

# Conversation Killers: Interrupting/Monopolizing, Minimizing/Discounting, Opposing/Arguing, and Not Paying Attention

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There are four types of people who destroy and neutralize a conversation dead in its track. These types can be distinct but often I find that they tend to blend together. For instance, a person who interrupts or monopolizes a conversation may also minimize or discount what the other person is saying. Or someone who enjoys arguing may also not be listening to much of the conversation since this person focuses on only one point or phrase to argue about while ignoring everything else.

## 1) Interrupting and/or Monopolizing

“A conversation requires a balance between talking and listening, and somewhere along the way, we lost that balance.” -Celeste Headlee, 10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation [TED Talk]

Another way to describe an individual who monopolizes a conversation is what’s called **conversational narcissism**. Conversational narcissism is a pattern of talking in which people find polite ways to shift the focus of the conversation to themselves.

**Example of conversational narcissism:**

A supervisor tells you she was very ill from meningitis and almost died in the hospital. You respond with: “Oh I had meningitis when I was younger and I thought I was going to die.” You shifted the attention of the conversation about the supervisor almost dying from meningitis to yourself and your story (i.e., I had meningitis too).

“If they’re talking about the trouble they’re having at work, don’t tell them about how much you hate your job. It’s not the same. It is never the same. All experiences are individual. And, more importantly, it is not about you. You don’t need to take that moment to prove how amazing you are or how much you’ve suffered. . . . Conversations are not a promotional opportunity.” -Celeste Headlee, 10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation [TED Talk]

## **2) Minimizing and/or Discounting**

Back when I worked as a therapist, I learned about not minimizing or discounting the feelings and thoughts of my clients. Minimizing or discounting another person sounds something like this, “Oh, don’t worry about it. It’s nothing. You’ll get over it.”

In the workplace, I sometimes hear one person minimizing, discounting, or dismissing what another person is saying. The person doing the minimizing, discounting, or dismissing might be the boss, a co-worker, or even a subordinate. And, when I’m not careful, I am as just as guilty as anyone else of falling into one of these conversation-killer traps.

### **Example of Minimizing and/or Discounting:**

A woman shared that she had just been laid off. A friend, uncomfortable with seeing her friend in distress and wanting to help her feel better, replied: “You know it could have been so much worse. At least the company gave you a 4-week severance package. Many people don’t even get that. You get paid for a whole month while looking for a job. So cheer up! It’ll be fine.”

Regardless of the level or position in an organization, the outcome is that the person on the receiving end of the invalidation is left feeling unheard and frustrated.

Validation is a critical tool used often in counseling sessions. While this quote about validation was written to help guide therapists, I’ve included it here because I believe it’s instructive for everyone to understand just how important validation is: “Validation . . . simply means communicating to the [person] that his or her responses make sense, are understood, or are in a sense reasonable” (Robins & Rosenthal, 2011, p. 171).

## **3) Opposing and/or Arguing**

This person will disagree and argue with you, usually just for the sake of arguing. He will reject or oppose anything that someone else is saying or suggesting, and no amount of evidence or data will convince him to change his mind. This type of individual will only give up reluctantly and often do so by blaming the unreliable source of where he got his information.

Adam McHugh (in his list of the 12 usual suspects of bad listening, “How to Be a Bad Listener”) describes one type of bad listener who is keen on disagreeing. These individuals listen for a word, phrase, or topic that they want to argue about. And even if they do agree with most of what someone else is saying, they will nitpick over that word, phrase, or topic that they do not agree with.

#### 4) Not Paying Attention

One of the most egregious mistakes in a conversation is not paying attention. For instance, when you talk to someone and he’s looking around or at something else, it’s quite obvious that this person is much more interested in anything else but listening to you. It’s *ironic* because often I don’t think the person making this mistake (i.e., not paying attention) realizes he’s doing it (i.e., clueless to the fact that he’s not paying attention). But here’s the reality: Human beings, even children, can tell when you are not paying attention to them while they are talking.

Not paying attention includes something experts call “pseudolistening” or pretending to listen. Pseudolistening is when we pretend to listen but we’re thinking about something else. We pseudolisten when we’re not interested in what is being said or when we’re familiar with the information and so don’t need to give our undivided attention (Wood, 2016).

When you pseudolisten, you risk missing important information because you weren’t actually paying attention.

“Pseudolisters often give themselves away when their responses reveal that they weren’t paying attention. Common indicators of pseudolistening are responses that are tangential or irrelevant to what was said” (Wood, 2016, p. 173).

