

Talking versus Asking

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I was at a gathering of friends recently and encountered two people who were exact opposites in one specific area – the way they communicated. It wasn't that one was loud and the other softspoken. Or that one was eloquent and the other inarticulate. Or that one was passionate and the other monotone. No, it was much more differentiating than that.

One individual I'll call Tom the Talker. He was a nice guy, but did all of the talking. I felt like a hostage to an overly-chatty stranger on an adjacent airplane seat who I couldn't get away from. At the end of our conversation, I knew a lot about him. I knew what he had been doing recently. I knew about his work, his family, and his hobbies. Our conversation might have been enjoyable for him, but not so much for me. Actually, it wasn't really a conversation.

The other person I'll call Amy the Asker. She was equally nice, but rather than do most of the talking, she asked a lot of questions. She showed interest in me. She asked about my work, family, and hobbies. I also asked about her so we enjoyed a balanced discussion. At the end of our conversation, she knew a bit about me and I knew a bit about her. We left both feeling understood and appreciated by the other.

Do you think talking versus asking and listening is an important distinction? Does it really matter if someone likes to do most of the talking? If the answer isn't clear, here are a few circumstances to consider:

- When making a purchase, such as a new automobile, furniture, or home, would you rather work with a sales person who wants to understand your needs or tell you how great their product is?
- When going to the doctor, would you rather the doctor ask you questions about how you are doing or tell you how he has been doing?
- When attending a seminar or college course, would you rather the instructor facilitate an interactive conversation or give a lecture?
- Would you rather be with friends who enjoy hearing how you are doing or those who always redirect the conversation back to themselves?

You might think this “talking vs asking” attribute is simply the difference between introverts and extroverts. It is not. Of course, extroverts often talk too much but even introverts do as well. In their attempt to offset their introverted nature, they often overdo it. Or if they haven't said much in a while, they have built up a lot to say. In either case, they generally don't realize they are over communicating. Both introverts and extroverts just need to relax, be more self-aware, and contribute to the conversation equally.



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Another reason people talk too much, especially managers in the workplace, is that they think talking is leading. They think talking is the way to influence and persuade. Like parents who constantly tell their children what to do, they don't realize that when they are doing all the talking, there is no guarantee anyone is listening. In fact, the likelihood is that people are not listening. They stopped listening about 30 seconds into the manager's monolog.

Another reason people talk too much is they are insecure. They need the attention or are afraid not to control the conversation. They want to talk about what they want to talk about and avoid what others want to know or talk about.

Regardless of the reason, people who don't ask questions or show interest in what others have to say leave people feeling ignored. They leave people feeling cheated out of the opportunity to share their thoughts. They leave people feeling unvalued and underappreciated.

Where are you on the scale of talking versus asking? When in meetings, social settings, or family gatherings, do you prefer knowing what others are thinking or ensuring others know what you are thinking? Or somewhere in the middle? Hopefully you are balanced somewhere in the middle, but before assuming you are, objectively assess yourself. In your upcoming conversations, give attention to how much you are talking versus others. Be aware of any tendency you might have to redirect the conversation to your topics rather than understand others'. If you are an extrovert, realize that you are probably talking more than you think because you tend to "talk to think". If you are an introvert, realize that you are probably talking less than you think because you "think to talk". In either case, you are probably not asking enough questions. You are potentially talking too much or being too quiet and thinking instead of listening.

If you're a leader, parent, or in another position of influence and think you'll lose all your influence if you talk less and ask more, think again. Who controls the conversation – the person asking the questions or the person answering the questions? The person asking the questions. Your positive influence will increase significantly when you use an asking style of communication.

Adopt the habit of showing interest in what others think and do by asking questions. Strive to facilitate dialogs, not monologs. You can tell a friend about your day, but reciprocate and ask about their day. Ask questions like "how are you doing?", "how is your day going?", and "what do you think about ...?" Listen and make people feel valued and heard.

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