

TOOL 12

When Your Mind Goes Blank

30 response cards for the moments a new admin freezes: what to say, and what to do next.

Inside

The 10-second reset · How to use the cards

When you don't know the answer · 5 cards

When you made a mistake · 5 cards

When someone is upset · 5 cards

When there's too much · 5 cards

When instructions clash · 5 cards

When you need to ask again · 5 cards

Three sentences for almost any situation · Make your own cards

Your mind goes blank. That's normal.

Under pressure, most people lose their words for a moment. You don't need a perfect answer. You need a next step. These cards give you one.

The 10-second reset

- 1 **Breathe out slowly.** A long breath out gives you a second to think.
- 2 **Repeat it back.** "So you need the March report?" It buys time and checks you understood.
- 3 **Choose one:** answer it, check it ("Let me check and come back to you by 3"), or ask ("Which should I do first?").

How to use the cards

- ☐ Read all 30 once this week, in a quiet moment, so the words are familiar before you need them.
- ☐ Star the five you are most likely to need in your job.
- ☐ Take a photo of those pages for your phone, or print them, cut along the dashed lines and keep them in your notebook.
- ☐ When it happens, don't search for words. Read the card, say it in your own way, then do the "Then".

WHY IT WORKS

Having the words ready ahead of time means you don't have to find them under pressure. It's the same reason pilots and hospital teams use checklists for stressful moments: nobody has to rely on memory at the worst time.

When you don't know the answer

Nobody expects you to know everything in your first month. They do expect you to find out.

1 Someone asks for "the usual"

SAY

"I'm still learning the routines here. Can you show me what the usual looks like, so I get it right?"

THEN

Write the answer in your desk manual, so you only ask once.

2 You don't know the answer

SAY

"Good question. Let me check, and I'll come back to you by [time]."

THEN

Write the question and the time down now. Come back before that time, even if it's only to say you're still checking.

3 You don't understand the instruction

SAY

"Just to make sure I get this right: you'd like me to [repeat it back]. By when?"

THEN

Send a two-line email that confirms what you agreed.

4 A name, file or system you've never heard of

SAY

"I haven't come across that yet. Where can I find it, or who should I ask?"

THEN

Add it to your Who's Who Map or your desk manual.

5 Only your boss can answer

SAY

"I'll need to check with [boss's name] on that. Can I come back to you this afternoon?"

THEN

Add it to your list for your boss, with the person's name and their deadline.

REMEMBER

Three words that buy you time: "Let me check." Then always come back.

When you made a mistake

Everyone makes mistakes in a new job. What people remember is how you handled it.

6 You sent the wrong file or email

SAY

"Apologies, I sent the wrong version. Here is the correct one. Please disregard my earlier email."

THEN

Send the correction quickly, before anyone acts on the wrong version.

7 You forgot to do something

SAY

"I missed this, I'm sorry. I'm doing it now, and you'll have it by [time]."

THEN

Do it first. Then set a reminder so it can't slip again.

8 You double-booked a meeting

SAY

"I've made a scheduling error: two meetings at [time]. I suggest moving [one] to [new time]. Shall I do that?"

THEN

Bring the fix together with the problem. Never bring only the problem.

9 You gave someone wrong information

SAY

"I need to correct something I told you earlier. The right [date or figure] is [x]. Sorry for the confusion."

THEN

Correct it in writing too, so there is only one clear version.

10 Your boss points out your mistake

SAY

"You're right, thank you for catching it. I've fixed it, and next time I'll [check step]."

THEN

Keep it short. No long explanations or excuses.

REMEMBER

*Own it. Fix it. Say what happens next.
One short apology is enough.*

When someone is upset

When someone is upset, your job is not to win. It is to understand, write it down and find the right next step.

11 An angry caller

SAY

"I can hear this is frustrating. Let me take the details so the right person can help you."

THEN

Write down their name, number, the issue and what they want. Don't promise what you can't deliver.

