

10 Reasons You're Talking Too Much, and What to Do About It

If Rudyard Kipling was correct that "Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind," then many of us are addicted. While there are countless studies that contend that women out-talk men by more than 13,000 words a day, other studies show that men and women are equal-opportunity chatters, averaging about 16,000 words per day. And most of us, regardless of gender, do more telling, advising, convincing, explaining, directing, and divulging than we should.

All of that talking is costing us time, productivity and energy. It's also costing us our credibility and our relationships. People who go on and on appear to undervalue others' contributions, lack curiosity and self-awareness, and seem self-absorbed and even nervous.

Some common over-talking traps include:

1. **Talking about yourself.** Research shows that when we talk about ourselves, our brains release dopamine, the pleasure hormone, so we're immediately rewarded when we do so.
2. **Talking to show how much you know.** This, ironically, tends to undermine rather than build credibility. It also has a negative impact on our likeability, one of the key factors in how we evaluate people.
3. **Talking out of nervousness or insecurity.** Our ability to self-manage shrinks when our anxiety grows.
4. **Talking to change someone's mind.** And we do this despite the evidence that facts alone rarely persuade.
5. **Talking because you had prepared something to say,** even if it's no longer necessary or relevant.
6. **Talking to stop someone else from talking.** (Remind you of any staff meetings--or family holidays?)
7. **Talking out of habit.** For many of us, speaking can feel like an automatic reflex rather than a thoughtful approach to sharing information.
8. **Talking to think.** While some of us organize our ideas before sharing them, many of us use talking as a way to clarify and sound out our ideas, working out our mental processes aloud.
9. **Talking because it's your "turn".** Whether it's at a meeting or in a conversation, we think of our turn as a directive or mandate to say *something*, rather than an opportunity that we can take, or pass on, or defer until we actually have something more meaningful to contribute.
10. **Talking to fill the silence.** Yes, research from Duke Medical School found that silence is associated with the development of new cells in the hippocampus, the key brain region associated with learning and memory. Still, most people experience silence as something to avoid--especially in conversation.

Whether you see yourself in one of these--or all ten--here are three strategies to help you talk less and have more impact:

Ask for feedback.

Chances are you have some blind spots about your communication strengths and development areas. Find a few trusted colleagues to give you honest, helpful, specific feedback. Ask them to let you know when they see you making helpful contributions to the conversation, and when they experience you as talking a lot without adding much value.

Practice bottom-lining.

The term "bottom-line" traditionally refers to the last line on an income statement, where you know at a glance whether the company turned a profit or a loss. In communication, bottom-lining means saying what you need to say in as few words as possible.

It's the core of the message, the essence of the story, or the headline--like "profit" or "loss"--without all of the details. Ask yourself: What's the moral to this story? What's the core meaning I'm taking away? What's one point do I want people to take away?

Start sharing those versions. It's about being clear and concise.

Balance advocacy and inquiry.

Most of us are great at advocacy and light on inquiry. Both are critical for communication and relationships.

Be the person in the meeting who asks people for their perspectives *before* you share your own. Rally listens to someone's ideas, and ask thoughtful follow up questions rather than explaining why it won't work. Model inquiry by asking the team, "What other questions should we be asking?"

Bottom-line: Try listening more than speaking, and speaking concisely when you do, and inviting others to share their perspectives. As Thomas Jefferson once mused, "The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do."