



To Speak or Not to Speak

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Is it always a good idea to let people know where you stand on issues? In my leadership classes, this question comes up when we discuss politics and how to protect one's reputation. From the time I was young, my parents stressed that we should be open about our feelings and ideas. I learned at an early age to share thoughts early and often. Later on, I learned there is a potential trap in the philosophy.

I call it the "stand up and be counted" syndrome. The idea is that it is a good thing to be forthright with your opinions, but there are times in life where it is wiser to hold your opinions to yourself. Believe it or not, there are situations where other people simply do not want to hear your opinion, especially if you tend toward being vocal. In a public meeting, you need to watch the body language of other people to gauge when to be vocal and when to listen quietly. I have been trying to develop that skill in myself recently. I wish I would have paid more attention to the concept earlier in my career.

I can recall making a contrary point to what was being proposed and sharing my rationale in a public forum. The leader of the meeting made note of my objection and started to move on, but I could not resist the temptation to amplify my concern. That was a mistake. My point had been made, and by trying to get in the last word, I was losing rather than gaining ground.

A cliché that fits this issue is "keeping your cards close to your chest." The idea here is that it is often a better strategy to withhold your opinion until you have assessed the audience and political environment into which you might be injecting it.

Exactly how you interject your input is as important as when you do it. For example, I once was asked if it would be a good idea to take over the sale of a product line from another company in exchange for access to some technology. The product was ten-inch floppy discs, which at the time were declining in sales volume rapidly after the introduction of the five-inch floppy disc. I answered the question easily and abruptly with "I think it stinks" (which was actually the right call). I failed to take into account the full political nature of the line-up of forces pro and con on the decision, so I saw some raised eyebrows around the table. In the end, we did not go for the deal, so there was

no permanent damage, but my initial response could have been more circumspect and mature.

For example, rather than a flat rejection, I might have discussed some test patterns around the life cycle of the product. I could have asked Socratic Questions about the future sales stream we would likely experience. Asking questions is frequently safer than making strong negative statements. It lets the other parties discover the precaution for themselves rather than have you slap them in the face with it. If they discover it, then you will not likely be irritating the other people.

Recently I had the reverse of that situation come up. I was in a BOD meeting, and there was a troubling discussion going on. My emotions were at a peak level with lots of venom inside me. Before the end of the meeting, the Chairman of the Board noticed I was being less vocal than usual and asked me if I wanted to comment on the discussion. I said that I did not want to say anything. I just needed a couple days to get my emotions in check before making some public comment that might be misinterpreted. Unfortunately, my silence (which is rare for me) was interpreted as a negative signal. Sometimes you just cannot win.

In between silence and spilling your guts is the right place to be, and knowing when and how to speak is situational. It requires maturity, a keen sense of your audience and of the politics of communicating with them, a long term view of the implications, a tendency toward transparency, a sense of self protection, and a lot of maturity. The idea is to be conscious about the potential impact of your opinion before expressing your ideas verbally. This skill is one of the basic proficiencies in Emotional Intelligence, and it is important for each of us to become skilled at metering our opinions wisely.

The point of this article is to highlight the need to be sensitive to when to speak up and when to shut up. Lean in the direction of being forthright with your feelings, but watch the body language of others closely. That habit will allow you know when it is wiser to back off. Once you decide to speak up, do so with skill and sensitivity. If you have an objection, handle it like a razor sharp foil rather than a broadsword. Remember that just because a point is important to you does not make it important or even interesting to other people.

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