

Is deflection a good business tactic?

August 17 2021

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Politicians are especially deft at deflection, which is the tactic of answering a question with a question that steers the conversation in a different direction. It's not an easy skill, but former President Donald Trump mastered it, according to Wharton operations, information and decisions professor Maurice Schweitzer.

Schweitzer, whose research focuses on negotiation and communication,

pointed to Trump's confrontational style with reporters during press conferences and frequent refusal to give direct answers.

"In the 2016 presidential campaign he repeatedly was asked, "Are you going to release your taxes?" And he would reply, "What about [Hillary Clinton's] emails,'" Schweitzer says. "That's [deflection](#), and it worked."

Schweitzer and T. Bradford Bitterly, a management professor at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, are co-authors of a study titled, "The Economic and Interpersonal Consequences of Deflecting Direct Questions," which appeared in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. It's the first study to examine the costs and benefits of answering a question with a question, compared with answering with the truth, a lie, or declining to respond ("I prefer not to answer that question.")

Across four experiments, the researchers found that deflection can help people maintain a good impression with their conversational partner, avoid revealing potentially costly personal [information](#), and safeguard them from the inherent danger in lying.

"Deflection provides a method of avoiding answering questions that causes your counterpart to think that you are trying to learn more information instead of hiding information," Bitterly said. "In doing so, it is less interpersonally costly than declining to disclose and less risky than deception."

The study has practical implications beyond the political realm. Deflection is a tool that can be wielded during business negotiations, such as a sales deal or a [job interview](#), where information-gathering is critical to the outcome. If a hiring manager asks a job candidate to disclose their current salary, for example, the candidate could use deflection rather than answering truthfully or declining to share the

number. In one of their experiments, the scholars found that a humorous deflection to the salary question helped a job candidate maintain a favorable impression with the hiring manager while not giving away crucial information that could have lowered his salary offer.

"In job interviews, candidates are sometimes asked sensitive and even illegal questions like, "Are you married? Do you have kids?" Deflection seems like an opportunity to respond to a difficult question by redirecting the conversation and not facing the repercussions," Schweitzer said.

Declining to answer doesn't always work because that response itself signals information, he said. And deception is tricky because if the lie is uncovered, it creates reputational damage for the liar. But deflection does work, and it works best when it redirects the conversation back to the asker.

"People love talking about themselves," Schweitzer said. "There's so much to share about the most interesting topic around, which is me."

Breaking conversational rules

Schweitzer said deflection is intriguing because it violates longstanding norms of conversation, which were codified by linguist Paul Grice in the last century. One of those norms is that humans tend to answer questions truthfully. When asked about the weather, for example, a person doesn't respond with, "I'm very concerned about my aunt's health."

"If I ask you a question, the conversational rule is you answer it. We feel compelled to answer questions," Schweitzer said. "What I think makes deflection so interesting is we're violating the rule and we're invoking it."

While deflection may be an effective conversational alternative, it does

have pitfalls. First, successful deflection depends on the level of sophistication of both people in the conversation. The deflector may need some practice before getting it just right and not raising suspicion, and the asker also has a responsibility to recognize deflection and circle back to the question. In Trump's testier press conferences, reporters often redirected their questions after his deflection, usually to no avail.

"In our studies, after an individual deflected, it was surprising that the majority of their counterparts never followed up on their initial question, even when they were financially incentivized to do so," Bitterly noted.

Schweitzer said it's easy for people to get derailed when a conversation pivots from the key line of inquiry, "especially people who are narcissistic or easily distracted." The idea of shared conversational responsibility is one that he's exploring further. He's currently conducting research into the shared responsibilities in being deceived. For example what responsibilities do potential targets of deception have to ask questions, ask follow-up questions, and verify information?

"If you told a lie of omission, I never asked and that's more my fault," he said. "I think deflection is closer to that. I asked, you deflected, and I went along with it. It's active on your part, but it's still really my fault."

Bitterly is also interested in further research on effective business communication strategies.

"We all have information that we would like to protect for completely legitimate reasons, yet the number of methods we are taught for navigating situations where we are asked sensitive questions are surprisingly sparse," he said. "I'd like to continue to explore other strategies individuals can use for navigating these difficult situations."

More information: T. Bradford Bitterly et al, The Economic and

Interpersonal Consequences of Deflecting Direct Questions, *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2017). [DOI: 10.2139/ssrn.3063840](https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3063840)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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