

The Difficult Question Playbook

What to say when you know the law, but need a moment to find the words.



MADE FOR REAL PROFESSIONAL MOMENTS

Five difficult scenarios. One usable response structure. A seven-minute preparation worksheet and a printable desk card.

Make the answer useful before you make it detailed.

Under pressure, the temptation is to explain everything at once. Use these four moves to make your answer easier to follow without pretending the issue is simpler than it is.

1

NAME THE QUESTION

Show you understand the decision the listener needs to make.

"The question is whether we can proceed today."

2

LEAD WITH THE ANSWER

Give your current recommendation or position before the background.

"My recommendation is to wait."

3

PROTECT THE NUANCE

State the condition, uncertainty, or distinction that matters.

"The remaining liability wording is material."

4

MOVE THE CONVERSATION

Offer a next step or a decision path.

"I can send the two outstanding points this afternoon."

THE SHORT VERSION

"My recommendation is [position]. The important qualification is [limit]. The next step is [action]."

When the question puts your judgment on the spot.

These examples are templates, not universal answers. Replace the placeholders with your own accurate position, including material qualifications.

SITUATION 1

The client pushes back

In the room: “Other advisers say we can do this. Why are you being so cautious?”

Your objective: Hold the recommendation without sounding defensive.

LANGUAGE TO ADAPT

“I understand the commercial objective. My concern is [specific risk], not the objective itself. There are two possible paths: [A] and [B]. I recommend [choice] because [reason].”

Avoid: defending your expertise instead of explaining the decision.

SITUATION 2

You do not know yet

In the room: “Can you guarantee there will be no objection?”

Your objective: Be direct about uncertainty without guessing.

LANGUAGE TO ADAPT

“I cannot guarantee that. Based on what we know, [current assessment]. The open question is [specific unknown]. I will check [source or issue] and update you by [agreed time].”

Avoid: false certainty, or promising a deadline you cannot meet.

Regain the floor. Keep the meaning.

Clarity is not the same as being abrupt. You can guide the conversation while showing that you have heard the other person.

SITUATION 3

Someone cuts across the critical distinction

In the room: “We understand the background. Just give us your position.”

Your objective: Reclaim enough space to make the advice accurate.

LANGUAGE TO ADAPT

“Of course. My position is [position]. Let me add one distinction, because it changes the consequence: [essential point]. With that in mind, I suggest [next step].”

Avoid: restarting the entire explanation from the beginning.

SITUATION 4

Your explanation becomes too long

In the room: “Sorry, so what are you actually recommending?”

Your objective: Return to the headline without dropping a necessary caveat.

LANGUAGE TO ADAPT

“The recommendation is [action]. There are two reasons: [reason one] and [reason two]. The qualification you should keep in mind is [material caveat].”

Avoid: using detail to postpone stating the recommendation.

When they demand a yes or no.

A direct answer can still be properly qualified. The task is to name the decision threshold, not to remove it.

SITUATION 5

“Can we sign today, yes or no?”

If the answer is yes, with a condition:

“Yes, provided [specific condition] is satisfied. I would not treat that as optional.”

If the answer is no on the current facts:

“No, not on the information currently available. That could change if [missing fact or requirement] is confirmed.”

If the answer is genuinely not settled:

“I cannot responsibly give you a yes or no yet. The deciding issue is [precise unknown]. Here is how we can resolve it.”

YOUR REHEARSAL

Choose an upcoming yes-or-no question. Write one sentence that gives the current answer, and one that names the condition that could change it.

Keep this distinction: confidence is a communication quality. Certainty is a claim about the facts or law. They are not interchangeable.

Seven minutes before the meeting.

Use one real upcoming conversation. Write only what you can responsibly share on this copy. Keep client-identifying and privileged details out of any version you send to an external tool.

01

THE MOMENT

What meeting or interaction am I preparing for?

02

THE DECISION

What does the listener actually need to decide or understand?

03

THE HARD QUESTION

What is the most uncomfortable reasonable question they might ask?

04

MY FIRST SENTENCE

What is my clearest answer or recommendation today?

05

THE NON-NEGOTIABLE NUANCE

What condition, uncertainty, or distinction must remain?

06

THE NEXT MOVE

What will I propose, confirm, or follow up on?

Last 60 seconds: Say the answer aloud once in 20 to 30 seconds. Put the recommendation first. Check that the necessary qualification is still clear.

Practice the interruption before it happens.

AI can act as a demanding conversation partner. It cannot verify your legal position or decide which client information is safe to disclose. Use a fictionalized scenario and assess the legal content yourself.

COPY THIS PROMPT INTO YOUR AI TOOL

Act as a skeptical client in a fictional cross-border legal meeting. The scenario is: **[insert a general, invented situation]**. My role is to explain a recommendation clearly in English. Ask one challenging question at a time, wait for my response, and then push back once. Do not supply legal advice or invent legal authorities. After three rounds, give feedback on: (1) whether I stated my position early, (2) whether the important qualification was understandable, (3) whether my tone was firm and diplomatic, and (4) whether I gave a useful next step. Suggest one more concise way to structure each answer. Do not score legal accuracy.

MAKE THE NEXT ROUND HARDER

Ask for a surprise interruption and give yourself just 20 seconds to state the recommendation and its essential qualification.

AFTER YOUR REHEARSAL, ASK YOURSELF

- ☐ Did I give an answer before launching into the background?
- ☐ Did I keep the caveat that actually changes the advice?
- ☐ Could the listener identify the next decision or action?
- ☐ Did I sound like myself rather than a memorized script?

Confidentiality reminder: Never paste privileged communications, client names, identifying facts, internal documents, or unreleased matter details into an AI service unless your organization has approved that use and the applicable safeguards are in place.

PRINT / SAVE / KEEP BESIDE YOUR SCREEN

Your next answer, in four moves.

Name the question / Lead with the answer / Protect the nuance / Move forward

WHEN THE MOMENT ARRIVES

PUSHBACK

"My concern is [risk], not [objective]. I recommend [path] because [reason]."

I DO NOT KNOW YET

"What we know is [fact]. What remains open is [issue]. I will [next step]."

INTERRUPTION

"My position is [answer]. One distinction matters: [essential point]."

OVER-EXPLAINING

"The recommendation is [action]. The key reason is [reason]."

YES OR NO

"The answer today is [yes/no/not yet], subject to [condition]."

MAKE IT YOURS

The opening sentence I want to practice:

Want to go further? Explore [Command the Room](#) or [one-to-one coaching](#).