



MICHAEL R. DILIBERTO, ESQ.



The Sound of Silence

In Western cultures, many people are uncomfortable with silence. We tend to talk over each other, finish each other's sentences, and are quick to jump in with a response. Although 70 percent of communication is non-verbal, most of us think of communication as essentially a verbal activity. Thus, we are uncomfortable with long periods of silence. But silence can be a useful tool for negotiators. Here are three advantages of silence:

- 1. Silence can make you a better listener.** When we hear someone arguing for their position, it is natural to prepare a response in your head rather than listen. Instead, before responding, use silence to calm your mind and focus on what they are saying. Being a better listener lets them know their concerns are being heard, and encourages the flow of useful information that may help close the deal.
- 2. Silence can defuse anchors.** A demand or offer can act as an anchor, which can pull our judgment of the offer's value towards that number. Silence can defuse anchors in a negotiation. As illustrated in the movie *A Civil Action*, starring John Travolta (plaintiffs' counsel) and Robert Duvall (defense counsel), Travolta made an outrageous initial demand during a negotiation. Duvall's silence in response effectively communicated displeasure with that number more than any verbal protesting would. Silence can also defuse anchors in telephonic and online negotiations, where the other side may think that you have "logged off" in protest to their offer.
- 3. Silence allows you to regain control.** If you feel yourself losing control, take a moment, and instead of reacting with an emotional response, say nothing. This allows you to buy time to regain your composure, and think of your next move. Even a brief pause can bring clarity to your decision making ability. Your brief time out can disarm the other side, when you don't react as they might expect. It also gives the other side time to cool down, which can de-escalate the tension.

Just as great musicians know which notes not to play, effective negotiators know when to say nothing at all.