

**PLANNING AND PREPARING  
FOR  
DIFFICULT QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS  
By  
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*Keith Fulton and Sandy Martinez own Fulton Communications, a communications consulting and training company whose niche is hands on training and consulting for clients' most challenging communications issues, both internal and external. During the past 10 years, they have provided these services to 30 clients including major corporations and federal government agencies. These services include over 300 two and three day workshops in the field of Risk Communication. Keith and Sandy come from 43 years of combined experience in the chemical industry which included public affairs and plant manager positions.*

**INTRODUCTION**

“Will you guarantee me that \_\_\_\_\_?”  
“Isn't it better to be safe than sorry?”  
“Why should I trust you?”  
“Promise us that will never happen!”  
“You killed my friend!”  
“You're lying to us!”  
“How would you like it if \_\_\_\_\_?”  
“I don't think that's fair!”  
“Where do you live?”  
“Do you drink the water?”  
“You're an idiot!”  
“Your policy/plan is wrong!”  
“We have a report that contradicts what you just said!”

Responding to statements or questions of this nature can be difficult. How can you get prepared to respond these types of challenging dialogues?

All of us experience situations where we receive difficult, challenging and sometimes even insulting questions and statements from others. This can occur in your job, your day-to-day chores, your social life, with neighbors, and even family life. Wouldn't it be nice to have some practical tools and skills to be better prepared for those situations, particularly if this is part of your job requirement?

We frequently hear comments from our corporate and government clients comments such as, “I wish I would have known how to respond to that better!” If I had only thought of saying that...,” or “There's no way you can respond to that...” We frequently felt the same way during our many years of working with public stakeholders, internal

stakeholders and the media on issues of safety, health, environmental, job security, property value, fairness and special interests.

In our Risk Communication hands on skills training courses we demonstrate that there is no question or statement that can't be responded to well. The key word is "respond" and not necessarily "answer." In some situations, just a nod of your head is a good response.

There are several flexible hands on tools available to train and prepare people for any situation on any issue that will likely include challenging questions and statements. Two of these tools are included in this article. Note: much of the applications of these tools do not apply to Media Communication. The Media Communications Process is a unique form of stakeholder communication.

In other articles we will talk about other tools such as

Non verbal communications

How and when to deliver bad news

Planning and preparing for challenging meetings

How to respond to activists

Cross cultural communications

Dealing with various forms of unacceptable behavior in individual or group situations

So how do these two tools apply to dealing with numerous questions and statements that may be driven by a) negative emotions such as anger, worry irritation, distrust, fear, or b) driven by misperceptions and misunderstandings of facts, data or science or c) driven by agendas such as political, personal, economic, historic, social and cultural?

Two tools that will help you to plan and prepare for responding to difficult questions and statements are the 1) Generic Categories and 2) the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline. These tools work hand in hand for any issue (safety, health, environmental, fairness, economic, political, cultural or social) and with both internal and external stakeholders.

## **GENERIC CATEGORIES**

The Generic Categories Guideline shown below is one tool for responding to difficult questions or statements. This guideline is a flexible tool that can be useful when you are in the midst of a difficult and/or challenging dialogue. Remember that it is a guideline and not a model; every situation will need to be evaluated to determine which parts of the guideline are most appropriate for use.

Most questions and statements in difficult communications situations generally fall into one of the following generic categories:

1. Ventilation – A Highly Negative Emotional State/Anger
2. What's the Question or Statement?
3. Rude But Briefly Acceptable

4. Negative Allegations – Not True
5. Negative Allegations – True
6. Guarantee/100% Assurance/No Risk Acceptable
7. Fairness Questions
8. The Setup Question or Statement
9. Personal Interest That's Not Relevant (in group discussions)
10. Policy
11. Factual Questions – Who? What? When? Where?

Use the following table and the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline to help you formulate your responses to questions and statements.

