

Leader Talk Listen Ratio

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD



The Talk Listen Ratio is one interesting measure of the skill of a leader. It is a pretty easy concept to understand. If we look at the extremes, neither of them is a good place to be.

High Talker

If the ratio is over 80%, then the leader is monopolizing 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.

Low Talker

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.

It is easy to see the extremes do not work well. A balance, like perhaps between 40% and 60% might work better. 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. Most leaders are blind to the actual ratio they achieve on a daily basis.

The Best Ratio is Situational

The optimal ratio is situational. For example, if the leader was trying to outline her vision of the future, a higher ratio is expected. The purpose of that conversation is to share her views. Let's say the leader is trying to console a worker who has just lost a loved one. The better ratio would be much lower. In that conversation, the main objective is to let the person grieve.

Try to Lower Your Ratio

Most leaders would be better off if they would take their natural tendency and lower the ratio by 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.

How to Measure Your Ratio

It is possible to monitor your own ratio in certain circumstances. However, 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. Determine your typical ratio during several kinds of discussions. A 20% accuracy is enough to allow you to change your habits through a feedback process.

Conclusion

Few leaders think about their ratio or make an effort to measure or control it. If you are keeping track and working your way down the scale, congratulations. You are likely one of the elite leaders of our time.

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