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Gain Control with the Power of Silence

By *Dianna Booher*, author, speaker, and CEO of *Booher Consultants*, a Dallas based communications training firm. Her programs include communication and life balance/productivity. She has published more than 40 books, including *Communicate with Confidence*®, *Speak with Confidence*®, and *Your Signature Work*®. Call (817) 868-1200 or visit www.booher.com.

In this age of noise, more noise and still more noise, perhaps the most confusing and misunderstood "sound" is the sound of silence. Amid the constant barrage of telephone calls, presentations, negotiations and daily chitchat, every once in a while there's a break in the frenzy.

The way you respond to these moments of silence can mean the difference between increased profits or decreased clientele, deep understanding or total chaos, or a job well done or a job to be redone.

To the effective communicator, silence is an opportunity to gain keener insight into your conversations and clearer understanding about the people with whom you're conversing. After all, there's a reason no one is talking, and if you find it, you'll know how to respond.

Silence doesn't mean communication is dead; it may have simply lost its direction. You can regain control of things by asking leading questions – those that penetrate the confusion and guide the conversation to a desired end. Here's how:

- Lead others to be more specific. One of the most common reasons for silence is a lack of clarity in the words and phrases used. Generalities, clichés and unclear terms can disrupt the flow and content of your conversation. Mark Twain said it well, "The difference between the right word and the nearly right word is the same as that between lightning and the lightning bug." Leading questions can help you nail down details and define terms. "Does 'as soon as possible' mean you'll finish the report by the end of the week, by the end of the day, or by noon?" "You said our representative was discourteous. Did he yell? Act disinterested? Ignore your comments?" All individuals have their own peculiar communication styles and mannerisms. Learn to recognize yours and those of the people you know.
- Lead others to the main point. Conversations can digress into detours, and detours can take you far off the beaten path. Leading questions can help steer you back on track. "But your primary concern is that everyone gets their input to you before next week's meeting?" "Of all the proposals you've mentioned, which one do you think is the most feasible within our estimated budget?" Know where you're going in a conversation, and you'll know when you get there. Keep a careful ear out for those things that distract rather than direct.
- Lead others to clarify conflicting facts or statements. Like rush-hour traffic, conversations can result in traffic jams and sometimes accidents. While you and your partner may be traveling down the same communication highway, you may be in different lanes or heading in different directions. Leading questions can direct you through the congestion. "Your colleague said you'd arrive at noon. I understood you to say 2 p.m. When will you be there?" "We seem to be leaning toward the Turney proposal. I thought we already ruled them out. Did we get new data that makes them a more attractive option?" Effective lawyers, detectives and scientists poke and probe until they understand the facts completely. So should you.
- Lead others to further feedback. The purpose of conversation is to exchange ideas and information in a give and- take manner. Just as a tennis match is monotonous if only one contestant takes part, so it is with conversations. Some people don't give any feedback; others give it, only insufficiently. Be alert, and use leading questions to elicit the answers you're seeking. "What other comments do you have regarding our staffing shortage?" "In your opinion, which of the four issues should we concentrate on first?" Get

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feedback first, and avoid misunderstandings later.

- Lead others to agreement. At times, nothing more is said because nothing more needs to be said. It's time to act – and ask. "You probably want to hire another part-timer then, right?" "I'm assuming you can give me a 20- percent discount if I give you an answer today?" "Since you're so displeased with the current facility, do you want to consider another location?" There's a tendency to be gruff or pushy here. Avoid this. You simply want clear, specific and timely action.

Silence is simply another form of communication, but it can speak louder than the most adamant protests. What's the next silence you can turn into action?

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