



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03HEP
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
FEBRUARY 22, 2017

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You're giving a presentation on the company's strategic direction when one of your colleagues interrupts you. You pause, address his question, and continue with your point — until he interrupts again. Sound familiar?

All of us have known colleagues, friends, or romantic partners who seem unable to let us finish a sentence. How do you handle them effectively? There are a number of tactics. But it is important to understand when and why people interrupt others.

Different cultural norms. At the beginning of my relationship with my husband, I constantly interrupted him. Knowing that I love arguments based on data and good evidence, he showed up for one of our dates with a printout of a [research paper](#) titled “Overlapping Talk and the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation.” The first sentence reads, “The orderly distribution of opportunities to participate in social interaction is one of the most fundamental preconditions for viable social organization.” I got his point.

After that, I started watching out for my tendency to interrupt, which I blamed on my being Italian. (Italians are often expressive and verbal, and we tend to take interruptions as a sign of interest in the conversation rather than a lack of interest in what someone is saying.) Later, I even found some [empirical support](#) for the idea that culture plays a role in interruptions when reading about how people from individualistic and collectivistic cultures interact in conversation.

In [one study](#), Japanese participants (whose culture is collectivistic) tended to switch their usual cooperative interruption style (e.g., interruptions asking for clarifications) to the more intrusive North American style when they were engaged in conversations in English with Americans. In addition, the number of intrusive interruptions was higher in conversations between Japanese and American participants conducted in English than in conversations between two Japanese participants in Japanese. Similarly, in other studies with different cultures, the person speaking a second language often switched to the speech style of the native speaker.

Because of my own tendency to interrupt, I was curious to learn more about interruptions and what predicts dominance during conversations and meetings.

Status. From the literature, I learned that heritage is not the only factor that affects interruption. [Studies of group discussions and conversations](#) during meetings have found that status is another. High-status people are asked their opinions more often, talk more, receive more positive comments, are chosen as leaders more frequently, are more likely to influence their group’s decisions, and in general dominate the conversation. Studies of conversations involving couples and families have also found such status effects.

People tend to dominate conversations and interrupt when they feel more powerful than others in the room or when they want to signal power to others. In my [research](#) with Leigh Tost (University of Southern California) and Rick Larrick (Duke University), we found that when we induced people to feel powerful, by having them write about a time they had power over other people, they gave more weight to their own opinions than to a more informed advisor’s when making decisions. In [another study](#), team leaders who were induced to feel powerful did most of the talking during the team discussion and interrupted frequently. As a result, these leaders failed to learn about critical information that other team members had.

In my executive education classes, I find that students who are randomly assigned to the role of team leader experience a sense of power and overconfidence that leads them to dominate the team’s

conversation. They talk more, interrupt, give directives — and listen very little. Consequently, they fail to learn from others, with detrimental consequences for team performance.

How should you handle interrupters? You could give them academic research showing them the error of their ways, as my husband did while we were dating. But I would argue that the following simple strategies may be more successful.

Preempt the interrupter. Of course you can ask the person who interrupted to allow you to finish what you were saying. Even better, before you start talking, preview what you plan to say and stipulate when it's okay to break in. Workplace consultant Laura Rose suggests saying, “There are a lot of different pieces to this explanation, so please bear with me. I want to tell you the entire story. Then I want us to wrap around and get your thoughts on specific details.” This type of preview may stop the interrupter before he or she starts.

Hold a constructive private conversation. If the interruptions continue, speak to the person in private. Give the interrupter the benefit of the doubt; as was the case with me, they may not realize their tendency to interrupt. Talk to the person about what you've observed and for how long, and explain how it affects you (and others, if appropriate). This straight talk, when framed constructively, is more likely to produce a behavioral change.

Enlist the group. If you'd prefer to avoid embarrassing the interrupter, you can address the whole group without pointing fingers. Ask the group to reflect on whether you are communicating effectively together and what could be improved. This strategy would allow every member, including you, to raise their awareness of challenges facing the group, a first important step in addressing problems like this one.

By addressing past interruptions, you'll be able to avoid future ones and encourage balanced, effective conversations.

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