**GENERIC CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS**  
(Developed by Fulton Communications)

<b>CAT #</b>	<b>CATEGORY TYPE</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>	<b>YOUR GOAL</b>	<b>MAJOR TRAPS</b>	<b>GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE*</b>	<b>RELEVANT STEPS IN 6-STEP GUIDELINE</b>
1	Ventilation – A Highly Negative Emotional State/Anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “You killed my friend!”</li> <li>▪ “I have cancer because of you!”</li> <li>▪ “You don’t care about us!”</li> </ul>	Get them to calm down enough to discuss the facts behind their anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Responding too early with factual information</li> <li>▪ Taking their comments personally</li> <li>▪ Inadequate non verbal observation skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Let them vent for a while</li> <li>▪ Respond with empathy for awhile</li> <li>▪ When they have calmed down somewhat (based on your non verbal observation), use open ended questions</li> <li>▪ Move to facts if they appear to be ready to discuss facts</li> </ul>	Step 1: Anger/ Ventilation
2	What’s the Question or Statement?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Incoherent babble</li> <li>▪ Talking in circles</li> </ul>	Address the underlying concern/issue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Assuming you know the question or statement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Paraphrase off of recent questions or</li> <li>▪ A softball pushback statement</li> </ul>	Step 2: What’s the question?
3	Rude But Briefly Acceptable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “You’re an idiot.”</li> <li>▪ “Are you a REAL doctor?”</li> <li>▪ “Where’d you get your birth certificate?”</li> </ul>	Determine what’s driving their rudeness.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Taking it personally</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Acknowledge them.</li> <li>▪ How long you allow this to continue will depend on the situation</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy
4	Negative Allegations – Not True	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Why are you lying about...?”</li> <li>▪ “You’re covering up the fact that...”</li> </ul>	Convince them of the truth.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pushing back and reinforcing the negative allegation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Usually, emphasize the positive reversal</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
5	Negative Allegations - True	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Why are you lying about...?”</li> <li>▪ “You’re covering up the fact that...”</li> </ul>	To demonstrate openness and honesty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Defensiveness or denial when the allegation is true</li> <li>▪ Not getting approval for your response ahead of time from Command, Legal and Public Affairs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Acknowledge the truth</li> <li>▪ Emphasize the commitment to corrective action past, present and future</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action

\*For specific examples, come to a Fulton Communications workshop where we can discuss your work related issues. May of these workshops are sponsored by US Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine and US Navy Civil Engineer Corps Officers School.

## GENERIC CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS (cont'd)

CAT #	CATEGORY	EXAMPLES	YOUR GOAL	MAJOR TRAPS	GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE*	RELEVANT STEPS IN 6-STEP GUIDELINE
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Guarantee/ 100% Assurance</li> <li>▪ No Risk Acceptable</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Promise me this will never happen again.”</li> <li>▪ “Can you guarantee me that ...?”</li> </ul>	Provide assurance that the risk concern is being managed well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Initially, saying yes, no or maybe</li> <li>▪ Not recognizing the “numerator perception”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Emphasize your commitment</li> <li>▪ Tell them what you are doing</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
7	Fairness Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Do you think it’s fair that I have to drink this water?”</li> <li>▪ “I don’t think it’s right that I have to do ‘X’ because of you.”</li> </ul>	Search for common ground. If no common ground move to “Policy” category	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Evasive or defensive</li> <li>▪ Cost/Benefit discussions</li> <li>▪ Not always being aware of common ground opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ First empathize</li> <li>▪ Be open about your plans, even if the news is bad for them</li> <li>▪ Be willing to pursue their point if there may be common ground</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
8	The Setup Question or Statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Where do you live?”</li> <li>▪ “Have you taken the vaccine?”</li> <li>▪ “How would you like it if you had to work in this building filled with asbestos?”</li> </ul>	To have them move from the set up to their underlying issue.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Trying to avoid the setup</li> <li>▪ Not recognizing what their underlying issue is</li> <li>▪ Talking too long</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Provide the info they request in the set up and let them go to their underlying issue.</li> <li>▪ Keep your response brief.</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy And/or Step 4: Conclusion
9	Personal Interest That’s Not Relevant (In group discussions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ A question or statement about issue “X” when the discussion/meeting is about issue “Y”.</li> </ul>	Get back to the relevant subject.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Getting into the non-relevant discussion</li> <li>▪ Rudely/abruptly shutting them off</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Soft ball push back</li> <li>▪ Bridge back to relevant subject followed by possibly expressing willingness to discuss their issue another time or send them to another source</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts Step 6: Future Action
10	Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “Are there gays on those ships?”</li> <li>▪ “I don’t want to take the vaccine.”</li> <li>▪ “Does this mean my spouse is having an affair?” (STD Policy Questions)</li> <li>▪ “I think I deserve...”</li> </ul>	Clarify the policy if necessary and have them focus on the policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Talking too much about their situation and possibly misleading them in terms of policy options</li> <li>▪ Talking too long</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Express empathy (sometimes)</li> <li>▪ Clear and simple statement of the policy as your conclusion statement</li> <li>▪ Step 5 (Facts) should include commitment of those involved</li> </ul>	Step 3: Empathy Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts

