



The power of three magic words: I don't know

The other day I overheard a conversation in the airport. Sure, I overhear a lot of conversations at many airports but this one struck me as I waited to board my flight. A sharp-dressed older man in a blue Burberry sport coat, perfectly pressed tan slacks and a custom-tailored shirt was speaking with someone on his mobile phone. The well-dressed man appeared to be an executive of a large corporation; he had the look of a polished, well-seasoned C-level exec. By the pained expression on the man's face, the voice on the other end of the line appeared to be giving him some important advice and discussing something very critical.

A few minutes went by as I scanned the traveler traffic and pretended not to be interested in the drama of the exchange unfolding in Terminal 3. The man and the mystery voice on the other end appeared to be in an intense conversation about a difficult topic. Brows were furrowed, hand gestures were animated and the volume of the conversation was steadily increasing. The older executive asked a series of pointed questions, each one seemed to be more difficult than the next. With each question, the man got redder and redder. After four or five volleys of questions – and looking as red as a raspberry – the man sarcastically smirked, rolled his eyes and was noticeably annoyed. By this point in my eavesdropping, I paused all music, deactivated the noise canceling feature on my headphones and was listening intently.

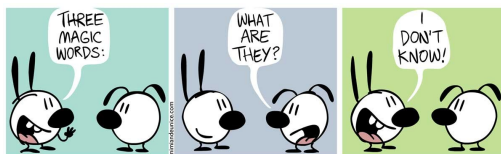
As I meandered closer, the next thing I heard was:

“...you know, that’s the problem with you guys; you seem to have all the answers. I know what you are telling me is wrong but you say it with confidence and you expect me to believe you. Why can’t you just say ‘I don’t know’?”

I was dumbstruck... I was so invested in the conversation I almost yelled out “Yeah! ...stick it to ‘em!”

Out of courtesy (or pity), the executive let the person on the other end of the line respond briefly but the call only lasted about 30 seconds more before he shook his head in annoyance, hung up and shoved the phone in his pocket.

So, I started thinking: how many times do we give a “best guess” to a series of difficult questions? Is it better to admit you do not know the answer to a question? Like most things in life, I think it depends on a lot of things...the context of the conversation, the personalities, your familiarity with the topic and a whole host of other variables that influence the outcome.



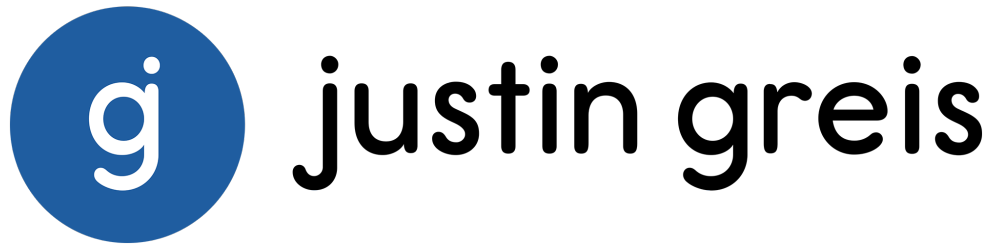
I suspect, in general, many of us who are in positions to provide answers, offer solutions or solve problems are afraid of the phrase: “I don’t know.” In reality, that statement holds a lot of power. It is an honest expression of your familiarity of a topic. When stated truthfully, it builds trust. You need not have all the answers on the spot. The smartest people in the room know when a question is beyond their knowledge and understand the power of consulting with others. It is far better to admit you do not know something and commit to the question asker that you will follow up with him/her with an answer by a

designated time frame than making up something and hoping the other party does not call your bluff.

As I reflected on my airport eavesdropped conversation, I thought about all the pain the person on the other end of the line could have avoided by simply admitting he/she did not know the answer. I'm sure the executive would have appreciated that approach as well.

So, next time you don't know the answer or have your back up against a wall facing the firing squad of questions, don't be afraid to admit you do not know but commit to getting the answer by a designated time frame.

Oh, one more thing: watch out for those around you in the airport. You never know who is listening in or if they will write a blog article about you! Perhaps my next article will be on situational awareness... :)



hi, i'm justin
(nice to meet you)

I post weekly **professional insights** and **personal stories** from my life as a management consultant, a dad, and an eternal optimist.



Click here to learn more about my **professional, personal, and “perfeSSIONal”** background.

connect with me

- [Visit JustinGreis.com](#)
- [Learn more about Justin](#)
- [Subscribe to newsletter](#)
- [Contact Justin](#)