

THE EXTRA POINT

BY JERRY ROBERTS



794 How Do I Know When to Shut Up?

In a world where communication between people is essential, and critical to one's success, I have a question. Once we've started a conversation, when should we end it? I'm Jerry Roberts, and we'll dig into that, next on The Extra Point.

About a dozen years ago, I wrote a short book on the art and science of networking. It was a series of strategies that could be used in any kind of face-to-face event. I created a course from part of the book, and also did a webinar version for certain select audiences. It was in that format that I caught a question I hadn't considered.

I had given the training and was wrapping up, when a guy entered into the chat, "How do I know when to shut up?" I had a couple of tactics for politely slipping out of a conversation that was going nowhere, or where one person was monopolizing your time, but this was different. This was not me stopping someone else, this was about me stopping me.

If I recall correctly, I believe I advised him that if he was repeating information and had nothing new to add to a conversation, that's a time to find a way out. If the other person was fidgeting, looking around the room for a possible escape, or had a blank stare like they were comatose — find a way out of the conversation.

I didn't think about that again until this weekend, when I caught an article on the Scientific American website that covers just this topic. Author Rachel Nuwer follows a fellow named Adam Mastroianni, a master's student in psychology at Oxford University in England.

Mastroianni told Nuwer of attending events and not wanting to get stuck in endless conversations, but also not wanting to be the one to perpetuate unwanted encounters himself. As he described it, "What if both

people are thinking exactly the same thing, but we're both stuck because we can't move on when we're really done?"

Fast-forward to today and Mastroianni is a doctoral candidate in psychology at Harvard University, and part of two experiments to examine the dynamics of talk. They studied the feelings of people about how long a particular conversation should last.

What they found was, one, that conversations almost never end when both parties want them to; and two, that people are a very poor judge of when their partner wishes to call it quits.

Mastroianni and his colleagues quizzed over 800 participants about their most recent conversation, whether it was with a significant other, family member or friend. They asked if there was a point in the discussion when they wanted it to end, and how much longer it actually lasted.

The second experiment paired strangers and told them to talk about anything they wanted to, from one to 45 minutes. They were asked to note when they wanted the conversation to end, and to guess what their partner's answer would be. The results are interesting.

Only two percent ended at the time both parties desired. Only 30 percent ended when one of the parties wanted. My eyes got big when I saw the next number. Participants in both studies said they would have preferred that their conversation had ended in half the time. Half the time. There were some who wanted to talk longer, but it was a very small percentage.

As for guessing how long their partner wanted the conversation to last, participants were off by an average of 64%.
(Con't.)

They thought the person wanted more, when they really wanted less.

Thalia Wheatley, a social psychologist at Dartmouth College, brought up the point that people put up a good effort to have productive conversations, only to get gummed up at the end because they don't know how to end it.

Wheatley figures that's why coffee and lunch are so popular for meetings — that the empty cup or lunch check is a natural end to the event. We don't get confused by it.

In the absence of technology that stops our vocal cords from putting out words, or allows us to read the mind of the other person, what can we do to determine when to stop talking?

As I advised the guy in the chat on my webinar, be aware of the signals the other person is giving. More than that, generally be as brief as you can be. Enjoy the conversation, learn about the other person, and make the points you need to make — then release them and move on to someone else.

That's The Extra Point. Be responsible and make something good happen today. For 93.3 and the Ray Gibson Show, I'm Jerry Roberts.

###

For information on training and consulting services with Jerry Roberts, please click this link: guamtraining.com

