing this crisis in unique ways. For some, this may mean imagining the worst-case scenario. For others, it may trigger a series of painful memories. Either way, it is important to let yourself feel these emotions. Remember that no feeling is permanent. Having a healthy way to address your emotional turmoil will allow it to move through you, making you less likely to [transmit those negative feelings onto others](#).

## Listen for the need underneath the question.

During crisis, [science tells us](#) that our composure frays. When this happens, two things take place. We feel less safe, and sometimes, less able to clearly articulate our needs. But, if you can detect what the need is beneath the difficult question, especially when it is addressed at you, you can form an honest response to it.

For example, when we take a closer look at the town hall meeting my client ran, we can see the real question underneath the inquiry that derailed him was not about access to government funding. It was about job security.

A better approach for my client to take would have been to first acknowledge the question being asked, so as not to deflect it, and then get at the underlying need. He could have said, “We know very little about the stimulus eligibility. Things will continue changing, but we do have a team staying up to date on how these regulations apply to us. I suspect some of these questions are rooted in concerns about your personal financial wellbeing and how this recession is going to impact the company. Let me tell you specifically what we’ve done, and what we’re planning to do with respect to our, and your, financial stability.”

By providing an honest response to the initial question and delicately speculating what the underlying issue was, my client could have sustained credibility while still addressing what nobody wanted to ask out loud. Finally, even though he’d anticipated some of the broader topics to address, he hadn’t sufficiently anticipated how to respond to questions for which he *didn’t* have answers. A little more preparation would have helped him steer clear of his initial canned answer, “I assure you we’re doing everything in our power to weather this storm,” which, even if true, came off as dismissive and off-putting.

### **Ask questions that help others find strength.**

One of the most empowering things leaders can do in the face of unanswerable questions is to use broader questions to draw out people’s deeper concerns. In doing so, you may end up helping others discover their own strength, which works far better than offering the answer you think they want.

For example, one client told me about a direct report whose anxiety had reached its limits. Through tears, her employee lamented, “When is this all going to be over?” With the best intentions, my client responded, “I have heard that we could see waves of cleared-for-work employees returning as soon as mid-May.” Within an hour, my client had five messages from people asking, “Is it true we’re not going back until mid-May?” My client’s response, though well-intended, started a chain reaction of misinformation and false hope.

In these situations, it’s helpful to first pause, consider the fear driving the question being asked, and respond with a question that helps to relieve that fear. For example, my client might have said, instead, “I wish I knew when this would all be over. But your question made me wonder about a deeper question: What part of this have you found to be the most difficult?” This would have allowed her team member to uncover, and ideally work through, deeper concerns.

There are several types of questions you can ask in response to anxiety-driven inquiries from employees:

- When you sense someone is having trouble adapting, ask, “What’s something you’ve learned during this crisis you would have never expected?” This can help them recognize they are more capable than they think.
- If someone is struggling to see past the current challenges, ask, “What’s one thing you hope remains after this crisis?” This will allow them to acknowledge that they’ve discovered things they actually might enjoy — like the perks of remote work and extra family time.
- To help others discover their resilience and combat anxiety, questions like, “What’s the worst thing you could imagine happening from all of this?” can help people sort through real vs. irrational concerns.
- Asking, “What’s one of the worst things you’ve ever overcome or endured?” helps people tap into sources of hope and fortitude from their own stories.

### **Don’t interpret questions as critique.**

Anxious questions will often arrive with an angry edge or an insistent or judgmental tone. Though unintended, this intonation can be interpreted as frustration, as if your employee is actually saying, “Why do I have to draw attention to something you should have already addressed?”

Leaders, as a result, may feel unfairly criticized or [be on the defensive](#). You can prepare for this moment by choosing compassion in advance. Remind yourself that many people right now are fearing for the worst and looking for available sources of reassurance. Fair or not, if you are an authority figure, you are naturally expected to provide that comfort. If

you become defensive, you dismiss people's feelings and shut down their engagement, forfeiting the opportunity to care for those relying on you. In these cases, the most empathetic response is to calmly acknowledge what you don't know. Telling the truth in the face of stern questions signals you trust whoever is asking.

### **Practice your tone and physical delivery ahead of time.**

In the face of extreme emotions, people in authority don't just *deliver* a message. They *are* the message. This becomes even more important when leading through digital mediums, and when the question you are responding to doesn't have a precise answer. Anxious listeners will pay hyper-vigilant attention to every detail. Your tone and pace of voice, body language, and facial expressions must all align to invite the trust of others.

This means, when you are addressing issues you actually are sure about, include declarative sentences that convey confidence and conviction. Contrastingly, if you are unsure, practice being a bit more speculative to convey how you are thinking about gray areas. For example, "At this point, I don't have all the answers our customers want, but I'm confident in our team that's working on it."

Most importantly, don't be afraid to show vulnerability — sharing what has made you anxious or sad or what lingering questions remain for you in the moment conveys empathy to listeners who likely feel alone in their struggles. The key is not to over-share to the degree you hijack the focus onto your concerns or intensify a listener's emotions with your own angst.

### **If you blow it, recover quickly.**

We all need extra measures of grace during these difficult days. Leaders can set the example by asking for it when they make mistakes. One way leaders can recognize those moments is by having "spotters" during critical communication and conversations. These are people assigned to carefully observe what you are saying, how you are saying it, and how others are metabolizing it.

In the case of my client's town hall, being on video conference enabled those of us acting as spotters to message him privately with suggestions on how to course-correct. He paused and told the group he wanted to circle back to the part of the meeting he knew hadn't gone well. He apologized for his defensiveness and acknowledged that his need to appear in control prompted his initial response. In the end, he got more positive feedback on that part of the meeting than on any other.

If others are relying on you for answers to tough, often unanswerable questions, take the time to prepare for how you want to respond. Sometimes a caring and honest response that meets deeper needs, allowing others to find strength and learn, goes much further than just a precise answer.



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