

Email tip: When you say that something didn't work, you have to say how it didn't work

 devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20100421-00

April 21, 2010



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I illustrate this point with an imaginary conversation, inspired by actual ones I've seen (and, occasionally, been a frustrated party to).

From: X

I want to do ABC, but I don't have a DEF. Anybody know of a workaround?

Somebody has an idea:

From: Y

Try mounting this ISO file into a virtual machine and trying the ABC from there.

Unfortunately, it didn't work:

From: X

I tried that, but it didn't work. Any other ideas?

When somebody suggests a troubleshooting step or a workaround, but when you try it and it doesn't work, you need to say *how* it didn't work. The person who made the suggestion had some expectation that it *would* work, and just saying that it didn't work will probably just generate an unhelpful response like "Well, try again." Which doesn't help anybody. In this example (which I just made up), a better response from X would be something like this:

- "I tried that, but it didn't work. Virtual PC refused to load the ISO image, putting up the error message "The CD image could not be captured. You may not have the proper access privileges to the CD image files.""
- "I tried that, but it didn't work. Virtual PC loaded the ISO image, but when I tried to view the contents of the CD, I got 'Not ready reading drive D.'"
- "I tried that, but it didn't work. Virtual PC loaded the ISO image, but when I double-clicked the ABC file, I got the same error that I got when I tried to do ABC directly."

Each of these is a different failure mode that suggests a different course of action.

And then the response probably won't be, "Well, try again."

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