

## 7 Smart Ways to (Literally) Play Dumb



Communications consultant **Geoffrey Tumlin** said he was motivated to write *Stop Talking, Start Communicating: Counterintuitive Secrets to Success in Business and in Life* after coming to a simple and sobering realization: In the last 15 years, as technology has changed how we talk to each other and made it easier than ever to communicate, people's communication skills have actually deteriorated.

"We're getting better and better at easy communication — at communications checkers — but we're increasingly getting worse at communications chess, the more sophisticated or harder communication skills, like bargaining, offering emotional support, and delivering bad news," Tumlin says. "The more we type, text and talk to each other, the more people are realizing that we're understanding each other less."

Being able to communicate more easily and frequently -- thanks to email, texting and social media -- also increases the chances that we'll make mistakes that could jeopardize our personal and business relationships. That may explain why it's not unusual anymore for a politician, a celebrity, a business leader or some other public figure to make headlines for saying something stupid.

"I can't build a relationship in a sentence. It can take days, months and years. But I can destroy it in a sentence," Tumlin cautions.

So what to do?

We can all start by talking a little less, he says. The key to being a successful communicator has to do with verbal restraint, which will help keep you out of trouble. If something does go wrong, the next tack is conversational containment -- thinking about what you want say carefully and limiting the back-and-forth dialogue to stop trouble from escalating. "If you want to know the hallmark between a decent communicator and a great communicator -- it's the ability to not say what's on your mind," Tumlin says. "What we're trying to do in any interaction that goes wrong is prevent fatal damage to the relationship."

If you're in situation where someone else says something stupid, inappropriate or "ill advised," Tumlin's advice is: Play dumb. Literally. By ignoring what the person said, and not responding, you give them time to "self-correct" — to say, "That's not what I meant to say" or "I can't believe I just said that. Sorry." It also allows the relationship, whether it's a personal or professional one, to continue on, hopefully undamaged.

First, do something hard every day. "You have to pick an interaction that's more difficult than email or texting and do it everyday...Have that conversation you wouldn't have -- walk into the next room rather than send a text message, or pick up the phone and call and deliver real-time emotional support. Even leave a voice message -- that's harder than just sending an email."

### "Playing Dumb"

"Playing dumb illustrates the power of communication in its absence and is one of the smartest, most altruistic moves you can keep in your conversational toolkit," Tumlin says. He offers seven smart ways to play dumb.

**1. Put on your best poker face.** When an I-can't-believe-she-just-said-that moment happens, your first instinct is probably to react physically: You might roll your eyes, sigh, raise your eyebrows, or even throw your hands in the air. But remember: Actions speak just like words, so if you're serious about defusing the episode rather than escalating it, you'll need to pretend that you're competing in the World Series of Poker.

**2. Don't overplay your hand.** Making an effort not to react to a dumb statement is considerate—but don't take the act too far. Remember, you're in the midst of a real-life interaction, not an after-dinner game of Charades. Your "performance" needs to be believable. "Be inconspicuous," Tumlin says. "If you oversell your dumbness by acting totally clueless or befuddled like one of the Three Stooges, you'll draw unwanted attention to your actions. You may even cause the other person to double down on her unproductive words, repeating them in an attempt to help you understand. Dumbness works best when you subtly allow the other person to walk back from her ill-advised words."

**3. Muzzle your inner know-it-all.** It's human nature to want to be right. However, the urge to prove another person wrong often gets people into hot water and torpedoed conversations. Correcting another person can spark arguments, damage the way he or she perceives you, and harm the underlying relationship. Nobody likes a know-it-all, and nobody likes being contradicted. "Unless something crucial hangs in the balance, if you hear someone misquote a statistic, mangle a story, or make a logical error, don't whip out your smartphone and start searching the Internet to prove her wrong."

**4. Don't expect it to be easy.** Playing dumb sounds simple: Just don't react. And it yields compelling relational benefits. But despite its usefulness, don't expect playing dumb to be easy. It may be difficult to override your instincts—and your desire—to respond with comebacks, criticisms, and corrections. Says Tumlin: "As conversations pick up a rhythm, or as our inbox stacks up, we feel increasing pressure to respond when it's 'our turn.' Playing dumb requires us to resist the urge to reply."

**5. Don't play dumb too often.** There's a line between playing dumb for relational harmony and playing dumb because you are in denial about a clear and present relational problem. If you find yourself playing dumb frequently, it may be a sign of a larger issue that needs to be addressed.

**6. Don't feed the fire.** Tumlin says it's easiest and best when your silence and intentional gaps provide enough room for someone to self-correct. You can play dumb and still talk, as long as you don't add anything to the conversation that redirects attention back to the offending words. If you feel like you need to say something after your conversational partner says something stupid, use neutral continuers like "um-hum," "I see," "Okay," or "I hear you."

**7. Pick and choose your targets.** Build a mental list of people with whom you might need to make a special effort to play dumb, so that when you interact with them you can remind yourself beforehand to keep your reactions on a leash. "If a key client tends to make off-color jokes after a couple of happy-hour cocktails, start inviting him to breakfast instead. Or if Aunt Sarah can't resist criticizing your housekeeping every time she comes over, try to visit at her home instead."

If you want to sharpen your overall communication skills, Tumlin offers these two tips.

Second, stop thinking of communications as what you say, and start thinking about it as what you don't say. "That gets to the playing dumb piece. Understand that communication can't always be part of the solution because hyper-communication is the problem."

And remember, he reminds me, it's not the technology that's to blame. New communications tools have revolutionized the way we interact and Tumlin says they can be "wonderful enablers." So the next time you read about someone tweeting something ridiculous, just remember: It's not the technology that's the problem. It's the user. -- *Connie Guglielmo*