

JOSHUA STEIN IN THE NEWS

Rediscovering the Lost Art of Conversation in Deal-Making

Or how to talk to—and through—a wall of sound

For centuries, anyone who has wanted to carry on a good conversation has had to follow at least two cardinal rules. First, let the other person talk. Second, don't interrupt.



Joshua Stein actively in a conversation, such as a negotiation of a document, must often violate the second rule.

A decade or two ago, I was struck by the occasional conversationalist who would not let anyone else say anything—a veritable human wall of sound who would talk forever making some point about a document or a deal without taking a break, or even a breath, oblivious to the possibility that someone else might want to respond, clarify something or say anything at all.

I have encountered more and more walls of sound in my deals. Now, it seems, most people who speak in a meeting, a conference call or other negotiation no longer want to give anyone else an opportunity to speak. They make their point; they keep making it; and they make it a few more times. Then they go on to their next point, the same way. They often don't acknowledge the existence of anyone else. They don't check once in a while to see if anyone else has anything to say.

Technology might contribute to the breakdown of two-way conversation. Voice mail has spoiled those who like to speak but not listen. Email invites one-way communication. If an email involves multiple parties in a deal, each recipient wants to jump in to say something unilaterally before the next guy can. Conference calls and speaker phones often allow only one-way communication.

PowerPoint presentations make every speaker a train on a track no one dare say anything for fear of derailment.

Technological trends and the general speed and urgency of all communications push every conversationalist to try to say it all before his or her time runs out and someone else can respond. If they think they might need more time, they'll grab it so they can keep control of a meeting.

I've developed some techniques to try to handle a wall-of-sound conversationalist.

First, if the conversation takes place in person, I sometimes literally raise my hand. Usually, the wall eventually sees me and realizes I might have something to say.

Second, I wait for a gap or for the wall to take a breath—this can entail a very long wait. While I wait, I might write a list of the points the speaker has made and the responses I want to make. When I get my chance, I may need to rewind several minutes of conversation to respond to some issue the speaker raised, usually several times, several minutes before. This technique doesn't always work. The speaker often seems to regard me as an unwanted interruption. So he or she keeps going for another few minutes, much as a steamroller keeps going even if it encounters a small bump in fresh asphalt. If my comments consist of more than a word or two, or require thought, I find that a wall-of-sound speaker will pay particularly scant attention.

As my third technique, I say the speaker's name. This doesn't require much of an opening, and it gets the speaker's attention. It often distracts him or her enough to let me talk. It's my secret weapon. I might ask if the speaker minds if I respond to something he or

she has said, or if I can finish my sentence that was interrupted. Usually this works, at least for the moment.

As a fourth response to a wall of sound, if I can ever get the speaker's attention, I sometimes tell him or her I'm having trouble having a two-way conversation. I earnestly and sweetly ask for permission to participate more fully in the conversation. Sometimes this works; more often, it doesn't. Usually, the wall remains utterly oblivious.

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My techniques to try to participate in a conversation sometimes help turn a one-way lecture about deal issues

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into a discussion. Could it be, though, that I'm the rude conversationalist, the one who impatiently tries to steal or barge in on someone else's time? At the other extreme, could it be that I let them walk all over me, and should act more forcefully to participate in a conversation?

Until I figure out the answers to these questions, I try to follow the two ancient rules of conversation with which I started. I wish the walls of sound I encounter professionally would do the same.

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