



Home / Your Voice / May I finish? The case against interrupting

YOUR VOICE

May I finish? The case against interrupting

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Wendy R.S. O'Connor.

Recently, a colleague called to ask me for my “feedback and insight” on a case. He then proceeded to interrupt me every time I opened my mouth. Eventually, he finished and, apparently satisfied with his own “feedback and insight,” he ended the phone call and thanked me for my help.

I hung up and pondered yet again why it is that certain people—particularly male people—never learned what most of us were taught in kindergarten, if not by our parents as toddlers: Don’t talk when someone else is speaking. After all, weren’t we given two ears and one mouth so that we would listen more than we speak?

Interrupting is rampant in our occupation—some lawyers can’t seem to keep their mouths shut while others are speaking. People may argue as to the reasons why others interrupt, but most

would agree that it's rude and annoying. It's also a conversation killer that precludes a healthy exchange of information because, bottom line, if everyone is talking, no one is listening.

YES, IT'S A REAL PROBLEM—FOR WOMEN, ANYWAY

Lawyers interrupt—a lot. Interruptions by litigators have been an increasing subject of sanctions: In 2012, a male attorney was fined \$10,000

(http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/appeals_court_sanctions_lawyer_for_frivolous_outrageous_and_unprofessional_/) by the Supreme Court of New York Appellate Division for “frivolous, outrageous and unprofessional” behavior, including rampant interrupting, while a female attorney with Jones Day was sanctioned by an Iowa federal court judge for her obstreperous behavior and ordered to produce a training video

(http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/judge_orders_jones_day_to_make_training_video_on_impropriety_of_frequent_de) for firm associates explaining why interrupting should be avoided. In 2017, a male attorney was sanctioned \$12,600 by a California appellate court for repeated interruptions during a discovery conference.

While both women and men are guilty of interrupting, most research suggests that men are the worse offenders. Over the years, scholars studying the phenomenon of interrupting have consistently concluded that men are twice as likely to interrupt a speaker than women and are 33% more likely to interrupt a woman than another man. A 1990 survey

(<https://books.google.com/books?>

[id=tvZJAQAIAAJ&q=inauthor:%22Illinois+Task+Force+on+Gender+Bias+in+the+Courts%22&dq=inauthor:%22Illinois+Task+Force+on+Gender+Bias+in+the+Courts%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjVzvyts7DdAhWGuIMKHb7gDXyQ6AEIKTAA](https://books.google.com/books?id=tvZJAQAIAAJ&q=inauthor:%22Illinois+Task+Force+on+Gender+Bias+in+the+Courts%22&dq=inauthor:%22Illinois+Task+Force+on+Gender+Bias+in+the+Courts%22&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjVzvyts7DdAhWGuIMKHb7gDXyQ6AEIKTAA)) by the Illinois Task Force on Gender Bias in the Courts found that judges interrupted female advocates far more frequently than their male colleagues.

These behaviors even permeate proceedings before our country's highest court: Two studies that examined transcripts of arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court—one conducted by the University of Alabama and one by the Northwestern University's Pritzker School of Law—concluded that women are interrupted at a vastly higher rate than their male counterparts and are allowed far less speaking time. In 2015 alone, two-thirds of the interrupting of Supreme Court justices occurred to one-third of the court (Justices Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Sonia Sotomayor, and Elena Kagan, all of whom happen to

be female), this despite guidelines that expressly prohibit any interruptions of the justices, and notwithstanding that the first rule we learn in law school is never interrupt the judge.

WHY DO WE INTERRUPT?

People interrupt for a variety of innocent and not-so-innocent reasons. Some people aren't aware that they are interrupting or may do so in an attempt to be helpful; because they are excited by the discussion; or to demonstrate their interest. Some listeners get bored and impatient because they anticipate what the speaker intends to say and are anxious to move the discussion forward. Perhaps the speaker is incorrect about a vital piece of information, or is dominating the conversation so that others can't weigh in.

Others freely admit to interrupting but blame it on their communication style or even their cultural heritage—"I'm Italian. That's how we talk." Interrupting may be a sign of social anxiety; it may even be unavoidable, such as in the case of an emergency or due to time constraints.

In each of these cases, the interrupter has no evil motivation (but could probably benefit from learning more diplomatic means of communication). In other instances, the interrupter's intentions may be less altruistic: He believes that what he has to say is more important, is trying to assert dominance, or wants to communicate a greater level of expertise at the expense of the speaker.

Whether intentional or not, interrupting communicates "what you're saying isn't important," or "please stop talking." It signals a lack of respect for the speaker, who may become angry or frustrated. Done frequently enough between people who must regularly communicate, interrupting dissolves trust and creates resentment, neither of which fosters a healthy exchange of information.

DEALING WITH INTERRUPTERS

So what to do when you find yourself in a conversation with an interrupter? It may depend upon your personal style, but here are some suggestions:

- Identify the behavior by saying, "May I finish?" or "I have a few more points to make and then I'll be able to listen to what you have to say."
- Consider changing how you express yourself to convey a greater sense of confidence. Use shorter sentences with definite language (Instead of "Maybe we should consider looking into option B?" consider "We need to move forward with option B").

- Employ authoritative body language. Sheryl Sandberg wasn't blowing smoke when she urged women to "lean in." Studies show that this technique, along with maintaining steady eye contact, communicates a gravity and accountability, which tends to diminish interrupting.
- Prepare the listener: If you need to present a lot of information, begin by stating, "Bear with me, this is critical to the dialogue."
- Keep talking. Speaking over an interrupter in a nonaggressive way is difficult, and it's an ineffective method to convey information, but it may cause the interrupter to stop talking or deter future interrupting.
- Ignore it if it's a first-time offender; it may be an aberration.
- Stop talking. This may not curtail interrupting, and it can feel passive-aggressive, but when used judiciously, it may gracefully convey the fact of the interruption without creating bad feelings.
- Consider whether you've gone on too long, or whether the interruption may positively impact the rest of the conversation. Maybe it's time to let someone else talk.
- If, despite all your best efforts to be diplomatic yet firm, the person you're speaking with refuses to stop interrupting, end the conversation, and explain why. "I'm trying to communicate with you, but you're not allowing me to do so. This conversation isn't productive, so I am going to end it."

NO ONE EVER DIED FROM NOT INTERRUPTING

Our profession is one in which effective communication is essential. What our colleagues and clients have to say may turn out to be very important and we do ourselves a disservice when we fail to listen carefully. More significantly, interrupting damages relationships because of what it necessarily conveys to the speaker, that what they have to say isn't worth listening to. And that's a message few are able or willing to hear as anything other than arrogance or a lack of respect.

Few would dispute that communication is the touchstone to strong relationships, and no one benefits when it breaks down, as it inevitably does when interrupting is a persistent problem. Whether you are the perpetrator or the victim of interruptive behavior, make it your goal to stop it in its tracks. Everyone benefits when everyone feels heard.

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