

The Art of Conversation

Many people believe themselves to be good conversationalists because they talk a lot. They're mistaken. In reality, a good conversationalist does as much listening as speaking – maybe more. The real strength of such a person lies in the ability to draw others into the discussion. It all falls under the category of verbal communication – one of your greatest professional tools. The art of conversation includes knowing what to say and when to say it. It also includes the ability to recognize when to listen.

How to start and sustain a conversation

- The key is to listen more than you speak. Just as important as knowing what to ask is recognizing how to phrase questions.
- A sure way to get others to respond is to ask open ended questions. Avoid yes or no answer questions. Instead use and interrogative – Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? For example, “How do you know Bill Jones?” This kind of question should get you a response with some detail thus opening the door to more conversation.
- It's crucial that you appear sincerely interested in what you are asking the person and in the response elicited. Work on developing a sincere interest in others.

How to be perceived as a good listener. Let the person you're talking to truly know you are listening. Below are a few techniques

- Take two. An effective way to avoid a head-on conversation collision is to count to two after a person has finished talking.
- Jump on the same wavelength. Learn to identify people as auditory, visual, or feeling and then communicate with them in their own language
 - Auditory person will often have background music playing and will consistently use words like sounds, talk, tell, hear and tone.
 - Visual person communicates best with the aid of charts, maps, and other visuals and sprinkles his vocabulary with words like perceive, look, imagine, observe, view, and see.
 - A feeling person, who frequently like to juggle many tasks at once, gravitates to words like empathize, feel, understand, sense and the like.
- Paraphrase. A sure way to let others know you heard what they said is by paraphrasing or reiterating. When you can paraphrase while on the same wavelength, you'll really be perceived as a good listener.
 - Auditory – “It sounds like....or I heard you say that.....”
 - Visual – “I see that.... or It appears that....”
 - Feeling – I feel that.... Or I understand that.....”

Different situations call for different levels of conversation

Small talk - Conversation about everyday happenings- the weather, sports, your immediate environment, etc. Everyone is able to participate. Thus when establishing rapport with someone, begin with small talk.

Medium talk – This deals with information specific to a group. For example, 2 people may make medium talk by discussing the company they represent. Although

others may be familiar with the company being discussed, they may not be able to participate in the conversation.

Large talk. - This deals with very specific information. For example 3 people from an accounting firm discuss the monthly quotas. They are making conversation understood or of interest to a limited number of people.

When not to talk

When you're involved in conversation with others, a good rule of thumb for talking about yourself or your affiliations is to do so only when asked a question.

When you know nothing about the topic under discussion, remain silent.

How to participate in a conversation without talking.

You can participate in a conversation by saying absolutely nothing. Just maintain your role as an active listener. Make use of your body language. Maintain eye contact. Smile. Nod. You'll be a welcome part of the conversation without ever opening your mouth.

Let your gestures speak for you

Body language and receptivity are vitally important aspects of animated and interested dialogue. Be sure to project a positive and friendly attitude. Smile. Maintain eye contact. Nod. And keep an open mind. Even if you are not at all interested in the person with whom you are speaking, keep an open mind regarding future relationships. It's a good way to help develop your professional network. You never know when your paths will cross again.

How to gain control of a conversation

Be open and friendly.

Take risks.

Be the first to say "hello".

Be genuinely interested in people. They'll be flattered and interested in you.

Be open to new ideas.

Accept people as they are.

How to change the subject – tactfully

Be tactful if you want to change the subject, use lead-ins like,

"I heard you mention earlier...."

"You seem to know a lot about....."

If you're looking for an escape hatch, try something like,

"Before this meeting ends, I'd like to....."

"I see it already 3 pm and I....."

Avoid being offensive and insulting to anyone.