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A valuable business tool: Knowing when to shut up

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It's an election year, and if there ever was a need for clarity in communication, it's now. And yet no matter how specific the question or how many times it's asked, the candidates from both parties just seem to drone on and on. With all the consultants and advisors they're using to ensure they win their party's nomination, you'd think that at some point there would be a briefing that started with the statement, "Let's try actually answering a question concisely and precisely during this debate and see if our numbers go up, what do ya say?"

Mike Staver, coach, professional speaker, and author of *Do You Know How to Shut Up? And 51 Other Life Lessons That Will Make You Uncomfortable*, says that if you think you don't suffer from the same problems as the candidates, think again. You probably do - and if you don't, you know someone who does. Thankfully, he has some advice to bring some clarity to your communication.

"Have you ever been in a conversation with a person who has already made his point but just won't let it go?" asks Staver. "Worse yet, are you that person? Some people love the sound of their own voices, while others may simply chatter on out of nervousness or because they are uncomfortable with silence. Regardless, it's annoying and counterproductive."

He points out that many people unconsciously and repetitively make decisions to keep talking until the anxiety of silence goes away, or they are convinced that the dead horse is sufficiently beaten into the mind of the listener. Underlying this behavior is often a lack of confidence and clarity on their point or position.

Here's the thing: Shutting up is a valuable skill to learn in business, in personal relationships - really, in all areas of life. "By shutting up once in a while, you will appear more confident and intelligent to everyone you come in contact with," says Staver. "Plus, it's amazing how much you can learn when you stop running your mouth."

Do you want to learn how to just shut up once and for all? Following are some of Staver's tips - excerpted from his concise and to-the-point book - on speaking your mind in a brief and highly efficient manner.

1. Be clear with yourself about what you are attempting to communicate.
2. Share with the person (when it isn't obvious) what you want to accomplish.
3. Avoid, at all costs, getting distracted by other issues, ideas, points, stories, and so forth.
4. Use talk-ending techniques like:
 - a. Saying, "So, what are the next steps?"
 - b. Using an example that sums things up (if it is a public presentation). (Then stop.)
 - c. Focusing on getting to the end of what you have to say in minimal time.
 - d. Using as few words as possible.
5. Give information in an amount the listener can reasonably digest - not the amount you personally feel compelled to share.

6. Ask someone you know and trust to give you feedback on the volume of words you use, the degree to which you are clear, and the degree to which you are concise. It is very important that you are both.

"It really is that simple," concludes Staver. "Once you become comfortable speaking less and in effect getting your information across better, shutting up will come naturally even to the most long-winded person. Start practicing today. You will become much less annoying and much more effective. Shutting up can change your life!"

Mike Staver is CEO of The Staver Group, Fernandina Beach, Fla., a national team of strategic business advisors and coaches. He travels the country speaking to Fortune 500 companies and start-ups.

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