



Innovative Leadership:
Mastering the Art of Shutting Up

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Yes, the title is admittedly provocative. But great leaders know when to chime in...and when chiming in holds their teams back. Learn how to become a more effective leader - and build a stronger business - by using silence strategically:

Great leaders are proactive. Great leaders are great speakers. Great leaders are fountains of new ideas. Right?

While leaders benefit from displaying all these qualities, failing to moderate them can backfire. Great leaders know when to speak up - and when to let their teams do the talking.

In this eBook, you'll learn:

- How to avoid being an “accidental diminisher” with your teams.
- Why getting comfortable with silence is an ideal leadership trait.
- When to use silence strategically.
- How to turn communication with your employees into a two-way street.



When Speaking up Causes Trouble: Accidental Diminishers

Leaders often reach their positions because they're full of ideas - and passionate about them. Even quiet leaders don't need much encouragement to share their vision, opinions, advice, and experience.

Used wisely, leaders' voices can be valuable sources of inspiration and information. When leaders talk more than they speak, however, they risk becoming "accidental diminishers" - leaders who hinder their team's growth and creativity rather than enhance it.

Popularized by leadership consultant Elise Foster, the "accidental diminisher" may appear as:

- The Idea Fountain
- The "Always-On" Leader
- The Rescuer
- The Rapid Responder

Here's how to spot your own tendencies and address them.



The Idea Fountain

Who they are: Idea fountains are visionaries. They can see the opportunities and challenges before them, draw a map, and recruit others for the journey - and they do, constantly.

The unintended consequences: Every leader needs a bit of the visionary in them. When your idea fountain runs non-stop, however, it can end up drowning everyone else on the team. Employees become so busy chasing your vision that they lose opportunities to build their own skills - to the detriment of the entire organization.

Tips for overcoming this habit: Draw the map and then lay it aside. Provide the big picture, then ask your team members how they see themselves fitting in and what resources they need. Even if you think you know the answers to these questions, ask anyway. You may be surprised at what you didn't foresee.

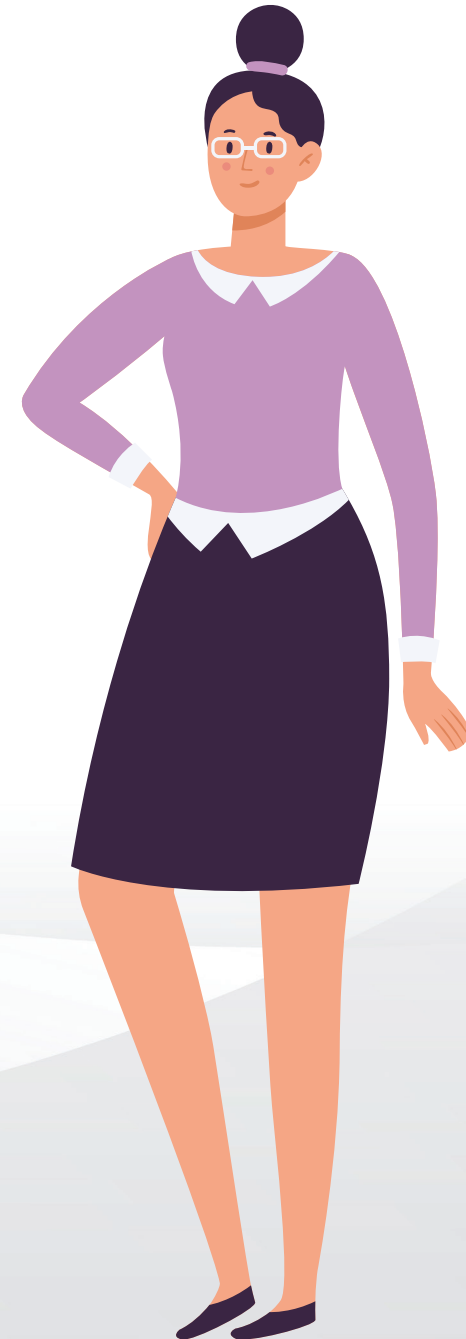


The Always-On Leader

Who they are: “Always-on” leaders are the Energizer Bunnies in the room. They’re often highly passionate about their work, and they express it by talking - a lot.

The unintended consequences: You may be energized by sharing your ideas. But that energy has to come from somewhere. Too often, it comes from your team, who feel they have no energy left for their own ideas or processes.

Tips for overcoming this habit: Find other ways to get your ideas out, such as by journaling. You’ll create more space for your employees’ thoughts, and you’ll get time to consider your own ideas and choose the best ones.



