

Argument for Silence

Smart negotiators and leaders often say little, in favor of listening, says **DAN LYONS**, author of *The Power of Keeping Your Mouth Shut*. He talks to Brunswick's KAVI REDDY.

DAN LYONS HAS WRITTEN extensively about startup culture and Silicon Valley in his books, as well as for *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *Fortune*, *Vanity Fair* and *Wired*. He has written for HBO's *Silicon Valley* series and was the creator of the Fake Steve Jobs blog.

Recently, Brunswick Partner and Co-General Counsel Kavi Reddy spoke with him about his new book, *STFU: The Power of Keeping Your Mouth Shut in an Endlessly Noisy World*. Lyon's experience of realizing that he was a "talkaholic" led him to examine how talking less and listening more can help us all.

Your book says communicating too much is dangerous, and talking less is a powerful way to get more of what you want.

When you talk less, you listen more. The big idea of shutting up is then to use that space to listen. Really listen. At one level, you avoid catastrophes and calamities, but you can also be a lot more successful. You can get more, negotiate better. In addition to helping yourself, what you can really do is improve the lives of those around you.

Leaders being quiet is good for their team?

At every level of leadership, the job is really to bring out the best in the people who work for you, or even around you. Your role is to help people unlock their potential and do great things and grow.

It seems that what is valued now is putting every thought out there with no filter.

There are 2 million podcasts, 48 million episodes and half of



these have just 26 downloads to them. We've created this culture where we believe that success is measured by your ability to attract attention—have 1 million Twitter followers, have a big podcast. We have so much content and stuff flying at us, and it is really taking a toll on our psyches.

Angry content gets more reaction and the system is gamified to reward follower count, likes, comments. So people want that rush again and they start realizing that the meaner and angrier they are, the more successful they are in that platform. You are being trained to overtalk.

Powerful people tend to talk less. As great a leader and speaker as President Obama is, he is an even better listener. He's said that when he was a community organizer, at first he would say, "I'm going to help," but listening was really the key. Angela Merkel is said to be a great listener, brilliant, but her speeches are terrible and it's almost on purpose. She kind of wants to put people to sleep.

When you're not out there publicly yammering, you can be listening, gathering information and deploying it really selectively. Silence is a way of both gaining power and wielding it.

You say women are unfairly pegged as being overtalkers.

Women are interrupted much

more frequently than men. Next time you're in a meeting, just sit and watch. Once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Have COVID and Zoom made it easier or harder to use silence at work?

Especially on group Zooms, one can just hit the mute button, and if you do want to say something, you have to actively do it. The raise hand function is great. There is a pause between someone calling on you and you speaking and it forces you to think about what you are going to say.

Can shutting up serve as a tool to create a more inclusive workspace?

Look at the future of work. Right now, the greatest and most pressing question for a lot of CEOs is, "Should we get everybody back into the office? How do we do

that?" Remember that communication doesn't mean talking; it means listening. It's not, "I'm going to sit here and go back and forth and tell you how to fix this." It's deeper. You have to have that conversation and really listen, build that trust and then build alignment. And only then, together, say, "OK, how do we figure out the future of work?"

In the book, I talk about Bill Marriott, who ran the hotel company his father created. He says something to the effect of "I didn't always decide in the way they wanted me to, but I felt that if I listened and they felt respected and heard, then they would buy into the decision."

You want to get the most productive, effective, happy and engaged company you can. The way to get that is quietly, by listening and creating space.

It seems simple. Why is it so hard?

We know we have to have difficult conversations, but we don't ever tell people how. We don't teach people how to listen. We do "show and tell" when you're a kid. What we don't do at the end of it is ask "OK, all of you write down, what do you remember? What did so-and-so say?" We don't teach how to really pay attention and listen.

People think it seems weak to just not have anything to say. They feel like it is incumbent on them to have all the answers. It is hard for people to have a conversation and not talk but listen.

There are many times in life where you should speak up. But when you do, do so intentionally. Know what you want to say, and what you want to get. But there are also many situations where you should say nothing. In a way, silence is also a form of communication. You are conveying something with silence.

Finally, how can we practice STFU?

Just listen. Remain present and connected, but quiet and listening. Listening is a superpower. ♦

Kavi Reddy is Brunswick's Co-General Counsel, based in New York.

