

Seven Rules For Making The Sound Of Silence Work In Your Favor

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by Geoffrey Tumlin, author of "**Stop Talking, Start Communicating: Counterintuitive Secrets to Success in Business and in Life**"

These days, it's difficult to watch the evening headlines or scroll through a news website without seeing that a politician, celebrity, athlete, or business leader is in the spotlight for saying something stupid. Sure, you might laugh — or wince — at these gaffes and wonder aloud why *anyone* would ever think saying *that* was a good idea. But secretly, a part of you may sympathize with the clueless celebrity or the foot-in-mouth politician, because you've seen similar things happen in your own conversations: Jim in accounting shares a little too much about his weekend during a lunch conversation, your boss says something completely loony about a client on the way to a sales call, or your coworker Sarah lays a nutty conspiracy theory on you during an informal chat in the hallway.



Yes, dumb statements are a fact of life — but you can reduce the negative impact of someone else's dumb statements by playing dumb yourself.

Playing dumb means that you pretend like you didn't see it or hear it when another person does or says something ill advised. This strategy benefits you, the other person, and the underlying relationship.

Specifically, playing dumb allows your conversational partner time to self-correct (e.g., "That's not what I meant" or "I can't believe I just said that, sorry") after an ill-conceived statement. This valuable conversational space allows hasty and counterproductive words to disappear without comment, thus preventing unnecessary damage to the underlying relationship.

Playing dumb is an especially smart strategy in the digital age where we are doing so much more talking, texting, and tweeting. Because communication and people are fundamentally imperfect, more communication means that there will be more incidents that require the silent treatment.

Here are seven rules to help you smarten up by playing dumb when you see or hear something stupid:

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 instead of escalating it, you'll need to pretend that you're competing in the World Series of Poker.

Playing dumb is considerate when it's done discreetly, but it's embarrassing to the other person when it's overt. So while you're being silent, also keep your eyes from rolling at whatever ridiculous thing you've just heard.

2. ...but 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, so you need to make sure your "performance" is believable.

Be inconspicuous. 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.

Remember, 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 torpedoes conversations. Correcting another person can spark arguments, damage the way he perceives you, and harm the underlying relationship. Remember, 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. And when someone lays a goofy conspiracy theory or profoundly loopy worldview on you, don't treat it as your moral obligation to set him straight. Playing dumb means letting go of the need to be right about everything.

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's often difficult to override your instincts — and your desire — to respond with comebacks, criticisms, and corrections.

Playing dumb is challenging because we feel obligated to respond when spoken to or to reply when we receive a message. 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.

Playing dumb is also difficult because, frankly, we like to pin the tail on the donkey. We get guilty pleasure when we hold someone to their illogical and goofy words, even though this is totally counterproductive. Always keep in mind that the most important thing is to move the discussion away from the offending words and give the other person an opportunity to self-correct — not to gain short-term satisfaction by hanging the dumb words around your conversational partner's neck.

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 warning sign of a larger issue that you need to address.

Fundamentally, playing dumb involves a tradeoff: We sacrifice part of a conversation in the short term in order to preserve an underlying relationship. Don't misuse the technique to avoid important relational issues. There are other communication tools to help you handle relationship problems.

6. Don't feed the fire.

It's easiest and best when your silence and intentional gaps provide enough room for someone to self-correct. But 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, you can use neutral continuers like *um-hum, I see, okay, or I hear you.*

There's a danger that the other person will hear your neutrality as a tacit approval of his statements, so use them selectively and exert your right to remain completely silent when you hear something so offensive that you don't feel comfortable being neutral. If your conversational partner asks about your lack of reaction, you can say you have nothing to add, politely request a topic switch, or just start talking about something else.

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.

You might find that it's beneficial to play dumb more consistently with bosses, key clients, and important colleagues, where you have less leverage to alter their behavior. You might also choose to play dumb with older

relatives who have a penchant for saying things that drive you crazy but don't really harm you.

In these cases, your long-term strategy might be to listen and comment when necessary, without adding anything substantive, or you could change the underlying conditions to limit the instances of problematic communication. 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.

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. We exert a profound influence on interactions with what we don't say, type, or forward. And in today's communication environment where speed routinely trumps deliberation and where restraint is often abandoned by the desire for self-expression, playing dumb is a tool that's both necessary and effective.'



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