

JOURNAL REPORTS: LEADERSHIP

How to Use Silence in Business Meetings

It can be awkward. But research shows that pausing at just the right moment can be a powerful tool.

By Heidi Mitchell

Meeting with your boss to talk about a big raise? Or getting together with the whole department to kick around There is a simple strategy that can make things a lot more productive: Keep In business meetings, silence during a conversation can feel awkward and uncomfortable—even unbearable. But research shows that people can

use silence to their advantage. Pausing at strategic times gives statements more weight and lets people fully absorb them, giving them the space they need to come up with creative ideas in This doesn't mean, of course, that silence always beats talking, and that inserting moments of reflection should be a default tactic. Rather, people have to be smart about how, when and why they stay quiet. Simply staring into space when your boss asks you a question won't win you a promotion, and staying silent when someone says something offensive can encourage further bad But using silence strategically and intentionally can be a powerful negotiating and conversational tool. Here are some ways silence can work to your Time for you to The simplest way to use silence is to hold back for a few seconds and give yourself time to think before you speak—letting you reflect on the That is a big help in negotiations, according to a recent paper published in the Journal of Applied Psychology. Jared Curhan, a professor of work and organizational studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management, discovered that breakthroughs in negotiations occurred nearly twice as frequently after a conversational lapse of between 3.5 and 9.5 seconds as they did at any other point in the Why? A pause before speaking gives you the chance to absorb what has already been said, and take in the big picture. For instance, negotiators may realize that they had been

seeing the other side's priorities incorrectly. They may have thought the other side wanted a raise in salary first and foremost—but after a self-imposed reflection, it might become clear that time off was more important. It is a lot easier to make deals when you have that kind of Silence, Prof. Curhan says, “allows everyone to stop and think, ‘Maybe there is another way we can get this done.’ One way to make your intentions clear and remove any potential misunderstanding is to explicitly say you need some time to ponder, Prof. Curhan extrapolates from his research. That way, the silence can make the other party feel you're truly considering their thoughts. “If it serves to enable you to think more clearly, then pausing is something you should consider doing at work or in any negotiation,” he ...And for others, Silence before you speak can be a powerful strategy. But silence after you speak can also be effective. So, ask your listeners to take a moment to reflect on what you have just said. This gives them a chance to take in your words—and process your emotions. Marilieke Engbers, an assistant professor of corporate governance and leadership at the School of Business and Economics at Vrije University in Amsterdam, studies “the unsaid,” or what is thought and felt but not spelled out, in the boardroom. When board members insert deliberate silence into conversation, she says, people are more likely to “hear” emotions, frustrations and dilemmas during those “While discussing various

topics, we are simultaneously assessing the unsaid—relationships, group dynamics and levels of trust—through nonverbal communication,” she says. Unfortunately, we don’t always interpret the “unsaid” in a discussion correctly, Prof. Engbers says. But by asking for a few seconds of silence after making a remark, the initiator “can slow down the speed of the conversation and thus create more space for participants to truly listen to what is said and what is felt,” the professor says. To avoid sounding patronizing, Prof. Engbers suggests saying something such as, “Maybe it’s me, but I sense we talk past each other, or we don’t seem to understand each other well. Perhaps it would help if we take a moment to reflect on what is going on. Would you agree to take a pause?” Useful dialogue and honest questions can arise from such a pregnant A show of Staying silent doesn’t just give people a chance to reflect. It also lets them show respect for what the other person said. But only if the other person is higher Namkje Koudenburg, an associate professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands who studies communication within group dynamics, found that staying silent for a few beats after someone in a higher-status position speaks can be a powerful way to convey that you’re paying respectful Prof. Curhan of the Sloan School agrees. “If someone makes a statement and you pause while giving the right body language, like literally nodding your head, before speaking, your silence

may convey that you're truly considering what the other person just said, which could build trust," he But there is a nuance here you must remember. "Make sure you only [stay silent] when the speaker is clearly in a higher-status position, like your boss or your superior," Prof. Koudenburg That is because if a superior stays silent, it may make everyone uncomfortable or signal a rejection of what the previous speaker has just said. Likewise, if someone with high status stares into the distance instead of speaking, the gesture might lead to a sense of Another subtlety is crucial: timing. If somebody of lower status takes too long to respond when directly asked a question, they might be seen as interrupting the conversational flow (or even being annoying). "The natural flow of turn-taking often occurs within milliseconds," says Prof. Koudenburg. "So taking 4 seconds of pause is a meaningful disruption of that Calming things In Prof. Engbers's research observing board meetings, she finds that instructing the group to be silent for several moments after a heated exchange "can help prevent further miscommunication, false attribution and speculation, which are detrimental for building trust." A few beats of "forced" silence—such as telling the group to take a moment—can provide an opportunity for everyone to understand the other people's points of view and create an inclusive, creative and contemplative atmosphere, the

professor says. “Then a virtuous learning spiral has been enacted,” she Indicating You should also consider silence as a powerful way to signal when someone steps out of line. In a 2020 paper, Prof. Koudenburg found that when a single member of a group of men made a sexist remark—and it was met with total muteness—the offender took that deafening pause to mean that those types of comments weren’t acceptable. Silence can also be a useful alternative when confrontation won’t work in the moment, she On the other hand, if the conversation kept flowing, then sexist or otherwise prejudiced comments might be perceived as normal and would likely pop up again in future office “If someone proposes something that is harmful to the group, you can use a moment of silence to make the person know that they are breaching a norm,” says Prof. Ms. Mitchell is a writer in Chicago. She can be reached at Journal Insights from The Read more at More in C-Suite Four Simple Ways Bosses Can Reduce Stress at Want to Work on Weekends? You Better Think How We Renovated Our House So It Was Perfect for Working From The Challenge That Extroverts Face as Great Novels About Business: How Much Do You