



Episode 71: The One Phrase to Use Sparingly

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here's my question today: when is the last time you answered "I don't know" when asked a question?

If you use the phrase "I don't know" a lot, this episode is for you. And if you hear the phrase "I don't know" from the people you interact with at work and home, this episode is also for you.

Our words have power. They direct our thoughts. They invite sensations in our body, which then influences our nervous system and the nervous system of others.

This creates our reality – the way we think about and live our life, and the way that others see and view us.

For us, the conversation we have in our head with ourselves will either allow us to think in new directions or will keep us constricted.

With others, our words matter because it's the way that others form impressions of us. They hear what we say and how we say it, and they make an assessment of what we're all about. That's why our words, tone, and body language are so important for us to be aware of. They can make the difference between someone seeing us as capable and someone seeing us as lacking confidence.

How other people see us matters, because it then creates the reality we have with them. For example, at work, if people see you as confident and capable, you might be invited to certain meetings or collaborations. If people perceive you as getting easily defensive, you might not be sought out.

All this is to say that if you want to be seen in a certain way, you need to make sure that the words coming out of your mouth, as well as your tone and body language, support the qualities you want others to see.

The phrase "I don't know" is one of the key phrases to watch out for and use sparingly, if at all.

Here's why: When you say "I don't know" especially in a resigned tone, and leave it at that, without any explanation, it conveys giving up responsibility. It has an energy. To me, it feels like a cop out, or like a lack of capability for figuring things out, or like the person doesn't care.

What do you want for dinner? I don't know. Well, what am I supposed to do with that?

What's your 5-year career goal for yourself? I don't know. Again, what do you do with that?

Now there are times in life when you might not have an answer to a question in that moment. You might feel like you don't actually know.

You might not have a strong point of view, you might be thinking about something else and are caught off guard, or you might still be formulating your thoughts.

And – there are other ways you can answer a question instead of saying “I don’t know” that can be more explicit.

In coaching sessions, one big idea I share with clients is this: we get to tell people the conclusions we want them to draw about us.

Saying “I don’t know” misses an opportunity to tell people what we want them to know about how we see a situation, the factors we’re considering, or how important a decision is to us.

Saying “I don’t know” misses an opportunity to show up intentionally and take responsibility for what we want and how we think. And that’s what it means to be a leader – someone who takes responsibility for how they show up.

If you want to be seen more as a leader or partner, please avoid saying “I don’t know” and choose a different answer.

Even if you don’t have a strong opinion, there are other ways to answer that are more helpful both for your thinking and for the person you’re talking with.

Here’s an example:

A few days before each coaching session, I email 3 questions to my client to help focus the conversation. These questions are an opportunity for people to think about the coaching homework they’ve tried, what they’re learning, and what they want to discuss in our upcoming coaching session.

I believe that a coaching session is a valuable use of people’s time, and I know that when people have given some thought ahead of time to what they want to talk through, it’s helpful for both of us.

Most of the time, when clients write back answers to these questions, they have an idea about what they want to discuss.

Sometimes, however, when answering the question about what they want to talk through, I get an answer of “I don’t know.”

I know that my clients are thinking about a lot of things, and I know that they have full lives at work and outside of work. Any of those things could be a topic for coaching. So it’s not really that they don’t know, it’s that they’re still thinking it through or overwhelmed by other things.

Saying that would be a more helpful answer.

Instead of saying “I don’t know,” tell people what you are thinking about, and your initial thoughts about their question.

Here’s a simple example. Let’s say you’re going out to dinner with a friend and they ask you, where do you want to go? And let’s say you don’t have a strong point of view.

You could answer, “I don’t know.” Or you could answer more intentionally and say something like, “I wish I had a strong preference and I don’t. I would love it if you chose the place, as I can find something to eat anywhere.”

See how a little more explanation helps the other person understand where you’re coming from?

Now, what happens when you're the one asking the question, and you get "I don't know" as an answer. Let's say you're having a career development conversation with a direct report. You ask them what their career goals are, and they say "I don't know."

Instead of getting frustrated or jumping in with your opinion, here's my suggestion.

Put on your coaching hat and ask this powerful question:

What is one thing you do know?

Because there are always things we do know, and refocusing someone on those things can open up the conversation and keep it moving.

Someone might not know exactly which job they want in the future, and they do know certain things. They know the type of people they like working with, they know some things they enjoy about their job, and they know some things they don't enjoy.

When you get an answer of "I don't know," see it as an invitation for a reframe and remind them – gently, if needed -- that there are things they do know. Shifting from what we don't know to what we do know activates our pre-frontal cortex effective thinking.

Lastly, let's talk about using this phrase as a leader. There might be times when, as a leader or manager, you might not know what's coming for your organization. Other people might be making decisions, and if your team asked you about the future, you might honestly not have all the details.

In a situation like this, please don't just say, "I don't know." Instead, think about the pieces you do know, and the pieces you don't know. Then, answer more completely by sharing both.

You can tell your team, "Here's what I do know..." and tell them those pieces. And then you can say, "Here are the pieces I do not yet know..." and share those.

Sharing what you do and don't know helps you be seen as thoughtful, honest, and as having more control over the situation. Even if we don't know a specific answer, we can still communicate in a way that conveys that we have a process for thinking about things and that we're still forming an opinion. That helps us feel clearer in our own heads. It helps others see us as confident and capable. And it helps us continue to write the story of our lives more intentionally.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want help solidifying what you do know, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!