

LET SILENCE DO THE HEAVY LIFTING

By Marilyn Thiet

Susan Scott's book "Fierce Conversations" is filled with a multitude of tips and strategies to enable business leaders to engage in more meaningful conversations. But for me, the most poignant statement she makes is to allow "silence to do the heavy lifting" in conversations. Every book, blog, and expert discussion on leadership points out the critical importance of communication in being an effective leader. Yet so often when we hear this we think of the eloquence of speech in great leaders, or the succinct and understandable written word. Seldom do we think about the importance of incorporating silence into our communication as a leader.

Now don't get me wrong, I am not advocating silence as a primary method of communication. Quite the opposite as I've had far too many people talk to me about the lack of any communication or enough communication from their managers and executive leadership teams. Frequent and clear communication and two way dialogue is essential. But as a leader, how are you using the powerful force of silence during a conversation, especially with those who work for you? In periods of silence, there is usually only one activity taking place, and that is thinking and processing information. Reflecting upon what was just said by the other person, thinking about the place and perspective they are coming from, constructing a response or direction to take the conversation, or allowing the other person to do the same.

For those of you who know me, you know that this is something that does not come easily to an extrovert like me. I have to consciously work each day, and in each conversation to let periods of silence take the place of more words. Like so many people I somehow think that saying the same thing over and over will have better results in conveying meaning, or swaying someone to my way of thinking. I recently retweeted a quote from Keith Rosen that said "People respond in amazing ways when you give them the space and support to work through a challenge on their own". Building periods of silence into your conversations is a deliberate way to begin to allow this to happen.

Take time in your conversations this week to allow for silence. Once you state your point of view allow time for others to process and respond. And following their response, take your own time to think about the next best words to continue the conversation in a productive manner. Nothing is more critical to your relationship with your team than your conversations with them. Let the "sounds of silence" do the heavy lifting as you grow your communication skills to become a great leader.