

Are You a Spoon in a Blender to Your Team?

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My 13-year old son and I were in the car having what I thought was a conversation. I was mid-sentence when my son held up his hand, faced me, and said, “Mom, at this point you sound like a spoon in the blender.”

Clever, I grant you, but ouch. I was stunned.

My intentions were well-meaning, but unfortunately my “coaching for success” was coming across more like “clamoring and duress.”

Of course, I realize my experience with my adolescent son was not unlike that of many parents. But, as someone who earns a living as a professional speaker and facilitator, this experience suddenly made me recognize how hard it is for everyone to be heard and understood.

I hear from many clients – even those working at the highest levels in their organizations in HR, legal or compliance departments – that they sometimes feel powerless and unheard.

Worse yet, in their frustration about not being heard, they occasionally resort to levels of animation and emotion that later garner complaints from others who characterize them as being mean or unprofessional.

The issue – whether at work or in our personal lives – is how do we turn up the volume on what we have to say so that we feel heard and valued? Just as importantly, how do we highlight what we have to say without the risk of causing others to cringe or tune us out? Or, in my son’s vernacular, how do we keep the spoon out of the blender?

Here are my 10 tips on how to turn up the volume on what you have to say:

- 1. Pick the moment.** Listening and multitasking are contradictory activities. Request permission. Let the person know that you have something to discuss and ask them when would be a good time to talk so they can focus on what you say.
- 2. Offer perspective.** Provide context for why you are talking now. Offer your intention and explain the big picture. What’s at stake for you/us?
- 3. Speak calmly.** If you are angry or frustrated, wait – take a walk before you talk. This is harder than it seems because it requires that you be aware of how you are really feeling about a situation before you begin to engage in a conversation about it. Even if

you do come to the conversation calmly, other things may happen during an exchange that could provoke certain emotions. If you can't step away, then take a break in the moment. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly. As you breathe out, focus on relaxing your face. You'll know that your face is relaxed when your mouth naturally comes to rest in the shape of a slight smile. Bonus: Once your face is relaxed, your tone of voice will be much calmer and having taken a breath, you are apt to speak more slowly.

4. Be truthful. Speak honestly and directly. Trying to be diplomatic or soften the blow often causes us to add extraneous comments that can seem insincere or leave others wondering what else is going on that we're not being honest about.

5. Make your point. Arrive at your bottom line only once. Don't keep circling back to your reasons. You will have more impact if you get to the point and then let it sink in.

6. Pause; use silence to invite response. It is natural to want to keep talking and re-making the point when the other person doesn't respond, but don't. Just breathe and allow the other person the opportunity to take in what you've just said.

7. Really listen. Ask questions, make eye contact, remove distractions. It is absolutely critical that we demonstrate that we are earnestly making an effort to understand the impact we have on others.

8. Acknowledge the response you get. If you get no response, acknowledge that.

9. Ask for next steps. Summarize the conversation and reach agreement about what action will be taken going forward.

10. Thank your listener. The overall impact of a successful conversation is more than an agreement on next steps; it's about the relationship. After a conversation, express appreciation for how the other person made you feel as a result of engaging with you. Let them know that you feel valued when they hear you.

No matter the situation -- whether giving a speech, addressing a performance issue, asking for an alternative work schedule, or talking with your teenager -- these tips can help you communicate more effectively and increase the likelihood that you will be heard.