The Rescuer

Who they are: Rescuers may delegate happily, but they tend to hover on the sidelines. At the first sign of difficulty, they jump in to “help.”

The unintended consequences: Your intentions may be golden, but your results aren't. Rescuers create dependence and learned helplessness in their teams, diminishing their ability to achieve.

Tips for overcoming this habit: Delegate, then step away. Let team members come to you if they have questions. When they do, ask them what they've tried so far to overcome the problem. If you worry excessively about them, set a time near the end of each work period for your team to give you a short update on their progress.



The Rapid Responder

Who they are: Rapid responders act quickly and decisively. Halfway through the description of a problem, the rapid responder is already pouncing on a solution. Rapid responders often say, “Even when I ask the team for feedback, I only get silence.”

The unintended consequences: Teams have adopted silence because they’re used to being handed a solution - for better or worse. They may even fear rattling you if they interrupt your rapid-fire approach.

Tips for overcoming this habit: You may see the solution at once but keep it in your head for the moment. Instead, ask your employees: “What’s the first step?”





Why Silence Matters

Silence is a difficult thing for many of us to sit with. Yet silence is also the source of focus, regrouping, and creative thinking.

When you can create silent space for your teams:

- Team members overcome initial discomfort to discover new depths in their own thinking and idea generation.
- Teams find a new way to bond by sharing silence with one another.
- Team members feel safer speaking up, because they've had time to consider and shape their ideas before presenting them.

Silence takes the frantic rush of work and thought and distills it to the elements that matter. In doing so, it provides a powerful way to build relationships and unlock new ideas.

Ma: Silence as Aesthetic Principle

Ma is an ancient Japanese aesthetic principle that focuses on empty, negative space. In that space, Ma sees pure potential, unshaped by any outside force.

In the workplace, Ma is often overlooked in the pursuit of goals, achievements, awards, and recognition. Yet it is in the silent spaces that trust, creativity, and deep work can occur.

Embracing Ma at work may look like:

- Creating empty spaces in the workplace that provide a sense of calm.
- Leaving space between meetings or tasks in workers' daily schedules.
- Listening with an intent to understand, rather than an intent to respond.



Using Silence Strategically

Putting Ma to work means using silence strategically. Leaders may use silence to achieve various goals, including:

- **Improve idea generation** by leading a silent brainstorming session. Use a whiteboard or sticky notes to allow employees to contribute, peruse, and add to ideas before voting for the best options.
- **Defuse conflict.** If a meeting becomes tense, call for a minute or two of collective silence. This time allows participants to recenter themselves, focusing on the issue instead of the tension.
- **Get to the heart of a problem.** We're not used to silence, especially in conversations. To encourage a hesitant team member to speak up, try letting the silence become awkward. Many people will begin talking simply to fill the silence.



How To Lead by Listening

To turn yourself from an accidental diminisher into an intentional multiplier:

- **When you have the urge to give an answer, ask a question instead.** Your knowledge of your team and business provides a foundation for insightful, challenging questions. For instance, instead of telling a team member, “You’re going to do this task,” try asking, “What part of this is the best fit for you?”
- **Offer fewer ideas and more space.** You may be bursting with ideas but share them in small doses. Leave silence and room for thought between each idea. Remember, the concept may not be new to you, but it is to your audience. Give them time and space to consider it as it deserves.
- **Ask for solutions, not problems.** If you’ve developed the habits of an accidental diminisher, your team has likely responded by identifying problems but not solutions. After all, they’ve been able to count on you for all the answers! Encourage team members to bring at least one proposed solution to you whenever they raise an issue.



What is “Clearing Listening”?

Clearing listening sets the tone for a conversation by leaning into what others are saying - without offering advice, arguing, or using their story as a springboard for your own.

An exercise in clearing listening:

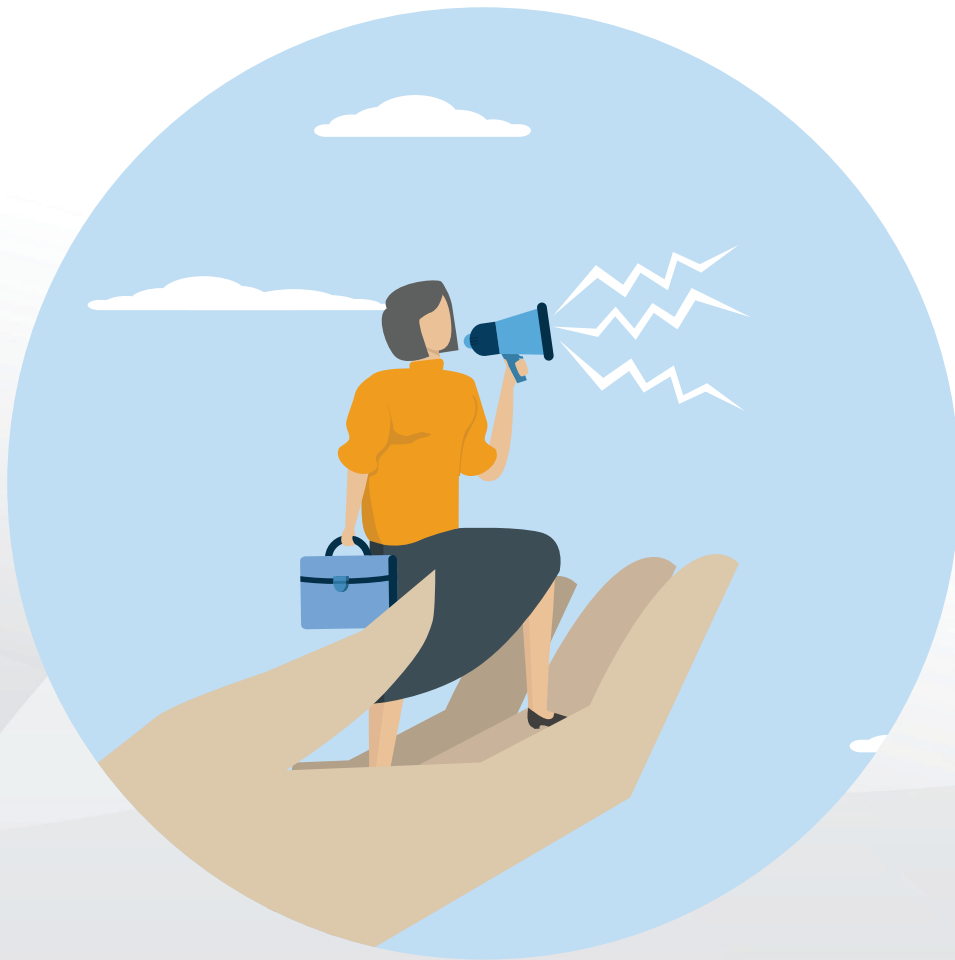
- Begin a meeting by asking each member of the group to share what is on their mind. Anything is fair game, from “I’m really nervous about this meeting” to “I wish I’d grabbed a cup of coffee before I came in here.”
- As each person speaks, the other group members simply listen.
- When each person finishes speaking, the rest of the group says, “thank you.” Then the next person speaks.



Clearing listening encourages everyone in the room to meet everyone else where they are. It provides a powerful basis for listening and understanding.

Filling the Silence: How to Encourage Employees to Speak Up

If you have accidental diminisher tendencies, your team has developed corresponding habits - like the habit of keeping their opinions to themselves. Use these strategies to help team members come out of their shells.



- **Take a “listening tour.”** Sit with employees and ask one or two questions about what is working, what isn’t, and what you can do. Listen for common themes, then report back with specific actions you’ll take to improve the workplace for your team.
- **Listen to learn, not argue.** Silence isn’t agreement - it’s merely an open space. Thank team members for their feedback but resist the urge to push back against ideas that make you uncomfortable. Your team will speak up more when they feel heard, even when that doesn’t translate into getting everything they think they want.
- **Ask follow-up questions.** “Fine” is an instinctive answer to the question “How are things?”, but it doesn’t tell you much. Encourage conversation with follow-up questions, like “What could be better?” or “What does ‘fine’ look like?”

When Silence Isn't Golden: Communicating With Your Staffing Partner

When teaching your team to speak up and contribute, take a page from your own book: Use these same skills to communicate more effectively with your staffing partner.

- **Answer your own “listening tour” questions.** Fill in your staffing partner on what’s working, what isn’t, and what you’d change if you could. Just as your team provides valuable info to you by answering these questions, you’ll provide valuable insight to your staffing partner by giving your own answers.
- **Speak to inform, not argue.** State the facts as you see them, honestly and with the intent to resolve any issues. You don’t have to win a fight; you have to strengthen a partnership.
- **Provide follow-up information.** “Everything is fine” doesn’t help you as a leader, and it doesn’t help your staffing partner, either. Go one step further: “I loved the last batch of candidates you recommended, but is there a way to schedule their interviews within one week instead of spreading them over three?”