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**GENERIC CATEGORIES OF QUESTIONS AND STATEMENTS (cont'd)**

<b>CAT #</b>	<b>CATEGORY</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>	<b>YOUR GOAL</b>	<b>MAJOR TRAPS</b>	<b>GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE*</b>	<b>RELEVANT STEPS IN 6-STEP GUIDELINE</b>
11	Factual Questions – What? Who? When? Where?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ “When is the next meeting?”</li> <li>▪ “What are the next steps?”</li> <li>▪ “When will you find out the results of the testing?”</li> </ul>	Answer the questions clearly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Jargon</li> <li>▪ Talking too long</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Respond in language understandable to the stakeholder</li> <li>▪ Know when to stop talking – non-verbal observation skills</li> </ul>	Step 4: Conclusion Step 5: Facts

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## **6-STEP GUIDELINE**

The 6-Step Guideline shown below is another tool for responding to difficult questions or statements. As with the Generic Categories Guideline the 6-Step Guideline is a flexible tool that can be useful when you are in the midst of a difficult and/or challenging dialogue. Again, remember that this is a guideline and not a model; every situation will need to be evaluated to determine which parts of the guideline are most appropriate for use.

- Step 1: Anger/Ventilation
- Step 2: What is the question?
- Step 3: Empathy
- Step 4: Conclusion
- Step 5: Facts
- Step 6: Future Action

The first two steps in the guideline match up to two of the Generic Categories. Step 1 is Generic Category 1 and Step 2 is Generic Category 2. In applying the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline, you are usually not always dealing with Ventilation and you usually know what the question is. So, you usually just need Steps 3, 4, 5, and 6 of this guideline. However, always evaluate the situation you're in and determine whether you need Steps 1 and 2.

### *Step 1: Anger/Ventilation*

This is Category 1 of the Generic Categories as noted above. The individual or group is very angry or agitated (ventilation). There are three basic steps you need in this situation: A) Allow ventilation for a time. The time you allow for this varies with many factors which are discussed in our training. B) If they have calmed down some, proceed with open-ended questions and C) if they calm down some more, start discussing the facts behind their ventilation. The most crucial skill is your non verbal observation skills to know when to end the conversation and if and when to proceed to Steps 2 and 3. This is also demonstrated in our training.

### *Step 2: What is the question?*

This is also Category 2 of the Generic Categories. You're not sure what the person is asking or stating because he or she is still venting or is jumping from subject to subject. Listen carefully to what the person is saying and paraphrase the question ("Are you asking whether ..." so you may address the underlying concern.

### *Step 3: Empathy*

Sometimes it is appropriate indicate to your stakeholders that you have some sense of what they are saying and/or some sense of their situation. Empathy is comprehending their ideas, situations, and feelings from their perspective – walking in their shoes. Empathy is not sympathy and empathy is not agreement. Empathy is not "I know how you feel" because you don't know how they feel; only they know how they feel.

