

BBC Learning English
6 minute English
The wisdom of keeping quiet



Yvonne: Hi, I'm Yvonne Archer, this is '6 minute English' and with me today is Callum Robertson. Hello Callum!

Callum: Hello Yvonne!

Yvonne: Today, words of wisdom. Callum – are you wise enough to explain the word 'wisdom' for us?

Callum: Well, I'll give it go! I'd say that 'wisdom' is something that usually comes to us as we gain more knowledge and experiences in life. And a wise person knows and understands how to make sensible decisions based on that knowledge and on those experiences even when the decisions are difficult.

Yvonne: Nice explanation.

Callum: Oh, well thank you!

Yvonne: So that's why older are usually the wisest because they've had more time to gather knowledge and experiences in life – like Callum!

Callum: Are you saying I'm old?!

Yvonne: Didn't say anything! So wise words there from a wise man – Callum. But before we hear more on today's topic, are you wise enough to get today's question right, Callum?

Callum: Oh, I hope so!

Yvonne: Good. Who said "Life is like an onion: you peel it off one layer at a time and sometimes you weep." Was it:

- a) Carl Sandburg
- b) Alan Bennet – or
- c) Confucius?

Callum: I don't know who Carl Sandburg is, Alan Bennet is a British writer, Confucius is an old philosopher... I'm going to say Confucius - I don't know but I'll say Confucius.

Yvonne: Nice choice - but we'll find out whether you're right or wrong later on. Now in today's report about words of wisdom – words and sayings which can help us understand how to be successful in life - we'll come across the word 'diplomacy', You've probably heard it before in news reports but let's get Callum to tell us about it anyway.

Callum: Well, 'diplomacy' is – I suppose it's a skill really. It's an ability to say and do things without offending or upsetting people. And in news reports, we sometimes hear about 'diplomats' – and it's their job to work in international relations, helping countries develop good relationships with each other.

Yvonne: But if someone says you're 'diplomatic' – it isn't always a compliment, is it?

Callum: Well no, not always. Some people might find it offensive if we don't tell them exactly what we mean or how we feel because we're trying to be kind – we're trying to be diplomatic – we don't want to upset them. And that can leave some people wondering what we really mean.

Yvonne: Thanks Callum. So now, the BBC's Vanessa Feltz recently did a show about wisdom and the key to success – happiness in life. As she tells us what one listener said, try to find out which three areas of life they're talking about...

VANESSA FELTZ

Communication is the key to success but use diplomacy at home, at work - wherever you are. There may well be people listening who think the very opposite is true: keep quiet – silence is the key to success in romance and at work.

Yvonne: Callum, which three areas of life does Vanessa mention there?

Callum: Well she was talking about finding the key to success in life at home, life at work and also in romance – in our love lives.

Yvonne: Oooh! So all areas of life really. But, is it better to keep quiet if there's an argument or is it better to communicate in a diplomatic way – so, talk about things without upsetting the other person?

Callum: Umm – well that's a difficult question because of course, it depends on the situation, your relationship, the person you're talking to... For example, how old are they, how well do you know them and how do they get angry? Very quickly or not? All these things you have to think about.

Yvonne: Yes, it's a tricky question.

Now in the next part of Vanessa's programme on words of wisdom, she uses some really lovely phrases. First, 'to keep schtum'. Callum?

Callum: 'To keep schtum' – well it's actually a mixture of English and Yiddish, which is the Jewish language. But it's an expression that we use in everyday English as well. 'To keep schtum' - it means to keep quiet and not say anything.

Yvonne: Lovely. We'll also hear the word 'fence' as in the term 'to sit on the fence' – and, to 'not state your case either way'. Don't those terms have similar meanings, Callum?

Callum: Yes, they do. If you 'sit on the fence' and don't get off, or you 'don't state your case', you don't tell people what you think and whether you agree with them or not. And in an argument, it's not clear whose side you're on.

Yvonne: Okay – here's Vanessa again. She speaks a little more quickly this time - but try to catch those phrases...

VANESSA FELTZ

If you just keep 'shtum' and ride out the bad situation, you don't say anything, you don't get off the fence. In fact, you don't register at all. You're just, quiet, quiet, laid back and retiring, it will all go away – or it will all improve on its own and you won't have had to state your case either way. We're taking calls on wisdom this morning – 'wisdom' you know that word - 'sagacity' – another lovely word for wisdom!

Yvonne: Wow, Vanessa really loves the English language, doesn't she?! But I don't think anyone has enough 'sagacity' – wisdom – to know all the answers in life.

Callum: Well, 'a sage' might – and that's another word for a wise man, 'a sage'.

Yvonne: And luckily, Callum – you're my sage.

Callum: Ahh.

Yvonne: So please, don't get today's big question wrong! Who said "Life is like an onion: you peel it (off) one layer at a time and sometimes you weep"?

Callum: Well, I took a guess at Confucius.

Yvonne: And your guess was...wrong.

Callum: Oh no, not again!

Yvonne: Sorry, Callum. Yes, it was Carl Sandburg – an American poet.

Now that's all we've got time for today. But do join us again next time for more '6 Minute English' when we'll all be a little older - and hopefully a lot wiser!

C/Y: Goodbye!