

Persuade with a Pause

The Pause that Made a Prime Minister

In May 1940, the British effort to stop Hitler stood in tatters. The British army was retreating as the Nazis blitzed across Europe.



Across the channel, the British government sat in shambles with the Prime Minister stepping down.

But who would be the next Prime Minister? After much maneuvering, it came down to one meeting and two candidates—Lord Halifax, the government's preferred choice, or the outspoken Winston Churchill.

The meeting started, and the plan became clear. Lord Halifax was the establishment's choice to lead the nation as prime minister. All they needed was Churchill to agree and serve as Lord Halifax's cabinet minister—effectively the number two position.

After some discussion, Churchill was asked to support Halifax.

But Winston Churchill didn't say anything. He sat and waited for someone to speak. By his account, the silence lasted over two minutes. Finally, Lord Halifax broke the silence and said he would support Winston Churchill as Prime Minister.

The pause and silence changed everything. Churchill was made Prime Minister and rallied the nation to never surrender.

Winston Churchill knew that sometimes the best persuasion is to pause and let the silence do the work.

You can increase your persuasion by strategically using these three pauses.

Long Pause

4-5 seconds to focus or refocus your audience's attention

- **5-Second Reset** - You've been speaking and see people are losing interest. Finish the thought, and then pause and silently count to five. At 2 seconds, the people listening will wonder what you'll say next. By 4 seconds, people on their phones will notice the silence, look up, and wonder what they're missing. At 5 seconds, the audience will be looking at you; then reward them by saying something meaningful.
- **Start with a 4-Second Pause** - At the start of a speech, count to 4 as you look around the room, briefly make eye contact with individuals, and then begin.

Medium Pause

2-3 second pause to give the audience time to process

- **Enjoy the Line** - when you deliver a great line, pause for 2 seconds for the audience to enjoy it.
- **Let the Story Do Its Work** - after you tell a story, pause for 2-3 seconds to let the story sink in before moving on.

Short Pause

1 to 1.5 seconds to signal the end of thought.

- **"Period"** - mentally say "Period" to yourself when you're speaking and finish a thought. That little pause is just enough to signal the thought is complete.

Sources: *Silence Wins the Day*, Lapham's Quarterly | Churchill, Winston S. *The Gathering Storm* (Winston S. Churchill *The Second World War*) (p. 597-8).

The Bottom Line

Remember the power of a pause next time you are giving a speech. Long Pauses of 4-5 seconds to focus the audience. Medium Pauses of 2-3 seconds allow people to enjoy a line or story. Short Pauses to signal the end of a thought.