

It's True: You Talk Too Much



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I'm sorry to be the one to tell you, but you talk too much. I know you think you don't, but seriously, you do.

Take this simple test: After your next long conversation with someone, estimate what percentage of it you spent talking. Be honest. No, you're already underestimating. How do I know? Because it's more fun to talk than to listen. Talking is like drinking a great Cabernet. Listening is like doing squats.

Add another 20% to your total.

If you talked more than 70% of the time, you jabber too much. I know, because my son has Asperger's syndrome, and part of his education was learning conversational dynamics.

People with Asperger's tend to give monologues about their obsessions, which can be problematic socially. It's hard to get a date after you've just told a girl all the subway stops in North America.

Dr. Lynn Koegel, who is clinical director of Koegel Autism Center at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says that an optimal conversation flow has each person talking about 50% of the time. This is the Ali-Frazier of good give-and-take.

But, you say, what if your talking partner is just quiet and loves to listen? Stop it. She doesn't. Listening is like reading a corporate report. Talking is like eating a cinnamon bun.

So how do you achieve this 50-50 conversational ideal? Easy: ask questions. But don't think that one "How are you?" is going to turn you into Oprah. Actually listen to what the other person is saying, and find openings.

For instance: Your friend says, "I think that Henry the intern is probably a psychopath."

Now if you're inclined to say, "So's my mother! Yesterday, at the museum, she..." don't. You're talking too much. Instead, try, "Why do you think Henry's a psychopath, and if he's cute, would he be good for my niece?"

Now you're doing great. Your friend will love telling you about Henry. When she's done, if you really must, you can tell the anecdote about your mom. But if you're talking about someone whom your conversation partner

doesn't know, especially a mother, keep it short—one minute tops, unless it's a truly fantastic story. And to qualify as such, at least five people need to have said to you in the past, "Wow, that's a fantastic story." Not "a great story" but "a *fantastic* story."

I can hear you complaining already: "One minute? But I need to include all the details." No you don't. Just get to the part when, on a crowded elevator, your mom turned to you and said, "I wish I could press the up button on your boobs." Your job is to quickly entertain and inform, and then to ask good questions.

Also, let your chattering breathe a little. One dastardly arrow in the big talker's quiver is to slow down in the middle of his sentence, then to blow through the period so that there's no opening for anyone to squeeze a word in. Secretly tape one of your own conversations, and if you realize you do this, stop it or never go out in public again.

Another essential rule is to monitor your audience. Is the guy you're talking to glancing at his cellphone, spinning his Dorito like a paper football or making his tie into a noose? If so, pull the ripcord and ask him if Heineken is his favorite beer, since you've just seen him drain five of them. Watch how relieved he is to have a turn to talk! Talking is a Miguel Cabrera home run. Listening is getting hit in the head by it.

But, you say, this conversational paradigm sounds like work. And talking feels so good! Besides, people don't seem to be complaining about you.

Oh, but they are.

If you don't let others participate in conversations, I promise they are hatching schemes against you. Fevered discussions are happening over where to put your place card at the dinner party—"Not next to Uncle Joe! He's only got six months to live!" Colleagues at nearby cubicles tell you they have to wear headphones to "concentrate on work." At parties people always say to you, "Excuse me while I grab another drink." People at parties are so thirsty!

So when reading this piece, did you recognize yourself? Did it perhaps make you think of someone else? If so, wouldn't it be great to send it to him? But you don't want to hurt his feelings, so how would you go about it?

Decent questions, right? Now I'll sit back and let *you* talk.

—*Mr. LaZebnik is a writer on "The Simpsons."*

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