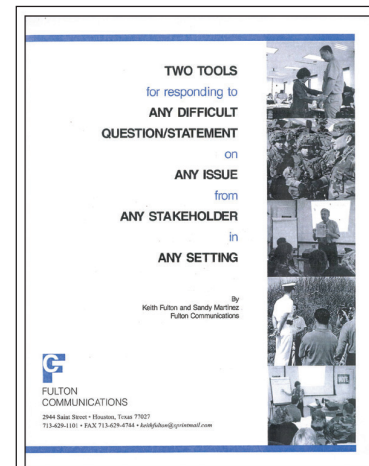


## Appendix H—Templates for Responding to Difficult Questions

Reprinted with permission from “Two Tools for Responding to Any Difficult Question/ Statement on Any Issue from Any Stakeholder in Any Setting by Keith Fulton and Sandy Martinez of Fulton Communications

### INTRODUCTION

“Will you guarantee me that \_\_\_?”  
“Isn’t it better to be safe than sorry?”  
“Why should I trust you?”  
“I think it’s riskier than you’re telling us!”  
“Why shouldn’t we be frightened about \_\_\_?”  
“You’re more concerned about protecting your organization than us!”  
“How do we know that someday science will discover something we don’t know today?”  
“Don’t you think you should have told us about this sooner?”  
“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. Sometimes questions and statements may be driven by one of these three communications arenas: 1) perceptions and misunderstandings of facts, data or science, 2) agendas such as political, personal, economic, historic, social and cultural, or 3) emotions such as fear and anger.

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, and even family life. Training is necessary to respond to these situations.

You may have said after a challenging conversation with a stakeholder, “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...”

Outlined below are two flexible, hands-on tools to train and prepare for any situation on any issue that will likely include challenging questions and statements. These tools are Generic Categories and a 4-Step Guideline. These tools work hand in hand for any issue and with both internal and external stakeholders.

NOTE: The applications of these tools do not apply to media communication. The media communications process is a unique form of stakeholder communication.

## TOOL #1 – GENERIC CATEGORIES

The Generic Category Tool for Responding to Challenging Questions and Statements is a tool for the best approach on **how to start a response** to questions and statements from any stakeholder on any issue. All questions and statements fall into one of the 12 categories so it is a tool that can be used throughout a conversation as questions and statements move from category to category. Usually the goal is to have a conversation in Category 11—Factual Questions. However, if the conversation starts or moves to emotional categories such as Categories 1, 3, and 12, this tool provides the best way to start your response and gives you the best chance to eventually have a factual discussion, Category 11, with the stakeholder.

Similarly, challenging questions that usually occur in Categories 3 through 8 are best handled by starting your response as shown in this tool. Again, this gives you the best chance to eventually have a factual discussion.

The table below provides just a few examples of each category, major traps to avoid and **how to start the response**—the last column titled, “Generic Nature of the Response”.

The best way to use this tool is to practice with a co-worker familiar with your communications issues.

| CAT # | CATEGORY TYPE  | EXAMPLES  | MAJOR TRAPS  | GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE  |
|-------|--|---|--|---|
| 1     | Ventilation—<br>A Highly Negative Emotional State/<br>Anger, irritation, disgust | <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>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Responding too early with factual information</li> <li>•Taking their comments personally</li> <li>•Inadequate nonverbal observation skills to detect if they are calming down</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•First, stay with empathy for awhile</li> <li>• Second, if they’ve calmed down somewhat based on your nonverbal observation, use open ended questions</li> <li>•Third, move to facts if they appear to be ready to discuss facts</li> </ul>  |
| 2     | What’s the question or statement?  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Babble, babble, babble.”</li> <li>• You can’t figure out what their point or question is</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Assuming you know the question or statement and answering it</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•A softball pushback statement such as, “I want to be sure and answer your question, so can you tell me more about...?”</li> </ul>   |
| 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> <li>•“You’re the agent of Satan!”</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Taking it personally</li> <li>•Not planning ahead of time on what is acceptable and what is not acceptable</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Acknowledge they are upset. “Clearly you are upset. What can I do to help you?”</li> <li>•How long you allow this will depend on several factors; size of the group, percent of people in a crowd being rude</li> </ul> <p>NOTE: this category mostly applies to public settings.</p> |

