



LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS: I AM SPEAKING

At least as far back as George Washington and his *110 Rules of Civility & Decent Behavior in Company & Conversation*, interrupting another person has been considered impolite and ill-advised. His Rule #74:

When Another Speaks be attentive your Self and disturb not the Audience if any hesitate in his Words help him not nor Prompt him without desired, Interrupt him not, nor Answer him till his Speech be ended.

The issue of interrupting others has recently come to the fore once again. According to research, the chief factors that determine who does the most interrupting in any given situation are: perceived status (dominance) and gender—those two factors being somewhat related: [Time.com: What Research Says About Men Interrupting Women—And How to Stop It](#) and [HBR.org: Female Supreme Court Justices Are Interrupted More by Male Justices and Advocates](#).

When we coach executive teams, we often recommend that the team set up rules of engagement or “Team Agreements,” not 110 rules like George Washington’s, but whatever number is considered necessary for the team members to engage productively with each other. The number is usually fewer than 20. We advocate for team agreements in these brief articles: [ExecutiveCoaching.com: A Technique You Might Not Think of to Boost Performance](#) and [ExecutiveCoaching.com: 5 Rules to Follow for Effective Senior Team Meetings](#). Here are several communications tips from executive teams with which we have worked; these statements are from their team codes of conduct:

- *“Listen and learn, hear the message and seek to understand—communicate with honesty and respect; listen with trust; respect opinions; depersonalize the issue—focus on the issue not on the person.”*
 - Notice several things: If you are listening, you are not interrupting. If you are treating someone with respect, you are letting them speak. If you are focusing on the issue, not the person, details such as gender do not matter.
- *“We foster a culture of safety that encourages openness and constructive feedback.”*
 - Safety and openness are required for a speaker to be able to give someone who interrupts honest feedback about the effects of their behavior. Typically, interruptions interfere with a speaker’s ability to feel safe.
- *“We listen, air our views and are receptive to others; don’t keep things secret; disagree agreeably, in a dignified way.”*
 - Interrupting is a sign that you are not receptive to others’ views. If you have interrupted someone, you are not being dignified.
- *“Value and appreciate different ideas and perspectives.”*
 - This is another way of saying that you value input from your colleagues. Cutting your colleagues off shows that you value neither your colleagues nor their ideas.

These suggestions from our client teams are ways to build a culture where people LISTEN with respect and do not shut down others’ ideas by interrupting. For some thoughts on what you can do as an individual, see: [HBR.org: How to Handle Interrupting Colleagues](#).

What is the communication culture your senior team uses and models for the organization? Has your team agreed on commitments to one other?