

WSJ Print Edition

Managers should give others space to speak up and step up in meetings.



GETTY IMAGES I Coach your team to contribute early and often by asking questions during meetings.

Bosses Need to Exercise 'Shut-Up Muscle'

BY SABINA NAWAZ

If you're hoping to solicit new ideas or feedback from your team during a meeting, you might think the best way to loosen people up and get the conversation flowing is to start things off yourself.

But too often, the opposite happens: Bosses who don't invite input from others before voicing their own ideas and opinions often discourage their employees from asking questions, providing dissenting views or pitching ideas of their own.

If this dynamic becomes the norm—with you speaking first and/or the most during meetings—your employees are likely to disengage and perhaps even multitask their way through meetings, mindlessly agreeing with everything you say. Frustrated by the lack of response, you might find yourself speaking even more to compensate. Instead of improving efficiency, you end up hurting team morale and productivity—and create a bigger work burden for yourself.

To change this dynamic, bosses need to exercise their "shut-up muscle" and give others space to speak up and step up in meetings. One of the best strategies to help managers do this—and yield more from their teams—is to make it a goal to be the third person to speak in meetings.

Why third? The voices most likely to be shut down when the manager speaks first are those with dissenting opinions. Keeping dissenters quiet can lead to shorter meetings and the illusion of greater efficiency, but it also increases the likelihood of underinformed and error-ridden decisions. Making it easier for people to express unbiased opinions sets the stage for more robust debate and better outcomes. At the same time, managers shouldn't wait too long to speak, either. If you take too long to weigh in, your team might wander off topic or read something into your silence that just isn't there.

Here are a few other tips to help managers delay speaking and encourage others to contribute more at team meetings:

Recognize your interruption triggers.

Notice which situations or people most make you want to jump in and interrupt others, and have a plan in place to help you press pause. During a virtual meeting, for example, you could place yourself on mute by default so you have a moment to reconsider before speaking. At an in-person meeting, try a physical cue such as sitting on one of your hands.

Use margin notes. Another way to keep yourself from interjecting while others are talking is to create a wide margin wherever you take notes and jot down thoughts that come to you as you listen. In letting others speak first, you might find that many of the points you wanted to make have already been addressed. This helps your employees feel empowered and allows you to add unique value by surfacing points that the team hasn't yet considered.

Ask questions. Like many managers, you may want to be seen as the smartest person in the room. But that won't advance your overall objectives. Instead, coach your team to contribute early and often by asking questions such as, "What have you considered?" or "What would happen if we did nothing?" or "What have you learned?"

Ask for a paraphrase. Paraphrasing signals that we are listening to, and want to accurately understand, what others have said. To prevent those frustrating and timewasting meetings after the meeting, where employees gather to discuss what the boss really wants, ask a team member to paraphrase what you, specifically, have said. This is a good way to reduce your own word count while ensuring your employees understand your input and expectations.

With these strategies, you can avoid dominating the discussion and help your team produce more and better ideas. That, in turn, will lead to improved work relationships. Isn't that what it means to lead? *Sabina Nawaz is a global CEO coach and leadership speaker, and the author of "You're the Boss, Become the Manager You Want to Be (and Others Need)."*

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