| CAT # | CATEGORY TYPE  | EXAMPLES  | MAJOR TRAPS   | GENERIC NATURE OF RESPONSE  |
|-------|--|---|---|---|
| 4     | Negative Allegation That is Not True                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Why are you lying about...?”</li> <li>•“You’re hiding and covering up.”</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Pushing back and reinforcing the negative allegation, e.g., “We didn’t lie.” Or “Why do you think we’re lying?”</li> <li>•“We didn’t cover up anything!”</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Start with emphasizing the positive reversal, e.g., the opposite of lying is telling the truth, the opposite of covering up is being open/ disclosing, etc. “Actually, we told the truth about that.”</li> </ul>                                    |
| 5     | Negative Allegation That is True                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Why did you lie about...?”</li> <li>•“You covered up.”</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Defensiveness or denial when in fact the allegation is true</li> <li>•Not getting approval for your response ahead of time from Command, Legal &amp; Public Affairs and others</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> <li>•“We could have done a better job.”</li> </ul>  |
| 6     | Guarantee/ 100% Assurance<br>No Risk Acceptable              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“Promise me this will never happen again.”</li> <li>•Can you guarantee me that...?”</li> <li>•“Why can’t you go to zero?”</li> <li>•“Isn’t it better to be safe than sorry?”</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Initially saying yes, no or maybe</li> <li>•Saying initially, “There are no guarantees” or “We can’t guarantee you that.”</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Emphasize your commitment and what you are doing</li> <li>•“What I can guarantee...”</li> <li>•“We’re moving towards zero.”</li> <li>•“We are making progress on...”</li> <li>•“We learned a lot from that and this is what we changed.”</li> </ul> |
| 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>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Evasive or defensive</li> <li>•Starting with Cost/Benefit discussions</li> <li>•Not always being aware of common ground opportunities</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <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>  |
| 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/old housing?”</li> </ul>                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Trying to avoid the setup point</li> <li>•Not recognizing that their setup is not their underlying issue. It is just a way of them saying, “You aren’t in my situation.”</li> </ul>       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Provide the info they request in the setup and let them go to their underlying issue, e.g., “I live ‘X’” or, “You’re right, I haven’t been in that situation.” Or “I don’t work in that building.”</li> </ul>                                       |
| 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>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Getting into the non-relevant discussion</li> <li>•Abruptly/rudely changing the subject</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Bridge back to relevant subject followed by possibly expressing a willingness to discuss another time or send to another source</li> <li>•“I’d be glad to discuss that with you another time, but tonight we’re here to...”</li> </ul>              |
| 10    | Policy   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“I don’t want to...”</li> <li>•“I think I deserve...”</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Talking to much about their situation and possibly misleading them in terms of policy options</li> <li>•Going into details when they may just want a yes or a no</li> </ul>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Stick with a clear statement of the policy and repeat if necessary</li> </ul>   |
| 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>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Jargon</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Provide a simple/direct response</li> <li>•Respond in language understandable to the stakeholder</li> <li>•Know when to stop talking—non-verbal observation skills</li> </ul>   |
| 12    | Fear   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•“I’m afraid of...”</li> <li>•“It’s really going to get bad.”</li> <li>•“I’m not feeling good about this because...”</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Not being truthful about what is not known</li> <li>•Trying to avoid fear</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Tell them what you do know</li> <li>•Be open about what you don’t know</li> <li>•Tell them when you’ll update them</li> </ul>   |

## TOOL #2 – 4-STEP GUIDELINE

The second tool is a 4-Step Guideline. This is a flexible guideline, not a model that you always use in a 4-step linear manner.

