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A Cure for Interrupting Others

Dear Communications Doctor,
During my evaluation this year, my office manager let me know I have a problem with interrupting others. I know this is poor behavior and I'm worried that if I don't stop it will have a negative effect on my career. What can I do?
Brian -- Houston

Dear Brian,
Interrupting is an all-to-common communication behavior - especially among individuals who believe that they have a lot to say and a short time in which to say it. After all, when we think we know the answer, or are convinced that we can offer up an immediate solution (and the other person continues to drone on and on), interrupting serves as a great way to get your point across, right? Of course not; because here's what happens when you interrupt: At the same time you give voice to your ideas, the other person is left feeling like his thoughts and ideas are less important or even *worthless*. In short, interrupting leaves others feeling devalued which is opposite of the response you want to invoke when building positive interpersonal relationships.

So how can we stop interrupting? Unfortunately curbing the interruption habit is not as easy as just saying, "Don't interrupt." Why? Because like any other habit, interrupting involves a series of small behaviors that in order to be addressed, need first to be pulled up to the level of consciousness, and then subsequently dealt with. Let me explain:

Prior to the words coming out of our mouth, interrupting begins in our mind. In the midst of listening during a typical conversation, it is very natural for us to begin "rehearsing our response." Here, you are not alone: communication experts think that in a typical conversation the average person listens only a few seconds before they decide the next thing they want to say. Much like an actor practicing for delivering his or her lines on the big stage, when we rehearse a response, we go over and over again in our mind what it is that we want to say. As we do so, we get more and more focused on the word and picture images in our mind, and less and less focused on what the other person is saying to us. The result? Our ears turn off and if we are not fully aware of what we are doing, our mouth turns on.

Another cause of interrupting occurs when we decide we have important information to share and we begin to obsess that if we do not share this information immediately, that the idea will be lost forever. It's as if the idea will disappear, never to be had again.

To illustrate how these two habits work in tandem with each other, I want you to think about the last time you were in conflict with another individual. Go ahead and pull the remembered scenario up to the level of awareness - just like you're pulling up a blind to let the light in. How long did it take before you began rehearsing your response. Half a second? Perhaps you even had what you were going to say before you started the conversation. Once you decided your lines, think about how much energy you put toward remembering what you were going to say, rather than fully opening your ears to the other person.

And if you thought you had the "winning point," or the idea that would win the round and make you the knowledge "heavyweight-champion-of-the-world," watch out. My prediction is that you were likely thinking, *"I've got it, and I not going to lose it . . . Gee, if he'd only quit talking for just one minute then I could just say it . . . c'mon, c'mon, c'mon, shut up already before I forget what I'm going to say."* Sound familiar?

Excellent communication happens when we get "other focused" - when we stop thinking so much about ourselves and when we start focusing on what others need from us. As humans all of us are looking to feel listened to, valued and accepted. By thinking more about what another person's needs are, rather than being consistently self-absorbed with our own, we are well on our way to establishing positive relationships with others.

P.S. I think it was former President Eisenhower who said, "Don't talk unless you have something to say." This is simple, but sound advice and may be just what the Doctor ordered with regard to curbing the habit of interrupting.

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.