12 A visitor has been kept waiting

SAY

"I'm sorry for the wait. [Name] is just finishing a meeting. Can I get you some water while you wait?"

THEN

Let your boss know quietly that the visitor is here, and how long they have waited.

13 Your boss seems unhappy

SAY

At a good moment: "Is there anything I should be doing differently? I'd rather know early."

THEN

Don't assume it's about you. Ask once, listen and write it down.

14 A coworker is short with you

SAY

"Sorry, I can see you're busy. When is a better time for me to ask about [x]?"

THEN

Don't take it personally in your first month. Notice when they are less busy.

15 Someone blames you

SAY

"Let me look into what happened, and I'll come back to you with the facts."

THEN

Check your emails and notes first. Answer with facts, not feelings.

REMEMBER

*Their mood is information, **not a verdict on you.***

When there's too much

When everything feels urgent, you don't have to decide alone. Ask, then write the order down.

16 Three "urgent" requests at once

SAY

"I have three urgent items: [A], [B] and [C]. Which should I do first?"

THEN

Ask the person who sets your priorities, usually your boss. Write the order down.

17 You're behind

SAY

"I'm behind on [x] because of [y]. I can finish it by [new time]. Does that work?"

THEN

Say it before the deadline, not after.

18 A last-minute task from your boss

SAY

"Yes. To fit this in, should [current task] wait until tomorrow?"

THEN

Let your boss choose what moves. Then update anyone who was waiting.

19 A request you can't do today

SAY

"I can't do this today, but I can do it [tomorrow morning]. Would that work?"

THEN

Offer a real time, and put it straight into your calendar.

20 You need a moment before you answer

SAY

"Let me think about that for a minute, and I'll come back to you."

THEN

Take five minutes. A considered answer is better than a fast wrong one.

REMEMBER

*When you're overloaded, ask: **"Which should I do first?"***

When instructions clash

Conflicting instructions are normal in a busy office. Choosing between people is not your job. Asking is.

21 Two people ask for different things

SAY

"I've had two different requests on this: [A] would like x, and [B] would like y. Which should I follow?"

THEN

Ask your boss to decide. Don't choose between them yourself.

22 "That's not how we do it here"

SAY

"Thanks for telling me. Can you show me how it's usually done?"

THEN

Write the process down and follow it until you understand why it works that way.

23 A task outside your role

SAY

"Happy to help where I can. Let me check with [boss's name] that this fits my priorities."

THEN

Check once. Your boss decides what your job includes.

24 Someone asks for confidential information

SAY

"I'm not able to share that, but I can ask [boss's name] to get in touch with you."

THEN

When in doubt, don't share. Let your boss know about the request.

25 Your boss changes their mind

SAY

"No problem. So the new plan is [repeat it back]. I'll update [x] and let [y] know."

THEN

Update everyone affected, and your own notes. Changing plans is normal.

REMEMBER

*When two people want different things, **your boss decides.***

When you need to ask again

Asking twice is far better than guessing once. Ask well, and nobody minds.

26 You've forgotten what they told you

SAY

"I want to get this right. Could you remind me of [x]? I'll write it down this time."

THEN

Write it in your desk manual straight away.

27 You need to ask a second time

SAY

"Sorry to come back to this. I've done [part], and I'm stuck on [part]."

THEN

Show what you've already tried. It makes the second question easy to answer.

28 You need more details

SAY

"Before I start, can I check three things: what exactly, by when, and who it's for?"

THEN

Use what, when and who for every new task.

29 You need a decision from a busy boss

SAY

"I need a quick decision on [x]: A or B? I'd suggest A, because [reason]."

THEN

Give options and your recommendation. Busy bosses decide faster that way.

30 You're fairly sure, but not completely

SAY

"I'm planning to [x] unless you'd prefer otherwise. Is that OK?"

THEN

It shows initiative and keeps your boss in control.

REMEMBER

*Asking is part of the job. **Guessing is the risk.***

Three sentences for almost any situation

"Which should I do first?"