



Essential Ways to Deal with Silent or Unresponsive People

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Eight techniques to deal with silent or unresponsive board members.

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Essential Ways to Deal with Silent or Unresponsive People

Introduction

Do you work with a person who does not speak up? She doesn't even have anything to say when you ask directly for her opinions. Do you try to cajole her into stating what she is thinking? When she responds, does she 'sit on the fence?' You aren't sure whether she agrees or disagrees with what you are saying or doing.

Do you wonder what is really going through her mind? Is she ignoring you, engulfed in her own thoughts, or feeling superior to you? Silence can provide a person with time to think and weigh her own thoughts or it can be used as a form of aggression. If it is a form of aggression, the board has to take action to ensure that person is a contributing member. This article outlines eight techniques which may help.

1. Body language

Pay attention to the person's body language, eye movements, and facial expression. Is she following the flow of the discussion, shifting her gaze away from you frequently when you are speaking, and/or changing her views based on the ideas of others she is trying to impress? She may be listening. The way things are stated may be too fast for her. Without thinking time she may be unable to formulate her opinions and as a result may think the best thing to do is remain silent.

There are people who talk to think and those who need to think before they are willing to speak. What is your style? What makes you comfortable during a discussion? Now reverse that situation and wonder what a person with a different style would need in order to make a contribution. Once you make that determination you can look at your relationship and see if it supports both styles. If it does not, what can you do to provide the unresponsive person with the conditions she needs to process information, formulate her thoughts and express them in an accepting environment?

If conditions support both thinking styles and you determine that the person is deliberately unresponsive, then you need another strategy. One such strategy is using open-ended questions.

2. Open-ended questions

Words or phrases which enable a person to ask open-ended questions include

- How
- Why
- Could you provide examples of
- What do you mean by
- What would be the risks associated with that, or
- What would be the major concerns for you?

If you do use close-ended questions, that person may nod her head or give you a one-word answer and that could end the conversation. If the person is genuinely shy, she will welcome the opportunity to be included. If she has chosen an aggressive stance, she may study you and wonder how genuine you really are before responding.

3. Your Stance

If you are tense, you may have a tendency to stare directly at her. It is better to

- be prepared to expect any response and honor that response without judgement
- lean a little forward as you speak or tilt your head forward
- raise your eyebrows a little because you are sincerely expecting an answer, and
- nod as she speaks demonstrating that you are willing to listen longer.

Sitting with your arms folded or smirking when you speak will not help in any way. Trust is evaluated by your body language. When you sit patiently you are honoring the other person's need to think.

4. Honor silent moments

The tendency is to fill in silent moments. Just try remaining silent for 15-30 seconds. It sounds like a short time but it feels like a long time. Refrain, if at all possible, from filling in the gaps. If you do forget yourself and start talking, re-engage the unresponsive person by asking her opinion about the thoughts you just expressed and wait.

If the silent person shows visible emotions, name them. Questions such as, "You seem really displeased right now, am I reading that correctly?" If she says, "Yes," then you can continue by asking an open-ended question. The key is to continue to honor where the person is coming from and simultaneously enable the board to function effectively.

5. Establish ground rules

If your issue is occurring at work, does your employer have ground rules for discussion and problem solving? If so, it may be appropriate to review those prior to engaging in problem solving with another person. If not, it may be essential to establish determine if they could be established.

Examples of ground rules include

1. All divergent opinions are welcome.
2. Each person participates by expressing her own opinions.
3. Time-limits for discussion are set and honored.
4. All commitments are kept
5. Listen attentively to the speaker
6. Keep what was said confidential.
7. Silence is agreement.

The list may be sufficient to start the discussion. The silent person will see that she is not being treated differently from anyone else. She may be more open to attempts to encourage her to express herself.

6. Be encouraging

Remain encouraging and positive even when the person remains silent and unresponsive. You may want to react to the blandness, negativity or hostility but don't. Remind her that you are sincere and her opinion matters to you. When she does begin to speak, refrain from stepping closer or touching her. Just listen.

7. Listen attentively

It is essential to listen and acknowledge what is being said without interrupting. Also, if possible do not try to move back to your agenda too swiftly. Allow time for each topic, especially any topic which is important to her. Be supportive.

Final Comment

Dealing with the unresponsive person can be very trying. If she is given the support and knows the rules for participation but does not participate, you may have to take another course of action. That action may be

- ignoring her
- asking her to participate in an alternate dispute resolution process, or
- engaging in mediation.

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