



Stop Rambling in Meetings — and Start Getting Your Message Across

By Anne Sugar

Has this ever happened to you: You debrief from a strategic meeting, only to find you can't remember anyone besides yourself sharing ideas or contributing input? Many leaders need to be coached to speak up. But what if you have the opposite problem — and you can't seem to stop talking? This can lead to frustration all around — your team members become frustrated because they want to share their own ideas, and your manager grows frustrated because they want to hear other viewpoints. Your ideas get lost because stakeholders lose patience with your habit of dominating the conversation — and start to tune you out.

If you suspect you may be monopolizing the conversation in meetings, experiment with these tactics to help get your message across.

Measure exactly how much you're talking.

Take time to reflect after meetings. If you feel like you have been sharing too much, look back and consider who else contributed. Ask yourself honestly: "Did I talk over people?" Estimate how much of the meeting you were speaking.

For example: "I spoke up about one third of the time and talked over Jim twice." Note that there isn't a specific set point for how much you should or should not talk. You will need to use your gut. If you notice you have a pattern of talking over others, it's time for a reset. Moving forward, make an effort to prioritize listening over talking.

Make a rule for yourself regarding when to share. For example: “I won’t speak until at least two other people in the meeting have shared their input,” or “I will limit my sharing to one point.” Or, “I will time myself and allow only three minutes of speaking.”

Of course, this advice won't work all the time; your input will be needed and solicited when the stakes are high. But for routine meetings, practice pulling back and letting others have the floor. I coach clients to over-index on sticking to their allotted speaking time. While you don't want to limit your speaking time forever, adhering to the time rule in the beginning will help you build the habit of yielding the floor.

Consider using other ways to share your ideas.

If you excel at creativity, you may come alive in a brainstorming session and quickly generate a wealth of ideas. However, if you tend to ramble when describing those ideas, you could come across as scattered and ill prepared. Consider other ways to organize your ideas and communicate them to audiences. For example, can you keep a running list of your brilliant insights on your computer so you're better prepared to share them in the next meeting? Or, can you share ideas in a non-meeting setting — for example, in a follow-up email or an internal chat platform?

Use whatever forms of communication are at your disposal to help organize your thoughts. You'll then communicate well-thought-out concepts when you do share. One client I worked with had many fantastic ideas; however, in her review, her supervisor noted that my client's ideas got lost when she attempted to verbalize those ideas. This client wasn't succinct enough and monopolized senior leadership meetings. To help regain her credibility after this review, my client only shared one point of view at a time that was fully flushed out so that she looked more strategic and organized. For important matters, she followed up afterward with another meeting or an email. This strategy helped her regain control of how she spoke in meetings.

Practice compressing your thoughts.

When speaking, make sure that what you're saying is necessary and impactful. You can even think of your sentences in tweet form: How would I communicate this idea if I were tweeting and facing a character limit? How can I cut my message down to its essence?

You can also try writing down the thoughts you plan to discuss in a meeting. This will help you see the cadence in how you deliver ideas. Once you establish a rhythm for compressing your thoughts, you won't need to take much time to prepare and practice.

Think of yourself as an editor eliminating words and ideas that don't communicate the essence of what you want to share. I worked with one leader who found that she could reliably scale back each of her sentences by about five words. While that may not sound like a lot, those extra words made for more muddled communication. She delivered messages with a more significant impact by trimming back her sentences.

Build in pauses.

Are you giving your colleagues enough time to digest what you say and to ask questions? If not, give yourself a signal to pause.

One client I worked with decided that when he needed to slow down and stop talking, he would pinch himself. This was a signal to take a breath, stop talking, or ask the group questions. This straightforward tactic can be amazingly effective. By slowing down and taking deliberate pauses, you'll be able to regulate your impulse to overshare, and your message will have a better chance of landing.

Ask for help.

It may be hard to know in the moment if you're oversharing. A fresh perspective can offer insight. Ask a trusted colleague or advisor to provide insights into how you're meeting your goal of talking less and listening more.

Request specific feedback: "Did I share my ideas in three minutes or less?" The answer you receive could provide additional insights that you can use for future conversations. One client I worked with decided to have a reciprocal agreement with a trusted peer. They would make sure to notice each other's patterns and would then meet once a month to share their perspectives.

While it's important to share your point of view, it's critical to know when and how. Experiment with some or all of these tactics to make sure your input is being heard.

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