



Interrupting is a two way street.

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Everyone has complained about being interrupted. People have interrupted our conversations, our tasks, even physically (i.e. being cut in line, in traffic, beepers, texting).

On the other hand, everyone has interrupted. Everyone does it.

In either case, the interruptee (person being interrupted) may be allowing or enabling this behavior. Before we discuss how we can “interrupt” this behavior in general, let’s examine why it’s so prevalent.



On the average, we speak at the rate of 125-150 words per minute. We can comprehend and listen at the rate of 600 words per minute. This means that our minds are underutilized by a factor of 4-5 when listening to others. Therefore, it's a struggle to keep our minds on topic. Often times, we hear one or two phrases of the conversation and we jump ahead to a solution or experience that happened to us. We're quick to share our experience and expertise before we realize that this wasn't really the focus of conversation. Because of our boredom, we inadvertently created a tangent and separate conversation (either in our heads or out loud).

Our society also supports and encourages this lifestyle.

Not only does our minds working at a faster rate, other things are happening so fast these days. With the internet, cell phones, texting, beepers, and instant messaging – information is constantly streaming at us, for us and by us. Even our interruptions are interrupted. For instance you may be working on a task and then you get interrupted by an instance message or “online chat” by someone (or via phone call). While responding to that initial interruption, someone else enters your office. It's situation normal. We even have a name for it: “multi-tasking”.

Because interruptions have become so natural, we may not even notice that we're doing it.

People interrupt us for many reasons:

- 1) They need our help
- 2) They want attention
- 3) They are bored with the current conversation
- 4) They feel we are wasting their time

- 5) They want to distract the group away from the original specific topic, goal, or issue for some reason.
- 6) They may be a little arrogant.

Sometimes we feel we have really good reasons to interrupt others:

- 1) We only have a limited amount of time to accomplish something
- 2) The discussion has drifted off topic we think is important and we need to get it back on topic
- 3) They interrupted us “first”.
- 4) We need help and need it quickly.

Everyone does it.

Interrupting isn't seen necessarily as “bad” or “wrong”. It can actually be a natural part or flow of a conversation (i.e. friends or spouses completing each other's sentences or even speaking in short hand). Even so it can be distracting, especially if the interruption causes you to lose your train of thought.

The good news is that there are appropriate ways to interrupt and to set the stage to reduce interruptions.

- 1) Set the proper expectations for the upcoming interchange.
 - a. As you start your meeting, set the stage with the purpose and goal of the meeting. Announce upfront that you if you see the discussion go off target, that you may be interrupting to get us back on goal. Then say, “Excuse me – but we've gotten ourselves off target. Let's add that to our Parking Lot list and schedule a more appropriate meeting time for that discussion.”
 - b. Very similar advice if it is in a personal setting: Before you start your story, just set the ground rules. Let people know that it's a long but very interesting tale. Verify that your audience has the time (and inclination). Maybe even ask that they bear with you, as you outline your problem, issue, or situations. After you're able to focus on getting all the details out (without distractions), then folks will have the opportunity to comment and advise. This way, people will hold their comments and questions until the end.
 - c. At the beginning of your interchange, identify this is an “informational, one-way monologue”, or a conversational dialogue. Tell people exactly what you need from them. This works in both a professional or personal climate. A personal example: “Guys – I just need to vent on this, I'm not asking for advise or recommendations. I just need to let off some steam. I need to feel angry right now. I know I'm not at the right place to listen to ideas or solution. I just need to vent to someone. Do you mind being here for me and allowing me to just vent?” Or “I need to practice this on someone to see how it sounds out loud. Can you just listen for a moment?” This blocks well-meaning friends from interrupting to offer their suggestions or reasons why you should not be feeling the way you are feeling right now.
 - d. Unsolicited advice is rarely appreciated. Ask people what they need from you. This is a two-way street. If you understand their intentions, you won't be unknowingly interrupting them.
 - e. If you're conversing in short-hand, make sure everyone in the group understands the language.
 - f. If you are on-line chatting, maybe agree to use some signal like OO (over and out) when you are done. That may give the receiver a clue that you're still composing the answer or has been otherwise distracted.

- g. Even on the phone (because you cannot see their body language and expression), it's difficult to determine if your friend has completed, has been interrupted or is merely in mid-thought. One recommendation is to pause (stay silent) longer until you are clear on their intentions.
- 2) Lead by example
- a. Ask your friends to help you “stop interrupting”. Have a secret and visible code among your friends that if you un-intentionally interrupted someone, have them pull their ear, or tap their nose, or comb their hair back or something visual that clues you. Then quickly apologize, “I just realized that I interrupted you, please continue. You were saying about” Your friends may think this is so cool – that they ask you to do the same thing for them.
 - b. If you witness someone interrupting PersonA, interject that, although you are confident that their thought is important, that you would like “PersonA” to be able to finish their story.
 - c. If someone is constantly interrupting you, then you know ahead of time that they will probably interrupt you today. So, set the proper expectations before you start your story. And make a mental note to keep silent during their story.
 - d. To curb your “interrupting tendencies” (we all have them), practice active listening skills. Stay focused on their topic by rephrasing what they are say in your own words to validate that you are understanding what they are trying to convey. Since our minds track faster than we speak, this will keep your mind focused on mindful-listening versus chatty responding.

Conclusion:

As technology continues to advance, information and data will continue to come at us. Since we are biologically engineered to comprehend much faster than we can speak or type, our minds will often wander between the gaps. Interrupting (via personal interjections or technical interruptions like texts, cell phones, chats) have become part of our daily routine and therefore our default mode. But just because the interruption is happening “now” – does not mean that it is urgent or even important. It just means that the interruption is occurring “now”. And that is all it means.

Be deliberate in how you respond to people and their actions (versus in default mode).

Using the above recommendations can give you better control on where you spend your energy and attention.

About the author



Laura is a certified business and personal life coach. Laura offers one-on-one career and life coaching, small group coaching, seminars and workshops. She has been in the software and testing industry for over 20 years. She's worked with such companies as IBM, Ericsson, Staples, Fidelity Investments and Sogeti in various client advocacy and project management roles. The techniques she uses in her business coaching and client advocacy work saved these companies both time and money, which resulted in on-time, quality product delivery with higher client satisfaction. Laura now uses her client focus, project, quality and people management skills in her personal life coaching career. As a personal life coach, she helps people integrate their goals and dreams into their everyday lives. Laura uses creative and practical tools to help her clients realize what really matters to them. They then follow-through with project and time management techniques to create the reality they really want. You can learn more about her at www.RoseCoaching.info and contact her at LauraRose@RoseCoaching.info