

Want to Be a Better Communicator? Shut Up and Listen

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Good communication is vital for building healthy relationships both in and out of the workplace. A few well-chosen words can mean the difference between getting that long-awaited raise or getting the boot; resolving a dispute with a friend or making a new enemy.

But getting words to work for you, instead of against you, is a skill that's difficult to master, especially in the digital age. With so many ways to broadcast a message, it's easy to forget that, sometimes, what you don't say is the most important part of a conversation.

Geoffrey Tumlin, founder and CEO of Mouthpiece Consulting LLC, a communication consulting firm and president of On-Demand Leadership, a leadership development company, understands that silence is golden when it comes to communication. His new book, "Stop Talking, Start Communicating: Counterintuitive Secrets to Success in Business and in Life," encourages readers to do what doesn't come naturally — shut up and listen.

In an email interview with BusinessNewsDaily, Tumlin explains why communication is suffering in the age of text messages, tweets and Facebook friendships and offers up some thought-provoking advice on how to make everyday interactions — with co-workers and loved ones alike — more effective and meaningful.

BusinessNewsDaily: When it comes to effective communication, what's more important: good speaking or good listening?

Geoffrey Tumlin: Although both are important, conversations deteriorate much faster when there are listening deficiencies. People forgive speaking deficiencies like miscommunication, mistakes, and confusion more easily than they tolerate listening violations like interrupting, ignoring, and being distracted. Careful listening, and demonstrating that you are paying attention to your conversational partner, can counteract many spoken communication deficiencies.

BND: In your book, you suggest that today's tech-centered view of communication is problematic. How so? Is there a solution? **G.T.:** A tech-centered view of communication encourages five unrealistic expectations of communication:

Unrealistic expectation #1: Our new devices have made communication easier. Just because our new devices enable us to reach out and touch someone with a few simple clicks, that doesn't mean that communication itself has gotten any easier.

Unrealistic expectation #2: We successfully communicate each time we hit the "Send" button. Our devices have greatly simplified the sending and receiving of messages, but there's more to communication than that. Communication doesn't occur until the other person understands our message, and that's become the missing link in far too many conversations.

Unrealistic expectation #3: Better communication technologies mean better communication. Better communication technology doesn't lead to better communication, especially when the new tools encourage speed and convenience over thoughtfulness and deliberation, and when they fragment our communication, scatter our attention, and constantly distract us from the issues at hand.

Unrealistic expectation #4: What I want to say is the most important part of communication. With the promise of instant communication whenever we want it and however we want it, self-expression seems to be the king of the Internet age. But meaningful and effective communication is possible only when we consistently place our conversational goals ahead of our conversational impulses.

Unrealistic expectation #5: Communicating to an audience doesn't require any special consideration. One of the greatest deceptions of the digital age is that sending a message to dozens of people is just as easy as sending a message to one person. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

We currently expect too much from our digital devices and too much from each other. Until we turn that around by realigning our expectations about what our communication technologies can and can't accomplish, we'll continue to feel strangely disconnected and unfulfilled, in spite of having the most powerful communication devices in history in the palm of our hands.

BND: What are some things for us all to keep in mind before beginning any personal or professional conversation? G.T.: What you want to accomplish is more important than what you want to say.

The person in front of you is more important than the feeling inside of you. It's not communication until there's understanding.

When a conversation goes off the rails, protect the underlying relationship. As long as the underlying relationship is preserved, you can return to the conversation.

BND: What about a particularly important conversation, like asking for a raise or resolving a disagreement with a loved one? Any tips for handling those "high-stakes" conversations?

G.T.: Preparation makes an enormous difference in strategic conversations (i.e. conversations where you are trying to accomplish something), and especially when the stakes are high. The acronym GAS will help you prepare for conversations that matter.

Goal: What are you trying to accomplish? If you can't clearly identify your conversational goal, you aren't ready for a strategic conversation. Be able to state your goal in one sentence (I want Jenny to stop interrupting me during staff meetings; I want Jim to listen to my new client ideas), and orient to it if the conversation gets off track.

Approach: What communication strategy will help you achieve your conversational goal? Although there are many communication strategies you could select, like evidentiary-based appeals, emotional appeals, and fear appeals, the best conversational approach is to identify and communicate overlapping interests. Find the overlap between what you want (your goal) and the other person's interests, and you'll greatly lubricate the persuasive process.

Start: How will you begin the conversation to reduce reflexive resistance? It's incredibly hard to accomplish your objective if your first few sentences trigger an immediate no. Think through the best way to open the conversation so the other person doesn't feel constrained or pressured by the discussion early on. Let him know early that he'll have the time he needs to consider your request, to ask questions, and to gather additional information. Take some pressure off at the start to give your conversational goal the best chance of success.

BND: In Chapter 3, you call digital devices the "robber barons" of our time. Please explain.

G.T.: Digital devices are the robber barons of our time for three reasons: (1) they are highly distracting, (2) they often draw us into trivial pursuits and mindless time expenditures, and (3) they often hijack our priorities by making us too easily accessible to other people's schedules and agendas.

Our smart phones — once sincerely marketed as time-saving and productivity enhancing devices — now consume ever-increasing quantities of our time and attention. As a result, it's far too easy to become engaged in and engrossed with things that don't really matter, while our strategic priorities drift.

BND: Why is less more when it comes to communication?

G.T.: Although it's difficult to measure the trouble you avoid, the words you choke back, and the dustups you steer clear of, these invisible accomplishments are some of your most important communication achievements. Restraint — the ability to not say the damaging words that you'd really love to say — is the competency that distinguishes the very best communicators from everyone else.

Some of the best evidence that your communication skills are improving will come from words that go unspoken and from trouble that never materializes. The fastest way to reliably improve your communication is to stop talking.

BND: What are some tips for avoiding damaging conversations in the workplace?G.T.: Restrain your cave brain.

Delay your responses until you aren't upset, agitated, or frustrated. Don't let your emotions dictate your words

Resist the urge to prove someone wrong. Eliminate witty comebacks, put-downs, and insults.

[See also: How Communication Breakdowns Hurt Companies]BND: How can asking better questions improve relationships?

G.T.: Questions aren't always neutral, and they make a surprisingly large number of conversations worse. Bad conversations damage relationships when they are really criticisms in disguise, or when they function like hostile interrogation tools.

The good news is that some of what you are currently considering as relationship problems really reflect questioning deficiencies. Faulty questions —unanswerable questions, unwanted questions, leading questions, and loaded questions — all add strain to interactions and damage relationships.

Questions change the trajectory of an interaction. They are powerful communication tools that we don't take seriously enough. Taking the time to form better questions and then to ensure that the intent behind your questions is understood can help counteract the damage that faulty questions often cause.

Good questions facilitate good communication, but bad questions drive people apart. Think before questioning and you'll prevent conversational explosions.

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