



March 2017

To Speak or Not to Speak...? The Complexity of Meeting Dynamics



Managers who are striving to advance in their careers always get feedback on their communication skills and their ability to impact other people. Sometimes the feedback is specific and easy to understand.

“You speak too fast or too softly.” It means we can’t follow what you’re saying.
“You look stiff and uncomfortable in front of a group.” It means you lack confidence.

Coaching can help you strengthen the voice and learn to own the space.

But, sometimes the feedback is general and harder to understand.

“You need to show up more in meetings.” Does that mean you should talk more?
“You can be overbearing in meetings.” Does that mean you should talk less?

The more general feedback often focuses on meetings. That’s because while managers gain a lot of visibility from presentations and a lot of impact from one-on-one discussions, most of their time is spent in meetings. So, it stands to reason that impressions are more likely to be shaped in meetings than any other communication setting.

Meetings become a very visible test of how your style influences a group because it’s big enough to observe how a group of people react and small enough to interpret the one-on-one reactions. Because it’s dynamic, it can be less about your individual skills and more about your awareness of others and your ability to adjust to the situation. It’s a great laboratory for exploring the impact of communication and focusing in on your ability to influence others.

It isn’t easy because it is dynamic. It can change every hour as you move from one meeting to the next. And, it’s why many managers get the feedback noted above.

So, does it come down to: TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK?

Not really because that would suggest that it’s all about you. Instead, you should interpret the feedback through the eyes of the other participants and think about what they need in a meeting setting.

So, if you’ve been told: **You need to show up more in meetings...**

What it means about you: This feedback usually means that you aren’t getting noticed as much as your peers. It may be because you aren’t talking much, but it could as easily mean that you aren’t aware of owning your space and how people literally see you in the meeting. We would coach you to open your physical space and think more about the physical impressions that others are reading across the room.

What it means about other participants: They want you to be more vocal, vulnerable and present in the room. When you don't say much, they aren't sure how to read that. Is it because you don't care about the topic or is it because you are keeping your thoughts and next steps close to the vest? It's as much about your impact on them as it is about you.

In reality, it's usually a signal of someone who processes information before they join the conversation. It's understandable, but it's tough in group dynamics. You can't change the way you process information, but you can think about what you're doing and become aware that others are watching it. What non-verbals do others see while you're thinking? Do you seem removed? Chances are you're thinking a step ahead, and you want to formulate a pretty good solution and action steps before you speak up.

Our coaching is to speak sooner. Don't keep all of that in your head as a process to get you to a final answer. Instead, learn to verbalize the process. The things you're thinking are useful to a group and it can help a group move forward in a discussion. Realize that you don't have to always come up with the answer; in fact, it's better for the group if you don't. Sometimes the process itself and the first steps of the thinking are more valuable to a discussion.

Why you got the feedback: Leaders worry about someone who can't seem to influence a group or get in the center of a discussion. They value the end result of your thinking, but they know that if you don't show up in the group setting, you won't be able to bring others along. You can get pigeon-holed as an individual contributor instead of a group influencer. They watch group dynamics and want to see a manager who can turn a room.

And, what if you've been told: **You can be overbearing in meetings...**

What it means about you: This feedback usually means you talk a lot. You have great energy and think on your feet. And, you jump in quickly to ignite a conversation. But, you may have low awareness that there aren't many people similar to you in the meeting. So, you may be shutting others down and not noticing that you tend to cut people off or overpower ideas as they surface. We would coach you to pay attention to the room. Wait for others to engage; focus more on using your thoughts to bring others into the conversation rather than seeking the spotlight. Your style may already drive that impression.

What it means about other participants: They want you to be more inclusive. You may take up too much air and they may feel that you overpower them. It isn't a competition. In fact, when a single person drives an outcome, it's usually viewed by the group as a failure. The meeting participants don't know if you are trying to gain the limelight or trying to solve the problem. And, they can resent you for it.

In reality, it's usually a signal of someone who thinks fast and often flies by the seat of their pants. Your quick thinking is useful in this setting, but it may be more influential if it comes out in the middle of the meeting instead of in the beginning. And, it's more helpful to build on other ideas rather than squelching them.

Our coaching is to bridge ideas. When you speak, you will be more effective if you build on one person's idea or connect two ideas that have already been said. Think more as a facilitator. You may be able to move faster than the collective group, but it will only be a successful meeting if everyone gets to the same destination.

Why you got the feedback: Leaders worry about someone who overpowers a group. They see this as someone who is self-focused and less people focused. With passionate managers, they watch to see if the group will follow or if they back away from someone who brings all the energy to the conversation.

It's ironic that the communication situation you face most often is the one you dread most often. Meetings rank highest on how you spend your time and lowest on where you think communication is effective. And in response to that, many managers have developed bad habits. You get on your phones, you tune out each other and you wait for the moments in the meeting that have value to you.

Consider it differently. Meetings are a great laboratory because we attend them often and we have an active group to read and influence in every setting. Great communicators don't evolve overnight. It takes awareness, it takes skills and it takes a steady effort to strengthen influence and impact people.