#### Why We Need To Listen

“To be listened to is a striking experience, partly because it is so rare. When another person is totally with you—leaning in, interested in every word, eager to empathize—you feel known and understood. People open up when they know they’re really being listened to; they expand; they have more presence. They feel safer and more secure as well, and trust grows. This is why listening is so important . . .” (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2007, p. 31).

In the book, *A Manager’s Guide to Coaching: Simple and Effective Ways to Get the Best Out of Your Employees* we’re reminded that:

**“Often, when we listen to someone, we’re only partially listening, because we’re thinking of our reply or judging their comments. We often miss what’s in between their words, or even a key idea” (Emerson & Loehr, 2008, p. 103).**

**“The key to successful listening is to remove all distractions, sit back, and focus 100% on [their] words, emotions, and body language” (Emerson & Loehr, 2008, p. 105).**

**“By listening and allowing [people] to feel heard, you’re giving them the confidence that their words and ideas have merit and that they can figure things out for themselves” (Emerson & Loehr, 2008, p. 105).**

“Listening is more than hearing, and it is definitely more than waiting for the other person to take a breath so that you can speak again. It is the ability to temporarily forget the future and the past, and collapse your focus to a single point, a single person—here and now” (Burnison, 2013, p. 174).

### **Why People Interrupt/Monopolize, Minimize/Discount, Oppose/Argue or Not Pay Attention**

People Interrupt/Monopolize, Minimize/Discount, Oppose/Argue or Not Pay Attention for several reasons: **(1) Not caring** – There are some people who simply do not care (or care very much) about other people, **(2) Is impatient or in a hurry** – These folks are in a rush to solve problems or to get to solutions. Impatient people provide answers, conclusions, and solutions too early in the process. **(3) Monopolizing the conversation** – Shifting the conversation to their own topic or what’s called “conversational narcissism.” **(4) Misguided compassion** – Unlike those who don’t care, people who do care may try to “help” others feel better so they **skip over** the validation part, thereby discounting or invalidating feelings, and go straight to offering solutions or words of consolation. **(5) Fear of or discomfort with emotions or conflicts** – These individuals do not know how to deal with strong emotions or conflicts and will try to avoid strong emotions and conflict when in conversation or interaction with others.

### **Suggestions For Improvement & Development:**

In *FYI: For Your Improvement* (a guide for coaching and development), Lombardo and Eichinger (2009) shared a great tip in helping us **to better understand others**: *Avoid early solution statements and extreme positions. While the answer might be obvious to you, and might make perfect sense to someone in your field, it may either mean nothing or will be jarring to people in another function. Lay out your thinking, explain the alternatives, and keep them as maybes. Then invite them to apply their perspective to it. If you fire out solutions, you’ll encourage them to reply in your terms. You’ll never learn to understand them.*

Another useful advice Lombardo and Eichinger (2009) discussed is what to do when you’re **viewed by others as being insensitive**: *Seek to understand before you seek a solution. You might be seen as someone who jumps to conclusions and solutions before others have had a chance to finish their statement of the problem. Take the time to really define the problem. Let people finish. Try not to interrupt. Don’t finish other’s sentences. Ask clarifying questions. Restate the problem in your own words to everyone’s satisfaction.*

If you are struggling with **being interpersonally savvy** (relating to others; building & maintaining rapport), Lombardo and Eichinger (2009) offered this: *Tailor your approach to fit others’ needs. Too busy to pay attention? Too quick to get into the agenda? Do you*

*devalue others and dismiss their contributions, resulting in people feeling diminished, rejected and angry? Do you offer answers, solutions, conclusions, statements, or dictates early in the transaction? That's the staple of people with a non-savvy style. Not listening. Instant output. Sharp reactions. Read your audience. Always select your interpersonal approach from the other person in, not from you out. Your best choice of approach will always be determined by the other person or group, not you.*

A useful resource similar to Lombardo and Eichinger's *FYI* book is *Awaken, Align, Accelerate* (2011), a leadership development and coaching guide from MDA Leadership. According to the *Awaken, Align, Accelerate* book, if you talk over or interrupt others or if you spend more time talking than listening and you fail to draw others out or ask ineffective or too few questions, then this is a problem that will need to be remedied (Nelson & Ortmeier, 2011).

**Takeaway:** If you do not listen in a conversation, it is very easy to derail and wreck it. The first and most obvious way is by interrupting or monopolizing the conversation. A second, more subtle but just as harmful, way to kill a conversation is by minimizing, discounting, or dismissing what another person is sharing. The third way to end a conversation or turn it into a heated exchange is by arguing with or outright opposing what another person is saying. The fourth way to wreck a conversation is failure to pay attention to what the other person is saying. These conversation killers negatively affect your ability to understand another person and can also weaken or cause irreparable damage to your relationship with them.

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