

Sharpening Your Conversation Skills

There are three aims and purposes of conversation. The first is the plain enjoyment and pleasure of self-expression and interaction with other people. One of the most enjoyable things we ever do is to spend time with people we like and whose company we find stimulating. This potential pleasure is the driving force behind all of our social activities. We like to get together with people with whom we have a lot in common and just share ideas, letting the conversation go where it will. The second aim or purpose of conversation is to get to know the other person better. In sales, and in all kinds of business, you require prolonged exposure to another person in order to get a feel for how he or she thinks, feels and reacts. This can't be accomplished in a short meeting. The third aim of conversation is to build trust and credibility between the two people. This is perhaps the most important thing we do as we proceed through life and it is only possible with the kind of continuous conversation that reveals us to each other. In our personal relationships, there is no substitute for extended periods of conversation in the development of friendships and more intimate relationships. People who get along very well together have almost invariably spent a lot of time just talking about various subjects as they come up. One of the very best ways to learn about another person is to spend unbroken time in their company. I've found that a two- or three-hour car trip is one of the most revealing experiences you will ever have with another human being. People who have gotten along well for many years, working or socializing together in brief stints, will often find that an extended car trip brings out elements of their personalities that they did not know existed. Before you enter into any serious business or personal relationship with anyone, you should spend several hours with them experiencing the ebb and flow of sustained conversation. It's amazing what you will learn. Many people think that the art of good conversation is to speak in an interesting and arresting fashion, to be noted for your humor, ability to tell stories and your general knowledge of a variety of subjects. Many people feel that, if they want to be better at conversation, they must become more articulate, outgoing and expressive. They must become better talkers. Nothing could be further from the truth. As you've heard many times before, we come into this world with two ears and one mouth and we should use them in that same proportion. In conversation, this simply means that you should listen twice as much as you talk if you want to get a reputation for being an enjoyable person with whom to converse. The art of good conversation centers very much on your ability to ask questions and to listen attentively to the answers. You can lace the conversation with your insights, ideas, and opinions, but you perfect the art and skill of conversation by perfecting the art and skill of asking good, well-worded questions that direct the conversation and give other people an opportunity to express themselves. The art of good conversation centers very much on your ability to ask questions and to listen attentively to the answers. Ask open-ended questions that cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." Open-ended questions encourage the speaker to expand on his thoughts and comments. And one question will lead to another. You can ask open-ended questions almost endlessly, drawing out of the other person everything that he or she has to say on a particular subject. In order to be an excellent conversationalist, you must resist the urge to dominate the discussion. The very best conversationalists seem to be low-key, easy-going, cheerful, and genuinely interested in the other person. They seem to be quite content to listen when other people are talking and they make their own contributions to the dialogue rather short and to the point. In fact, good conversation has an easy ebb and flow, like the tide coming in and going out. Whether it is between two people or among several, the conversation should shift back and forth, with each person getting an opportunity to talk. Conversation in this sense is like a ball that is tossed from person to person, with no one holding on to it for very long. If you feel that you have been talking for too long, you should stop and ask a question of someone in the group. You will be tossing the conversational ball and giving that individual an opportunity to converse. Listening is the most important of all skills for successful conversation. Many people are very poor listeners. Since everyone enjoys talking, it takes a real effort to practice the fundamentals of excellent listening and to make them a habit. Here are the four major rules for active listening in a conversation. They will work for you whether you are conversing with a sales prospect, a business associate, your manager or a friend or member of your family. They are powerful, practical and proven techniques to increase your influence with other people dramatically. The first key to effective listening is for you to listen attentively, without interruptions. When you pay close attention to another person, you convey to that person that you very much value what he or she has to say. This is very flattering to your conversation partners, and they will respond warmly to your attentiveness. The major reason why most people are poor listeners is that they are busy preparing a reply while the other person is still speaking. In fact, they are not even listening closely to what the other person is saying. They are very much like boxers waiting for the other person to let their guard down so they can jump in with a quick verbal punch and take over the conversation. But this is not for you. Effective listening requires that you lean slightly forward, face the other person directly, and hang on every word. Listen as though there were nothing else in the world more fascinating to you than what the other person is saying. The very best listeners seem to have developed the knack of making the person who is speaking feel as if he or she were the only person in the world. Good conversationalists can even do this in the middle of a crowded room. In addition to listening without interrupting, you should also nod, smile and agree with what the person is saying. Be active rather than passive. Indicate that you are totally engaged in the conversation. Make eye contact as the other person talks. Relax your body and, if you are standing, allow your weight to roll forward onto the balls of your feet. Only you will know that you have done this, but the overall impression you will give is that your whole energy is now forward and focused on what the speaker is saying. The second key to effective listening is to pause before replying. A short pause, of three to five seconds, is a very classy thing to do in a conversation. When you pause, you accomplish three goals simultaneously. First, you avoid running the risk of interrupting if the other person is just catching his or her breath before continuing. Second, you show the other person that you are giving careful consideration to his or her words by not jumping in with your own comments at the earliest opportunity. The third benefit of pausing is that you will actually hear the other person better. His or her words will soak into a deeper level of your mind and you will understand what he or she is saying with greater clarity. By pausing, you mark yourself as a brilliant conversationalist. Never assume that you understand what the person is saying or trying to say. The third key to effective listening is to

