

How Silence Can Help Win-Win Negotiators



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While silence can be uncomfortable, its benefits are too numerous to ignore.

As many readers familiar with win-win negotiations know, power moves are deemed counterproductive when it comes to enhancing mutual value. Examples of power displays include “**take it or leave it**” tactics, threatening to go with a competitor or making an unreasonable offer. But what about silence?

Since silence is considered **discomforting** in many cultures, it can indeed be interpreted as a power move. Silence can destabilise your counterpart by making them feel nervous. In fact, in a Dutch **study**, a brief silence of four seconds was enough to trigger negative emotions and a sense of rejection in participants. Other **researchers** have shown that silence is commonly used in Italian melodramas to denote aggression and conflict.

However, not all cultures perceive silence as unnerving. According to a [study](#) based on meetings of local bank executives in Japan and in the United States, Japanese managers stayed silent an average of 5.15 seconds per minute while their American counterparts maintained silence for only 0.74 second per minute. When shifting topics, the Japanese bank managers stayed silent 6.5 seconds on average vs. 1.7 seconds for Americans.

In [The Culture Map](#), INSEAD Professor [Erin Meyer](#) talks about how the Japanese view silence as an opportunity to “read the air”, that is, they take the time to look for the context behind what is being said. In effect, Japanese use silence as a communication tool. The traditionally tight-lipped Finns are also said to “[embrace the awkward silence](#)”.

The benefits of silence

While it is important to recognise that silence can be interpreted in different ways, let us examine what could be the main purposes of silence from a negotiator’s standpoint:

- Silence can be useful to underscore the importance of what you have just said. It can let [information sink in](#) with your audience.
- It gives you time to process what has been said already and to consider your next move.
- It frees you to study the body language of your counterpart.
- At the right moment, it can make you seem more confident and dispel any sense that you seek approval.
- It can de-escalate heated discussions that may arise from misunderstandings or miscommunication. In [Getting Past No](#), William Ury talks about a tactic called “going to the balcony”, which consists of asking for time out in difficult situations.

The recent *Harvard Business Review* article, “[The Case for More Silent Meetings](#)”, describes how brainstorming meetings are considerably more productive when conducted in silence. This means that participants write down their ideas and contributions instead of waiting for their turn to talk. Silence “provides opportunity for all attendees to *simultaneously* express opinions and ideas”. It gives them ample time to generate ideas and can eliminate any worry about social disapproval.

Overcoming silent roadblocks

Despite the virtues of silence, the issue is what to do if you suspect someone is using silence to destabilise you. First, remember how a pause can actually benefit you. For instance, could you use this time to study the body language of your counterpart?

One way to get past a silent roadblock is to say: “I understand you may need time to think things over.” If a time out is warranted, it can give you a chance to gather your own thoughts and re-evaluate your position.

Another way to break the silence is by asking directly: “What is your initial reaction to what we just said?” or “Would you like to move to the next point?” If all else fails, you could summarise the points already discussed. Most importantly, avoid jumping the gun and blurting out unnecessary information.

To see how this could work in practice, let’s compare two exchanges. In our example, Lisa is a pharmaceutical industry executive who just concluded her mid-year performance review with her boss, Magnus:

- Magnus, as we still have a few minutes, I would like to discuss something else with you.
- [Magnus stays silent, scribbling something in his notepad.]
- I wanted to check if the company would sponsor me for an EMBA.
- [Magnus stays silent.]
- Marcia from HR and Doug from Logistics are just finalising theirs, and it has helped them grow a lot. I could find the time to juggle it all, if that worries you.
- Sorry, I missed what you just said. I had to quickly jot something down. What is it that I should worry about?
- I was saying, would the company sponsor me for an EMBA?
- Oh. ‘Juggling it all’, I see. There is indeed a lot happening in the department at present. Maybe we could discuss this again later.
- Sure, thank you.

Intentionally or not, Magnus responded with silence to some of Lisa’s attempts to persuade him to support her EMBA course. His initial lack of response felt intimidating and Lisa nervously raised a potential issue, which steered the conversation the wrong way.

Let’s see how this could have gone better by managing silence.

- Magnus, as we still have a few minutes, I would like to discuss something else with you.
- [Magnus stays silent, scribbling something in his notepad.]
- I wanted to check if the company would sponsor me for an EMBA.
- [Magnus stays silent.]
- May I know your initial reaction?
- Sorry, I missed what you just said. I had to quickly jot something down. You mentioned wanting to go for an EMBA?
- Yes, I believe an EMBA would help me gather fresh external ideas and develop my professional network, which could yield us new accounts. It would also be the perfect opportunity for me to work on my delegation skills, as we have just discussed.
- [Magnus looks thoughtful.]
- [Lisa waits for a few seconds.] Further education is a must in our industry and the company is very supportive in that regard. I'm sure that Bob would also grow by taking on some of my tasks while I would be on the course.
- OK, it does sound good. Let me talk to HR.
- That's great, Magnus! Thank you.

Lisa did not babble in order to fill the silence. Instead, she chose her arguments carefully and purposefully. She did not rush Magnus to quickly come to a decision by acknowledging he might need time to think this through. Lastly, Lisa paused before delivering her closing arguments, which helped her progress towards her goal.

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