W.A.I.T. Before You Speak — and Make Every Conversation More Impactful



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The most effective professionals don’t just say what comes to mind the moment they think of it. Instead, they pause to make sure the right thing is said by the right person at the right time. In fast-moving discussions, that brief moment of reflection can mean the difference between a rushed comment and a truly valuable contribution.

A striking 63% of employees say their voices have been ignored by their manager or employer, a disconnect that can have devastating effects on retention. Even more concerning, 34% of employees would rather quit or switch teams than voice their genuine concerns with management, according to The Workforce

Institute. When leaders prioritize active listening and create space for meaningful dialogue, they build stronger teams, improve engagement and reduce costly turnover.

That's the power of the W.A.I.T. framework — short for "Why Am I Talking?" It's not about staying silent; it's about creating space for better dialogue, sharper ideas and stronger relationships. By learning to pause before speaking, professionals at any level — whether with colleagues, subordinates or superiors — can drive more productive conversations, ensure key voices are heard and strengthen workplace dynamics.

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Intentional speech fosters stronger leadership

Speaking more doesn't always mean communicating better. Professionals who dominate conversations risk diluting their message and stifling valuable input from others. I learned this lesson the hard way early in my career. In my eagerness to close a deal, I kept talking — only to realize I had talked my way out of the sale. That experience stuck with me, teaching me that sometimes the most powerful move in a conversation is knowing when to stop talking.

The W.A.I.T. framework helps professionals communicate with purpose. Before speaking, ask yourself:

- **Does it need to be said?** Not everything that comes to mind adds value. Taking a moment to evaluate whether a comment contributes to the discussion can keep conversations focused and effective.
- **Does it need to be said now?** Timing matters. A point raised at the wrong moment might derail the conversation

instead of enhancing it. Waiting until the right time can lead to greater impact.

- **Does it need to be said by me?** Sometimes, the most important contribution isn't speaking but making space for the right person to share. When professionals wait to speak, they create an opportunity for better ideas, stronger insights or the right stakeholder to weigh in.

When you ask yourself, "Why am I talking?" (W.A.I.T.), you don't just automatically pause — you create time for the conversation to evolve. If the point truly needs to be made, it may arise naturally from someone else. And if it doesn't, you now have the time to follow up afterward to help shape the narrative in a more strategic way. Or perhaps you can ask a question to the right expert in the room to answer.

The late Larry King, one of the most respected interviewers of all time, understood the power of listening better than most. Rather than dominating conversations, he mastered the art of asking thoughtful questions and letting his guests speak — a skill every leader can learn from. As King put it, "I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening." This mindset is just as critical in leadership as it is in journalism. When executives speak less and listen more, they gain valuable insights, build trust and create a culture where employees feel heard.

Related: The 4 Levels of Listening: Why Every Good Entrepreneur Should Talk Less

Pausing creates space for innovation and collaboration

The moments between words are just as important as the words themselves. When professionals allow for pauses during

conversations, they create room for others to contribute, fostering a more inclusive and innovative environment. I learned this firsthand when working with a leader who rarely spoke in meetings, but when he did, his words carried weight. His quiet presence and well-timed contributions earned him influence, proving that leadership isn't about talking the most — it's about making each word count. Inspired by his approach, I shifted my communication style, focusing on listening first and speaking with greater intention.

Sheldon Yellen, CEO of BELFOR, champions this approach, emphasizing that great leaders "listen twice as much as they talk." By intentionally stepping back, executives encourage diverse perspectives to emerge, leading to more creative solutions and stronger team buy-in. Companies prioritizing this kind of communication — such as Pixar, known for its collaborative "braintrust" meetings — often see greater innovation and team cohesion.

One extreme practice of a pause in meeting conversations happened when Jeff Bezos at Amazon implemented "silent meetings," where executives spend the first 30 minutes reading a well-structured, written memo in silence before discussing a decision. This practice forces deeper thinking, eliminates knee-jerk reactions and ensures that ideas are fully considered rather than rushed responses dominating the conversation.

Self-awareness strengthens team dynamics

Beyond refining personal speech habits, W.A.I.T. helps professionals develop self-awareness, a key trait for fostering trust and engagement within teams. Effective communication isn't just about what is said but also how it is received. Those who pause to consider their tone, timing and audience create a culture of respect and engagement where

employees feel valued and heard.

I learned this lesson when leading a team early in my career. I believed I was being clear and direct, but a trusted colleague pulled me aside and told me my communication style sometimes came across as overpowering. Instead of fostering collaboration, I was unknowingly shutting people down. That feedback was tough to hear, but it changed everything. From that point on, I focused on asking more questions, actively listening and ensuring every team member had space to contribute.

A practical way to implement W.A.I.T. is by setting intentional "listening goals." For instance, professionals can challenge themselves to speak last in meetings, allowing team members to share their perspectives first. This ensures that a range of voices are heard and helps team members refine their contributions by incorporating insights from others. Over time, this practice fosters a culture of mutual respect and collaborative decision-making.

Related: How to Develop Self-Awareness and Become a More Conscious and Effective Leader

W.A.I.T. before you speak and watch your leadership improve

Mastering communication isn't about saying more — it's about saying what matters when it counts and ensuring others are heard. The W.A.I.T. framework offers a practical way for professionals to cultivate intentional speech, foster innovation through silence and strengthen team relationships with greater self-awareness.

By embracing pauses and practicing restraint, professionals create an environment where their words carry more impact, their colleagues feel more valued and their conversations

become more meaningful. In the workplace, words are powerful — but sometimes, their absence speaks volumes.

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