

The Right Answer To The Trap Question

It happens in an instant. The question is asked, all eyes are on you waiting for your response and now time seems to stand still. Your breathing becomes shallow, your muscles tense and a dozen thoughts go through your mind. What is the right answer? You need the right answer! Now!

It doesn't start that way, of course. Some days before, a senior manager comes to you with an assignment. He has questions from the management team about the competitive landscape and you are just the competitive intelligence professional to get answers for them.

Luckily, you know what do. You start by clarifying their vague questions. What specifically is important? You practice some rephrasing and finally present a set of three important questions to answer. "Is this the right set?" you ask. "Yes, it is" your senior manager responds and off you go to get answers. Your report is due at the next senior management staff meeting.

This is the fun part. Now that you have the questions, you begin to think through how to get answers. Let's see, since one of the questions is about power and how it is expressed within our industry, I'll start them with Porter's 5 Forces. Then, I'll follow with a detailed product comparison for the market segment we care about. Then, for the last question, I'll finish with a financial comparison of competitors. Ah, the plan is in place.

So, off you go. You begin accumulating information, talking to people and documenting the answers. You synthesize, summarize and test your conclusions. Your boss, acutely aware of your assignment and how it might reflect on her, monitors all that you do. She coaches you on what to say and how to say it. Your presentation slides begin to emerge. They are a work of art and represent an intellectual tour de force. Surely this will be a great triumph for you.

The presentation day arrives. You will have 30 minutes of an all day staff meeting to present. Due other items taking longer than expected, you finally enter the room two hours after the scheduled time. You notice that the managers assembled look tired and distracted. Half of them are talking on the phone. Most of the others are doing email. Only a couple of them are even looking at you. You start.

The first question seems to fly by. A head or two pops up from their computers when they figure out that you are starting with the answers rather than the data. That is a good approach their eyes seem to say. There isn't much debate as you move on to the second question. Again you present the answer as your boss fidgets nervously. There are a few more requests for clarification which you handle confidently. All of your preparation, skill and personal magnetism are paying off. Indeed, this performance may well result in the big bonus that you had been hoping for (and that your boss had been resisting giving to you).

Everyone seems to be listening now that you are to the final question. You are on cruise control at this point so when the trap is sprung, it shocks your entire being.

One of the managers in the back (that has successfully cleared his email queue) raises his hand.

“What are the implications of the competitor’s new product on our technology strategy and the plans that we have to acquire the XYZ Company?” he asks.

Wow, that is a great (note: all senior manager questions are “great”) question. It is not only a great question, at the time it is ask it seems incredibly reasonable that a competent CI professional would have a ready answer. The problem is that in all of your preparation you spent no time thinking about it.

While time is standing still, you review your options. I can’t admit that I don’t know, you think. If I do that, they will question all of my other answers. They will realize that I have been incompetent. Okay, I’ll give them an answer. They probably won’t know if I am right or wrong. Hold it, these are smart people. They will know. You look to your boss. Her look is glazed. She doesn’t know the answer either. Besides this is saving her a lot of money in your next review cycle. You have to think clearly. What do you do?

First, realize that the trap question is not about your competence, it is about your integrity.

Senior managers have built in sensors for bluffing. After all, much of what they do might be considered a bluff. (Yes, we can meet those sales targets with half the staff!) They accept that other senior managers will bluff them. But they do not want to be bluffed by you. It will kill your credibility once and for all if you try.

Second, focus on the value of future competence.

Remember that you have already answered some important questions for them. Compare the confidence that you have in those answers to any that you might provide off the cuff. Always think in terms of value the way that senior management thinks about value. They think about “big numbers” and how they and their organizations are measured. Most of all, they want to understand their risk. The best answers unqualified by risk are dangerous to them. You can answer the manager’s question but today’s answer has too much risk (or uncertainty).

Tomorrow’s answer will be far more certain.

Third, realize that the on-going relationship ultimately defines your success.

A competitive intelligence function will not likely endure if its people are not trusted by senior management. An untrusted staff will find that the questions are no longer asked, the meeting invitations are no longer received and even the valid, useful conclusions are ignored. Senior managers are constantly sorting through their organizations for the people that they can trust. Most people do not pass the muster but the CI person must do so (or find other work).

So what are some good answers? Try one of these.

- “That’s a great question. It was not considered thoroughly in this analysis. My answer today has too much uncertainty. May I eliminate some of that uncertainty and report back to you next week?”
- “That’s a great question. I have identified several similar issues that require more study. May I address your question and the other issues at the next staff meeting?”

- “That’s a great question. I can only speculate about the answer today. I would love to discuss this with you outside of the meeting when you have time.”
- “That’s a great question. The way I would approach answering it would be to talk with Joe in sales, complete a four corners analysis and then work through the conclusions with the CTO. Would you like for me to do this?”

Remember that you must be competent. However, integrity trumps competence. Avoid the traps that suggest otherwise.

For more information on business strategy and competitive intelligence, visit my website at www.jthawes.com or see my Strategically Thinking blog at <http://blog.jthawes.com>.

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