1. Empathy
2. Conclusion
3. Facts
4. Future Action

### Step 1 – Empathy

Sometimes it is appropriate to indicate to your stakeholders that you have some idea of what they are saying and/or some sense of their situation. Empathy is not sympathy and empathy is not agreement. Also, empathy is not “I know how you feel” because you don’t 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. Empathy can not be artificial or fake. It must be genuine. You cannot “pretend” to be empathic to their situation because stakeholders can tell if you are sincere by your nonverbals.

Empathetic statements are frequently not necessary. They are most helpful when dealing with anger, fear, crises, distrust and significant concerns. Empathy statements, if used, should usually be stated before any of the other steps.

**“Empathy is not sympathy and empathy is not agreement.”**



Personal connections can be made in an empathy statement only if the connection is 100% relevant. Examples of effective direct connection empathy statements would be, “I live in your neighborhood, too” or “My family also drinks that water” or “I’ve taken the vaccine” or “My child also attends that school” or “I went out there and saw that.” Empathy statements that would not be effective would be, “I work next to your community” or “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—in your words, body language and voice.

## Step 2 – Conclusion

The conclusion is usually the most difficult step in the 4-Step Response Guideline because in risk communication, the conclusion must be short, simple and precede the facts that support the conclusion. The conclusion should address the underlying point of the question or statement.

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.”
- “We are doing a lot.”
- “We don’t plan further clean up.”
- “We could have done better back then.”
- “You have to take the test.”
- “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 to wear the respirator.”
- “You do not have cancer.”
- “You do have cancer.”
- “One thing that has to happen first is…”
- “The clean up is complete.”
- “We don’t plan to spend any more money.”

**The conclusion is usually the most difficult step in the 4-Step Response Guideline.**

Also, if you are concerned that they may not be listening to your conclusion, you can use opening phrases such as:

- “Our conclusion is…”
- “The answer to your question is…”
- “What we learned was…”
- “The good news is…”
- “The unfortunate news is…”
- “I’m sorry to say…”

Major traps in the conclusion step are:

- The conclusion statement doesn’t address the underlying point or question made by the stakeholder
- The conclusion statement is too long
- Facts are included in the conclusion, e.g., “The water is safe to drink because ‘X, Y, Z.’” Instead, say, “The water is safe to drink” then pause to see if you were heard. Then, “The reason I say that is (facts).” The facts are delivered separately. First make sure they heard the conclusion.

You can use transition statements between your conclusion and facts:

“I say that because...”

“Because we have developed...”

- “The reason for that is...”

### Step 3 – 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. That is, they are actively listening. In those instances, use all your facts. It is crucial that you use your nonverbal skills here. As you are speaking, determine whether your stakeholders are listening to you. If not, stop talking about your facts and find out why they aren't listening, “Am I being clear?”

You can use transition statements between your conclusion and facts:

- “The reason I say that is...”
- “Why, because we have developed...”
- “The reason for that is...”

Major traps in this step are:

- Overuse of negative words and phrases unless your purpose is to change behavior.
- The use of what would be considered jargon for the stakeholders
- Not observing if the stakeholders are listening

### Step 4 – 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. Many times the conclusion is all you need, e.g., **We can't change policy.** However, it is usually important to have a future action when the stakeholders are concerned, fearful, distrustful, worried or confused.

Future action statements should have a “when”, a timing factor. If you don't have a “when,” then tell them “when” you'll have a “when”. “I'll call you next Friday. I may have that information then.” 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.”
- “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 mention a “when” or “when” you might have a “when.”

### **Summary of the 4-Step Guideline:**

- It is a guideline, not a model.
- You may not have conclusion/facts, just a future action. If so, the future action is also your conclusion, "I don't know. I'll call you tomorrow with more information."
- You can use transition statements between steps.
- This guideline is not for media communications.
- The guideline is not effective without good nonverbal skills, self awareness and observation skills.