

Learn How to Use Silence in Your Communication

HR Bartender | Sharlyn Lauby | February 25, 2024



Image captured by Sharlyn Lauby after speaking at the SHRM Annual Conference in Washington, DC

I saw a posting on LinkedIn recently that said, "Don't be the person at the meeting with nothing to say." In thinking about it, I thought the comment should be "Don't be the person at the meeting with nothing valuable to say."

There are a lot of people who go to meetings and spend incredible amounts of time talking and don't say anything of value. Personally, I think it's okay to have nothing to say. The key is using silence to your advantage.

Being able to communicate well is important. When it comes to communication, we often talk about being able to communicate succinctly and clearly. We talk about the value of listening. But one aspect to communication that we don't discuss often enough is silence.

Silence can be a useful tool in communications. We're not talking creepy moments of silence that last for eons. Think of this as just a natural pause in the conversation.

Silence can help us reduce the "ums". Many of us pepper our conversations with "ums". Often an "um" is a way to fill in space until we figure out what we want to say. Instead, we can take a

brief moment to think out what we want to say and how to say it. This could reduce the number of “ums” we use.

Silence can allow us to collect our thoughts. Sometimes when we’re looking for the right words to express our feelings, taking a moment to gather ourselves can be helpful. Being able to communicate clearly is key to getting our message across.

Silence can allow us to calm our message. If you’re feeling anxious, excited, frustrated, agitated, etc., taking a moment of quiet to collect ourselves can be helpful. This doesn’t mean we have to not express our feelings. In fact, taking a moment of silence could help us communicate our emotions better.

Silence can allow others to join the conversation. For example, a moment of silence during an interview might encourage a candidate to add something to their story. Or during a meeting it might allow a participant to ask a question.

My point is that communication doesn’t involve talking all the time. This is definitely a case of quality over quantity.

We can expand this conversation about silence to the written word as well. Like verbal communications, we need to be able to effectively communicate in writing. We need to be able to comprehend what others write. And we need to know when to put some space – in this case silence – in the conversation.

No, I’m not talking about ghosting someone. But it also doesn’t mean that we need to answer everything right away. For instance, someone can acknowledge an email with a note about when they will respond in full. Maybe they need to research something before they can provide a well thought out reply. Set expectations and manage them appropriately. It can be an effective way to communicate.

Verbal and written communication skills are and will continue to be important. Reminders about effective communications could be timely. Even the best communicators might find a refresher helpful.