

WAYS TO IMPROVE CONVERSATION

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"Communication is a skill that you can learn. It's like riding a bicycle or typing. If you're willing to work at it you can rapidly improve the quality of this very part of your life."

- Bran Tracy, Author and Speaker

This article is based on observation by the author of people engaged in conversation in many settings: Couples, families, business talk, meetings, informal small talks, professional consultations and a wide range of other such occasions.

The Five items below are distilled from what I have observed and what it reveals. I believe that adopting even one of these, will make a positive difference in improving your conversational skills. Each will have an immediate positive impact. Adopting them all could transform your experience of conversation.

1. SHOW INTEREST IN AND BE CURIOUS ABOUT THOSE YOU TALK WITH

In conversation, to be curious is a definite plus. Being curious about another person helps to engage us and to validate that person as interesting. On the other hand, if we seem bored by or indifferent to the person, they feel invalidated, as if we are saying you hold no interest for me. You are not interesting.

Not to be curious can be troublesome in Life. As human relations speaker and author Dale Carnegie wrote:

It is the individual who is not interested in his fellow men that face the greatest difficulties in life and inflicts the greatest injury to others. It is from among such individuals that all human failures spring.

Consider the spouse who shows no curiosity about what his partner is thinking or feeling, or the parent who does not wonder about the thoughts and inner lives of the children. Consider the manager, thinking s/he knows everything about the business and who expresses no interest in the employee's ideas. We know the result: Distance and negative feelings.

The good news is that we can choose to be interested or curious. This is an act of intention. For example, who has not taken a required course of study that held no interest at the outset but then, when you saw that being uninterested in the subject resulted in poor learning and grades, you decided to be interested in order to learn better. The same is true for our interest in other people. When one changes his thinking and his attitudes, his conversational behavior also changes. He pays close attention. He asks questions. He listens carefully.

I notice that many people try to appear interesting themselves instead of being genuinely interested in others. When we show interest in others, they usually begin to show interest in us. However, when we try to be interesting, we often look self-conscious or even vain, whereas being genuinely interested in other people makes our conversation and life experience a rich adventure.

2. BALANCE THE TALKING AND LISTENING- TAKE TURNS

We Indians tend mainly to be out-going, extroverts and talkative. That is probably a plus, because we are an optimistic, can-do society. However, for relationships, lots of talking and too much talking can be harmful to personal and business relationships.

The scientific evidence suggests that balancing our conversation so that everyone gets a turn who wants a turn is supportive of social relations. In informal conversation, balance requires that speakers monitor themselves so that they do not dominate by talking too much. It is also important for more quiet people to speak up from time to time so that the talkative ones do not think that you are giving up any interest in sharing your ideas.

Balancing the talk doesn't require a strict 50-50 distribution. The ratio can be 80-20 and still be balanced, as when one person is mainly interviewing the other who of course will do most of the talking. The key here is not so much the actual time each one talks. It is the taking turns that matters. One person may ask a brief question that requires a long, detailed answer. Having balance in a conversation suggests safety and fairness and creates a supportive climate for honest ideas to be expressed and heard.

3. GIVE GENUINE COMPLIMENTS AND REAL PRAISE WHEN APPROPRIATE

Some people have trouble giving compliments. Others have trouble receiving compliments graciously. Most of these troubles are caused by upbringing and culture. All of these old habits can be eliminated and replaced with kinder and more generous behavior that fosters better relations between people.

The fact is, such public and global praise is suspected, and so, not helpful. There are four solid points about giving compliments and praise:

- a) Don't praise people, praise what people do. It's less likely that there will be a gap between what someone hears and what he thinks about himself if we don't make sweeping comments about what he is like as a person.
- b) Make praise as specific as possible. Even better than "That's a really nice story" is "That's neat at the end when you leave the main character a little confused about what happened to him".
- c) Avoid phony praise.....One symptom of phony praise is a squeaky, saccharine voice that slides up and down the scale and bears little resemblance to the way we converse with our friends. A four-year-old can usually tell the difference between a genuine expression of pleasure and phony praise, between a sincere smile and one that is manufactured and timed for best effect.
- d) Avoid praise that sets up competition. Phrases like You're the best in the class (or for adults, in this department).

Some time ago, a student asked, whenever I compliment my friend, she resists. How can I make my compliments stick?

Try this method: Add a question after your compliment:

I think your new hairstyle is stunning, who did it for you?

Adding such a tag-question at the end usually prevents the person from avoiding the compliment because they are responding to the follow-up. The way you read the poem was deeply touching. Did you practice it many times?

Finally, if you yourself tend to deflect compliments, try harder to accept them. A simple Thank you to the one offering the compliment will do. After you run the billiards table, or score perfectly on the test, it's simply not appropriate to refuse a compliment. When you receive a genuine compliment, acknowledge it and let it in!

4. KEEP YOUR POSITIVE ENERGY UP

When we interact with others, we exchange not only words and bodily expressions. We also give off exchange our vital energy. If our energy is high and vibrant, we lift the conversation. If it's low and sluggish, we sap energy from the encounter.

Many ways are available to increase and maintain our personal energy. Among them are well known methods, such as being well nourished and well rested. Also, keeping our interactions positive rather than negative, focusing on what is good and what works instead of griping and complaining.

When we are energized, we are able to be responsive, alive to the situation and the person we are talking to. Our voice and body reflect our responses and add color and flavor to our talk. When we don't have enough gas in our tank, being responsive is difficult at best. In recent years new understandings have become available about how best to manage our bodily energy.

5. ASK BETTER QUESTIONS

A routine question will evoke a routine response. Thus, how is it going? Will generally get a Fine, thanks, or perhaps an I can't complain. If the purpose of the question is only to acknowledge an acquaintance briefly and move on, your purpose is served.

However, if you'd prefer a more substantial conversation, you'll need to use a different question to evoke a different response. A deeper and more detailed conversation will certainly be less predictable and probably more interesting, and it will likely have the effect of enriching your relationship.

Here are four suggestions for more productive questions:

- 1.** Ask questions that elicit detail. These are often what? Questions. For example, what did you finally decide about relocating? Or what did you do on your trip to Mexico? Will usually stimulate detailed responses. Questions that don't require detail, such as how are your plans coming along? And how was your trip? Can be answered with mere good, thanks.
- 2.** Ask open questions that require more than a Yes or No. These are the Wh and H questions beginning with What, Why Where, and How. These work better than closed questions that limit the response, such as did you like the movie? Instead, what did you like about the movie? Draws out a more interesting and detailed response.
- 3.** Ask some questions that are a little bit surprising or edgy. These are not meant to put the person on the hot seat, or to make them uncomfortable, but to stimulate and get a lively response instead of a routine response. What's the most exciting/challenging thing that is happening with you at this time? Is such an edgy question. Predictable questions usually evoke predictable responses, such as what did you learn in school today? Oh, not much.
- 4.** Use some If? Questions such as If you had the means to pursue your dream occupation, what would it be? Or if you could have dinner with a famous person, whom would you choose? Such questions break out of the routine and add some fresh energy to the conversation. By the way, don't ask others any question you yourself would not want to be asked. Also, be prepared to answer the very If? Questions you ask. The other converser may say, let me think about that for a minute. Meanwhile, you go first.
Enough, now lets get on with some of it. All the best.