question for clarification. Never assume that you understand what the person is saying or trying to say. Instead, ask, "What do you mean, exactly?" This is the most powerful question I've ever learned for controlling a conversation. It is almost impossible not to answer. When you ask, "What do you mean?" the other person cannot stop himself or herself from answering more extensively. You can then follow up with other open-ended questions and keep the conversation rolling along. The fourth key to effective listening is to paraphrase the speaker's words in your own words. After you've nodded and smiled, you can then say, "Let me see if I've got this right. What you're saying is . . ." By paraphrasing the speaker's words, you demonstrate in no uncertain terms that you are genuinely paying attention and making every effort to understand his or her thoughts or feelings. And the wonderful thing is, when you practice effective listening, other people will begin to find you fascinating. They will want to be around you. They will feel relaxed and happy in your presence. The reason why listening is such a powerful tool in developing the art and skill of conversation is because listening builds trust. The more you listen to another person, the more he or she trusts you and believes in you. Listening also builds self-esteem. When you listen attentively to another person, his or her self-esteem will naturally increase. Finally, listening builds self-discipline in the listener. Because your mind can process words at 500-600 words per minute, and we can only talk at about 150 words per minute, it takes a real effort to keep your attention focused on another person's words. If you do not practice self-discipline in conversation, your mind will wander in a hundred different directions. The more you work at paying close attention to what the other person is saying, the more self-disciplined you will become. In other words, by learning to listen well, you actually develop your own character and your own personality. The final key to becoming a great conversationalist is to practice the friendship factor. The friendship factor is based on the three Cs of caring, courtesy and consideration. You've heard it said that, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Caring is the catalyst in all good relationships. The people you like the best and who like you the best are the ones with whom you have the most caring relationships. Whenever you show another person that you genuinely care about him or her, you come across better as a conversationalist and as a friend. The second C in the friendship factor is courtesy. It is a magic quality of politeness that causes people to want to be around you. All good conversationalists make other people feel calm and comfortable in their presence. They never do or say anything that could hurt or offend the other person in any way. They are continually diplomatic and they keep their concerns and irritations to themselves. They always remain warm and friendly on the outside. The third C in the friendship factor is consideration. One of the major sources of positive emotions is the feeling that we are respected and considered highly by other people. Whenever you treat another person as an important and worthwhile human being, you trigger this consideration factor. You show that you not only value the conversation, but you value the speaker as well. Becoming a good conversationalist is based on learning and practicing the Golden Rule. This simply says that you treat other people the way you would like them to treat you. Just as you would like other people to ask you questions about yourself and to listen attentively to you when you talk, others would like the same courtesy extended to them. Remember, the purpose of conversation is not to dominate, control, or be right. The purpose of conversation is to enjoy yourself and to make sure that others enjoy themselves when they are with you.

About the Author

Brian Tracy is the most listened to audio author on personal and business success in the world today. His fast-moving talks and seminars on leadership, sales, managerial effectiveness and business strategy are loaded with powerful, proven ideas and strategies that people can immediately apply to get better results in every area.

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