Empathy is your ability to figure out the following: What must their situation be like for them? To do this, you must "remove yourself" and think about them instead of yourself. Removing yourself means you cannot bring in your personal feelings, beliefs, or feelings. Empathy cannot be artificial; it must be genuine. You cannot "pretend" to be empathic to their situation because stakeholders can tell if you are insincere by your non verbals.

Empathetic statements are not always necessary. They are most helpful when dealing with anger, fear, crises, distrust, and significant concerns. Empathy statements, if used, should be stated before Step 4: Conclusion, Step 5: Facts, and Step 6: Future Action.

Personal connections can be made in an empathy statement only if the connection is direct and solid. Examples of effective direct empathy statements would be, “I live in your community, too,” “My family drinks that water,” “I’ve taken the vaccine,” or “I went out there and saw that.” Examples of ineffective empathy statements are, “I work next to your community,” “I would drink that water if I lived here,” or “I would take that vaccine.”

Major traps in empathy statements are:

- Using personal connections that are not relevant to the listener
- Giving statements that are not genuine – both in the words and the tone.

#### *Step 4: Conclusion*

The conclusion is usually the most difficult step in the 6-Step Structured Response Guideline based on role-playing the use of the guideline with about 5000 students in our workshops. It must be short, simple, and precede the facts that support the conclusion. The conclusion should address the underlying point of the question or statement. If you don’t know the underlying point, you are back at Step 2, so you won’t yet have a conclusion.

Examples of good conclusion statements are:

- “The water is safe to drink.”
- “The vaccine is safe and effective.”
- “I don’t know, but I’ll find out.”
- “We’ve been sharing all the information with you about ‘X’.”
- “We are doing a lot.”
- “We don’t plan further clean up.”
- “We could have done better back then.”
- “The food is safe to eat.”
- “The policy states that ...”
- “We can not provide that to you.”
- “We can provide that to you.”
- “I have bad news to deliver.”
- “You are okay.”
- “You have cancer.”
- “One thing that has to happen first is...”
- “The clean up is complete.”

Major traps in the conclusion step are:

- The conclusion statement doesn’t address the underlying point.
- The conclusion statement is too long.
- Facts are included in the conclusion, e.g., “The water is safe to drink because...” The facts are delivered separately in Step 5.

#### *Step 5: Facts*

Facts support your conclusion. Usually one, two, or three facts are sufficient. There is no right number of facts to support your conclusion. In some instances, you may only have one fact. Other times, you may have several facts and your stakeholders are interested in all of them. In those instances, use all your facts, if they are listening. It is crucial that you use your non verbal observations skills here. As you are speaking about the facts, determine whether your

stakeholders are listening to you. If not, stop talking about your facts and find out why they aren't listening.\*

Major traps in the fact step are:

- Over use of negative words and phrases
- The use of what would be considered jargon for the stakeholders
- Not observing if the stakeholders are listening

#### *Step 6: Future Action*

You may not always have or need a future action in your verbal response. There are many instances where you close/complete the response without a future action. However, it is usually important to have a future action when the stakeholders are concerned, fearful, distrustful, worried, irritated, confused, or misperceiving the facts.

Future action statements should have a "when" or time factor. If you don't have a "when," provide a "I will get back to you" with more specifics about what is next, i.e., a "when" you'll have a "when." Whatever your future action comment is, it should let the stakeholders know that they will continue to be involved unless, of course, their point/issue has been resolved.

Good future action statements are:

- "I don't know, but I'll call you tomorrow."
- "I don't know, but I'll let you know at the meeting next Tuesday."
- "I'll be happy to talk to you more after the meeting."
- "There's more information about this on our website/brochure/fact sheet," etc.
- "The next review will be held at 'X' on 'Y' day."
- "We won't know for at least 6 months, but I'll be glad to call/email once a month on our latest outlook."

Major traps in the future action step are:

- Not specific on the "when"

#### Caveats to the 6-Step Guideline:

- This is a helpful guideline, not a model.
- You may not have conclusion/facts, just a future action. In that case, your future action is actually your conclusion.
- Use transition statements. Sometimes you can use transition statements or phrases between Steps 3 and 4, Steps 4 and 5, and Steps 5 and 6.