

The seven second rule: Navigating silence

In my house, the chatter is fairly constant. When I go out with friends, there's rarely a gap of more than a few seconds before someone feels compelled to say something. When it's quiet in the car for more than three seconds, my young daughter asks: "What's wrong?" I didn't realise how uncomfortable I was with silence in conversations until I began working in places where people were comfortable with silence. Over the years I've become more at ease with silence, but it can still feel awkward, largely because I was programmed to feel that way from a very young age.

When kids in the US misbehave, they're often given a time-out, which usually means that they have to stay in part of a room by themselves and are forbidden to make a noise or converse with anyone else. When they have successfully completed their silent time, they are allowed to return to the land of noise. The message is quite clear to most kids: Silence equals punishment. Talking equals reward.

Later in life people are introduced to the 'silent treatment' as a means of expressing displeasure with someone. Nothing makes me beg forgiveness faster than this close-lipped type of communication. For me and most other US natives, silence creates a strong sense of discomfort and often signals that someone is unhappy with us.

There's an experiment that I like to do in my workshops in which I pause after completing a thought, as if I'm contemplating my next statement. But instead of taking a one- to two-second pause, I remain silent for about five to seven seconds – and I observe what happens with my audience. In the US, the majority of the audience starts to cough, laugh,

talk to themselves out loud, and get wiggly in their seats right around the three-second mark. The signs of discomfort just increase as the time passes. Afterward, I ask the audience how my silence made them feel. For many, it's excruciatingly awkward.

Participants tell me that they think that I forgot what I was about to say or I had a sudden realization – like leaving the stove on in my house or having missed my mother's birthday. Next I ask participants to extrapolate: "What is your reaction when a question you ask is met with silence, whether it be by a colleague, customer, friend, or family member?" People native to the US generally assume that their question wasn't understood by the listener, or that the listener didn't know the answer or simply didn't like the question. Again, they tend to see silence as a negative.

When I put this question to people from other cultures, however, they may tell me that their first interpretation of the silence is to assume the listener





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is thinking, taking time to formulate a thoughtful and accurate response to the question. In their way of communicating, longer silences are expected and appreciated. People from these cultures don't get uncomfortable until about the seven-second mark, if at all. I recently asked a group of Japanese participants in my workshop what their tolerance for an extended silence was, and the response from one participant was "About thirty seconds."

In just the same way that I was programmed early in life to associate silence with negativity, people from other cultures may have been programmed to associate silence with positive attributes like thoughtful consideration and harmony. This has been my experience in many countries like Oman, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, where the saying, 'Speak a good word or remain silent' goes a long way in building relationships and reputations.

In many cultures, kids are conditioned from an early age to tolerate silences of five seconds or more – which others would consider prolonged. A client of mine from Finland recalls being taught from a young age not to rush into responses; to take time to contemplate questions and respond thoughtfully. She explained to me that during conversations, there are very few 'Uh-huhs', 'Yeps', 'Hmms', or other silence fillers needed to indicate that a person is still listening or thinking. She said that silences are perceived as treasured moments and signs of respect, and they are expected in all forms of conversation.

Over the years I have seen opposing perceptions of silence lead to unfortunate cross-cultural misunderstandings. One arena in which silence can really wreak havoc is at meetings in which the

participants are from different cultural backgrounds. If your question is met with silence, your reflex reaction might be to assume that others don't agree with or like what you said, prompting you to start rattling off qualifiers like "but if that doesn't make sense to you..." or "of course, if you don't agree..." and so on.

But in reality, the other participants might simply be thinking about what you said and formulating a thoughtful response – perhaps even translating it into their native language and back again. Whether on a conference call or in person meeting, it can be hard to keep our default responses at bay, but having some patience can be a good benefit. I often suggest that my clients allow seven seconds before saying anything or starting to ask follow-up questions. Those seven seconds may seem like an eternity to you, but if you consider all of the mental processing that needs to occur, even seven seconds starts to feel inadequate.

Conversely, if you are speaking with people who are uncomfortable with silence, it's best to respond promptly if possible. Even if you don't have an immediate answer, you can always let them know you need a few seconds to respond. A simple "Yes," "Got it," or "Let me think about it for a moment" is an easy way to acknowledge that you are engaged, and can go a long way toward easing the minds of others who are wary of silence.

Reminding yourself of your own comfort level with silence even before the meeting starts could enable to you to head off feelings of unease or aggravation even more quickly. How long is too long to be silent? When do you get uncomfortable? Test it out with a friend and consider what silence means to you. ■