



Why We Should Say, "I Don't Know" More Often

Description

We are often hesitant to admit we don't know something. Rather than saying, "I don't know," we often give an answer thinking the boss will think less of us if we don't know. That fear forces answers that sometimes need more thought or research. The reality is that saying, "I don't know," or I need a little time to think it through will make your boss and colleagues respect you even more.

The truth is, we can't have all the answers. After all, we are just human beings, the world is a very big place, and most business problems are very complex and nuanced. No matter how knowledgeable we are, we simply cannot know everything. And we shouldn't pretend to. Plus, in many cases, people aren't expecting an immediate answer. This is pressure we put on ourselves.

I speak from experience. I learned the power of "I don't know" from an early mentor. At the time, I was scared to look stupid. When I was asked a question, I made stuff up or talked for a long time about nothing. Then one day I asked my mentor: "What do you do when your boss asks you a question and you don't know the answer?" His response was, "Say, 'I don't know.'" He then followed this up by saying that I could offer to find out.

This was an "aha" moment for me. I decided to try it out. Soon after, I was at a meeting with about six people, and the boss called on me. I did not know the answer. I said, "I don't know," and he said okay and moved on. It was no big deal. I remember thinking, *I could have been doing that all these years!* It was so much easier. I also found my coworkers liked me better. The only person I had fooled by making up stuff was me.

Over the years, I came to realize that pretending to know it all is in direct opposition to the top two qualities needed to be successful: being self-aware and coachable. Organizations that encourage and nurture these two qualities tend to be strong, innovative, and profitable. They are especially vital in a business environment that requires us to adapt quickly and relentlessly.

The most successful people these days not only need to be great at what they do, they need to be great learners. They need to know what they don't know and be willing to work hard to learn it.

Here are a few reasons why saying, “I don’t know” is so powerful:

It keeps us from making bad decisions. When we say, “I don’t know, but I will find out,” we are likely to do research and put some thought into things. We’re more likely to avoid making a big mistake and going down the wrong path.

It invites feedback and promotes collaboration. “I don’t know” builds rapport. It opens the door to engaging our team to help. When we get input from a variety of people, we usually end up with better outcomes. Great teamwork is needed if we’re to innovate, collaborate, problem-solve, and, in general, practice the so-called “soft skills” that are so crucial in today’s workplace.

It gives us permission to rapidly shift direction. People who are open to learning new information and adapting their thinking accordingly are ultimately more successful. In a global economy where everything changes rapidly (marketplaces, consumer behavior, technology, etc.), organizations must be able to quickly shift in response.

It demonstrates humility. This is one of the most important traits you can possess. When we learn to quiet the ego and lead with humility, we engage with people rather than alienating them. People like and respect us more. We build stronger relationships. We never push our self-interest over that of the group. We know that a rising tide lifts all boats.

It shuts down our inner “park ranger.” What I call “park ranger leadership” is the attitude that leaders will swoop in and rescue employees if they get “lost in the wilderness.” This counteracts the sense of ownership we want to cultivate. When we say, “I don’t know,” others are likely to step up to the plate and figure things out themselves. Not only does this free leaders up to do their own work, it leads to a more innovative and resilient organization.

It creates a culture of knowledge seekers. You’re showing people by example how to become lifelong learners. This benefits them and, ultimately, the entire company.

It keeps us in a beginner’s mindset. By constantly reminding ourselves that we don’t know it all, we keep our curiosity stoked. We’re more likely to read and explore, to pursue training, and to seek out mentors.

These uncertain times we’re living through are teaching us a valuable lesson. The “normalcy” we took for granted changed almost overnight. We *didn’t* know what was going to happen—and we really don’t know what lies ahead. It’s time to get comfortable saying the words.

Date Created

June 1, 2020

Author

quint-studer