

Stop Over-Explaining: Why Pausing Is the Key to Better Communication

Forbes | Dr. Diane Hamilton | November 6, 2024



getty

Ever walked out of a conversation feeling like you understood less than when you walked in? Over-explaining might feel like it adds clarity, but it often has the opposite effect—leaving everyone more confused and exhausted. This happens all the time in the workplace, where communication can sometimes feel more scripted than genuine. Recently, I saw a recruiter's prep notes sent to a friend before her interview, filled with detailed lines on exactly what to say and how to say it. It left me wondering: Are we over-coaching people to the point of losing authentic connection?

Over-explaining doesn't just clutter up meetings and interviews—it shows up in everyday conversations too. People feel pressured to fill every silence, thinking they're adding value by covering every angle. But often, the more words added, the more the main point gets buried. The secret to better communication? It's not about saying more; it's about knowing when to pause, listen, and let others truly engage.



getty

The Pressure to Fill Every Silence When Communicating

Silence can feel like an uncomfortable spotlight, especially in high-stakes situations like interviews. There's often a feeling that any "dead air" must be filled. For extraverts, this can mean jumping in to keep the conversation moving, sometimes going completely off track to avoid that dreaded pause. But all this filling-in can actually dilute the message, leaving both parties more confused than before.

While speaking to students at the Luxembourg School of Business, this idea came up during a discussion on how to stand out in interviews by being genuinely curious. Many students shared that they felt pressured to keep talking if there was a pause, worried that silence might make them seem uncertain. But as we talked, we realized how powerful it can be to simply let a conversation breathe. Pausing, especially in an interview, shows thoughtfulness and composure, giving responses a sense of intention and depth rather than feeling rushed or scattered.



getty

Why Listening Can Be More Powerful Than More Words

Over-explaining can actually weaken communication. Research from Harvard Business Review shows that people can only process so much information at once. When conversations are packed with explanations, listeners often end up zoning out or losing track. Effective communication doesn't mean overwhelming the listener with details; it means letting the main message stand out. A quick pause after an important point gives everyone a moment to take it in, making the message clearer and more memorable.

In my classroom, I encourage students to rephrase what they've heard in their own words to confirm their understanding. It's a simple way to ensure they're actually connecting with what's being said, rather than just repeating it. Pausing to reflect back what's been said can improve clarity and ensure that everyone feels heard and understood.



getty

Finding The Balance Between Talking and Listening

Everyone has their own communication quirks. For introverts, a pause before responding might feel natural, but in high-stakes situations, this silence can sometimes be misinterpreted. Extraverts, on the other hand, might see the pause as hesitation and jump in, assuming the other person needs help. Simple phrases like, "That's a good question; let me think about it for a second," can signal engagement and let the conversation breathe without anyone feeling the need to jump in too soon.

Extraverts can also benefit from tuning into the other person's nonverbal cues, like body language or facial expressions. Often, reading these signals can indicate when it's time to pause and let the other person speak. Paying attention to these moments not only demonstrates confidence but also creates a balanced, respectful conversation.



getty

Making Pausing Part of Daily Communication

Incorporating pauses into everyday communication can be a small but powerful shift. After finishing a thought, taking a moment before responding allows others the chance to process, making communication feel more intentional. In interviews, especially, resisting the urge to fill every silence can show confidence. Instead of jumping back in, asking a follow-up question or simply letting the silence linger can keep the focus on clarity and connection.

Wrapping Up: Pausing for Real Connection

The next time you feel the urge to keep talking, consider pausing instead. It may feel a little uncomfortable at first, but the space you leave creates room for real engagement, clarity, and connection. In a world that often rewards speed and nonstop communication, choosing to pause shows a different kind of strength—one that lets others be part of the conversation rather than just an audience. So, if you want to communicate better, try using fewer words and more intention. You might be surprised at the power of saying less.