

# How To Say ‘I Don’t Know’ With Grace And Authority—A Leadership Lesson From Ta-Nehisi Coates



**Hanna Hart** Contributor

Careers

*I'm an executive coach writing on leadership and personal development*

f

f

f



NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

“I know that to scale up I should [get out of the weeds](#) and focus on contributing at a higher strategic level. I’ve got to empower my team, especially the managers who report to me, to make decisions. I can’t be *in* everything.” My client, Amir, who leads a policy team in a large tech company, is at a growth point in his career. He’s read the management books that tell him to *get work done through others*. However, within his company culture, “The reality is that knowledge is currency. And if you are not in-the-know, you risk losing credibility.” So he is caught. On the one hand, he fears that he will be exposed as being out-of-the-loop, and on the other hand, he knows he has to get beyond his own knowledge and expertise in order to be an effective leader.

We’ve all heard that “knowledge is power,” and we live in a so-called “[knowledge economy](#).” But for managers and leaders, it is essential to liberate their minds from some of the minutiae of knowing the details to free up mental processing space for the bigger picture as well as to hire people who have expertise beyond their own and let them shine. This requires being willing to say, “I don’t know” with confidence, grace and authority.

Saying, “I don’t know” with authority may seem oxymoronic, but it is part of [being a leader](#). Journalist, author and National Book Award Winner [Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) did it beautifully in his [Civil Conversations interview](#) with Krista Tippett. During the audience Q&A, Coates was asked for advice on how to teach history. His response: “I have no teaching advice at all. I was a terrible student. I failed my way through high school. I don’t know how I got into Howard University, but I failed my way through that too. I just — I don’t know. I have horrible advice, in terms of teaching.” The audience laughed, then waited for him to answer the question. “I’m serious,” he said, “Because one of the things that annoys me is, people act like they know everything.... Come on, be clear about what you know and what you don’t know.”

Coates continued, “I’m gonna talk about what I don’t know. And listen, here’s the thing that happens. You are well-researched and knowledgeable about one thing that you’ve been thinking about a long time and you’ve been reading about a long time. That does not make you well-researched and knowledgeable about all things... I get this title, ‘public intellectual,’ and I don’t like it, because what it sounds to me is, like, people who B.S. They’re smart about one thing, and so they play into this notion that they’re smart about everything else.... If you want to ask me about writing, I can [talk about it] up one side, down the other. I got you. I’m with you, because I’ve struggled with that.”

What makes this so powerful is that he owns his not-knowing as well as his expertise. The result is that his credibility is enhanced because he steadfastly refuses to B.S. You may not be a Pulitzer finalist, but here are some lessons for leaders and managers wrangling with the limits of their knowledge:

1. **Know your value.** If your highest value as a leader is in the big picture, commit to having a clear understanding of overall context and developing a point of view. If you are not going to know the details, be able to see the context, the system, the strategy.
2. **Cultivate resources.** In order to rely on your lieutenants and your team, you must commit to their development. Make sure that they have adequate support and resources, give them context and guidance and rely on them. Defer gracefully to others. Provide them the opportunity to be the authority and to shine.
3. **Reframe the question.** Sometimes, the question that is being asked is not the right question. Have the presence of mind to take a step back, make your own inquiry or reframe the question.
4. **Take responsibility for what you don’t know.** Acknowledge the validity of a question, own your ignorance and commit to finding an answer or providing a resource.
5. **Listen deeply and actively.** Remember that often your greatest gift is not your knowledge, but your ability to listen and reflect. Expertise is inherently limited; curiosity is boundless.
6. **Get comfortable with ambiguity.** Many questions don’t have a clear answer. Rather than seeing a question as an opportunity to demonstrate your worth, engage with it and with your colleagues and solve together. Do not shy away from ambiguity; instead, name it and be willing to offer imperfect ideas for others to build on, challenge assumptions and recognize complexity and uncertainty.
7. **Absolutely refuse to B.S.** Don’t risk your credibility by asserting a view without basis. Your reputation depends on it.

Follow me on [Twitter](#). Check out my [website](#).



**Hanna Hart**

I am an executive coach with more than ten years experience in business, tech, law, foundations and other organizations. I help leaders to understand themselves better, ... [Read More](#)