

The Power of Silence in Effective Communication

We have realms of papers, books and online material dedicated to effective communication both verbal and written. One may have also come across a lot of research and books on the importance of non – verbal communication. However, rarely has one discussed, read or pondered upon the power of silence as a tool for effective communication.

In recent years, researchers have suggested that silence is not simply an absence of noise or doesn't mean 'nothing' but constitutes a part of communication as important as speech. The context of a situation defines the power and message of silence. Constructive silence moves a conversation or discussion forward. Destructive silence shuts down communication and creates barriers that discourage speakers from expressing their thoughts. Thus, silences can be 'leadens' and they can also be 'golden'. We have all experienced various negative silences that could be called awkward, appalled, embarrassed, defensive, and fearful silences. These could be termed as leadens silences. However, there are also silences that are golden, such as confident, comfortable, reflective, peaceful, or respectful silences. Such silences can be helpful tools for enhancing the communication and to promote and maintain the existing relationship.

“Among the wise of secret knowledge, I am their silence.” — Bhagavad Gita, Chapter X

Silence can serve many functions in a conversation. This is one tool that many therapists and investigators use. When you are subjected to silence, it feels like pressure, and you are likely to reveal something you had decided not to disclose. People in power use silence as strategy, such as an interviewer. An experienced interviewer may let a silence hang, just to see how the person being interviewed conducts him or herself. Silence may sometimes indicate hostility or disagreement. When we experience anger, fear, or embarrassment, our cognitive mind shuts down. We sit there enraged, fuming and unable to speak. Silence can indicate profoundness, such as respect, awe or horror. It can indicate contemplation or empathy. It can indicate authority and power. Silences create a listening space and deepen your understanding of others and yourself.

Generally speaking, eastern cultures value silence more than the use of words, while in western culture, sometimes the opposite is true. Silence can have different meaning in different cultures. In their book 'Communication between cultures' Samovar and Porter, elaborate using an example: “In response to the question: ‘Will you marry me?’ Silence in English would be

interpreted as uncertainty, in Japanese it would be interpreted as acceptance, in Igbo (Southeastern Nigeria) it would be considered as a denial if the woman was to continue to stand there and acceptance if she ran away.”

Silence can be an asset and an effective strategy in negotiations. Negotiators from cultures that consider silence stalling rush to fill the void with chatter. This weakens their message and position. In a hurry to fill the silence, they often settle for less and compromise their bargaining position. Whether finalizing a financial deal or asking for a raise or promotion, a good negotiator must be able not only to present his/her position, but also to listen and use the power of the pause.

Spiritually, silence is understood as the language of the soul. Practicing conscious speaking is the first step towards inner silence. Being in conscious silence is the second step and meditation is the third important step for inner silence. Excellent communicators can allow silence when it's effective or called for. They are attentive to the need and uses of silence in a conversation. They avoid being pressurized into 'spilling' when silence is used to control. They understand and can offer silence as a gift or as a mark of respect. Their high emotional intelligence allows them to interpret silences of others and respond appropriately. Thus, silence can serve many purposes and functions both in our personal and professional lives. How you manage it determines your level of sophistication in communication.

Businesses today are operating in an interconnected globalized world. Experts advise; expect the unexpected to sustain and grow. Disruptive technologies, consumer demands, changing legislations all add to the complexity of the businesses and increase challenges for the business leaders. It is like a tumultuous ocean and has crashing waves. Yet like the sea, a place exists within us where we are calm and silent. How can we teach our management students to find this calm beneath the waves? To understand, interpret and respond to silences? Should our management education include silence as a tool of communication in our curriculum for effective communication? An interesting thought both to students as well as teachers!!