



## Your Talk Listen Ratio

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The Talk Listen Ratio is one interesting measure of the skill of a leader. It is a pretty easy concept to understand, and if we look at the extremes, neither of them is a good place to be. If the ratio is over 80%, then the leader is monopolizing the conversations. Unfortunately many leaders operate in this range for much of the time. They may be able to get compliance out of people, but they are leaving the power of people off the table. On the other extreme, if a leader's ratio is below 20%, there is going to be a detachment. This leader is too reticent with his or her thoughts. People will begin to wonder if the person is truly engaged in the mission of the group.

Since it is easy to see the extremes do not work well, it is axiomatic that a balance, like perhaps between 40% and 60% might work better. This means the leader is open with his or her thoughts, but also interested in the ideas of others. I recommend every leader ought to have some way to keep track, because most leaders are blind to the actual ratio they achieve on a daily basis.

You could make a recording of a few conversations to get some data, but I would not do that unless everyone involved agrees to being recorded. By getting everyone's permission to record a conversation, it would alter the phenomenon being measured, so you would have a Heisenberg Uncertainty situation, where you destroy accuracy by trying to measure a phenomenon.

The optimal ratio is situational, of course. For example, if the leader was trying to outline her vision of the future for the organization, a higher ratio would be expected. The purpose of that conversation is to share her views. Ten minutes later, when that same leader is trying to console a worker who has just lost a loved one, the better ratio would be much lower, because the main objective is to let the person grieve.

My observation is that most leaders would be better off if they would take their natural tendency and lower the ratio by about 20%. If I naturally take up 80% of the air time, I might get a much better result by operating at 60%. This rule does not hold for leaders

who naturally operate at 40% or lower. They should seek to maintain their current level or increase it.

I have found it to be possible to monitor your own ratio in certain circumstances. It is distracting to keep track, so the quality of communication is compromised. It is especially difficult to keep track yourself when you are emotionally upset or excited. In these cases, it is helpful to ask another person to make a mental note of your ratio and tell you later. The precision will not be to the second decimal place, but that precision is not required. If you can determine your typical ratio doing several kinds of discussions to within 20% accuracy, that is enough to allow you to change your habits through a feedback process.

There is nothing special in this technique, but I believe it is an extremely rare leader who actually cares about his or her ratio or makes any effort to measure or control it. If you are keeping track and working your way down the scale, you are likely one of the elite leaders of our time.

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