

Thought for the day – 26

‘You *don’t* have to answer the question’

Have you ever answered a question and then thought of a better answer? It is the sort of thing that usually happens in a job interview. When it happens in a negotiation, it can cause tremendous problems. I was once told that there are two types of negotiators: those who can instantly come up with a superb answer after a question has been asked, and those who can't. If you fall into the latter category you need to think about your approach to answering questions.

When you have been asked a question, the first thing you should do is to consider whether you wish to answer it. If answering the question will put you in a difficult position, or will take the negotiation in a direction you do not want to go, then you should avoid answering. There are a number of things you can do instead, including:

- Answer a question with a question. If someone asks you a question which you do not wish to answer, you simply say ‘Why do you ask?’, or ‘Why is that important?’, or ‘That’s a good question, what do you think?’.
- Make up your own question. This is a favourite trick of politicians, but it works just as well in a negotiation. Asked a question about unemployment, a politician will give a wonderful answer about inflation, or the balance of payments, or anything except unemployment.
- Copy American politicians. They are fond of ‘putting something on the back burner’. This simply means ‘I will come back to that later’. It is amazing how rarely the issue is resurrected in the interview.
- Nothing – the power of silence. Frequently when a question is asked and there is a short silence, the interviewer will come in with a second question, or will clarify his question, or will begin to answer it himself.

This techniques are all double-edged swords. You need to make sure that your opponent is not doing any of this to you during the negotiation!

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This thought has been taken from Eric’s book ‘Mastering Negotiations’. A master negotiator himself, he is our expert trainer on the subject – click [here](#) for details of one of his most popular courses.

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