

Being clear and precise increases your likability: Study

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A straight answer may be the best way to improve your likability. Credit: Pexels

It's a trait often associated with those in public life, but being vague may not be the best way to win friends and influence people according to a new James Cook University study.

In a new paper published in the [*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*](#), JCU Singapore Social Psychologist Dr. Deming (Adam) Wang and his team conducted nine experiments with Western and Asian participants to test how ambiguous and direct responses to questions were received.

Ambiguous responses were sometimes interpreted as a way to conceal the truth and sometimes as a sign of disinterest, making the responder seem less likable.

As a result, participants also reported lower inclination to befriend or date individuals who appeared to provide ambiguous responses.

"We largely focused on low stakes, everyday scenarios," Dr. Wang said.

"Often times you'll come across people who are not very social and don't really want to engage with you, so they'll brush you off with a perfunctory answer, which can often be ambiguous.

"Conversely, if well-meaning people are unknowingly damaging their [reputation](#) by being non-committal, this research may help increase their awareness of these social blind spots."

However, Dr. Wang said that reactions to ambiguous responses came with a caveat.

"A lot of people have this really dogmatic approach in that they just want to know the truth, as if truth-seeking is the only purpose of communication," he said.

"But in many scenarios in life, we're often inundated with conflicts of interest."

In questions that were of a sensitive nature, such as delivering bad personal news, giving a vague answer was found to "soften the blow" and favored over being more direct, which was perceived as harsh or hurtful.

"One of the sensitive questions in this study related to a person asking a doctor what percentage chance they had of surviving following a relapse into illness and the doctor responded the person had a 50% chance of recovery, which would be quite horrifying to hear," Dr. Wang said.

"But then in the ambiguous scenario, the doctor said "There's reason to be optimistic," which may be rather rosy response but it provides a kernel of hope over the blunt truth."

Dr. Wang said while vague responses had their places in society, the study showed it was unnecessary in everyday, low-stakes scenarios.

"In that context, people just want a clear response, a straight answer," he said.

"It's about being aware of the simultaneous goals we have in communication and prioritizing what's the best approach.

"And it's also about awareness of the concept of language [ambiguity](#) in general. This is because while people often provide an ambiguous answer on purpose, there are also classes of situations in which ambiguous responses are provided unintentionally, such as when the responder is tired, distracted, or genuinely unable to recall something with precision."

More information: Deming Wang et al, Give Me a Straight Answer: Response Ambiguity Diminishes Likability, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* (2023). [DOI: 10.1177/01461672231199161](https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672231199161)

Provided by James Cook University

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