

## Top Five Ways To Improve Conversation Immediately

"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." - Brian Tracy, Author and Speaker This report is based upon two kinds of research: First, research in the social sciences such as psychology, sociology, and communication studies. Second, 25 years of observation by the author of people engaged in conversation in many settings: couples, families, business talk, meetings, mixers, informal small talk, professional consultations - a wide range. These five items are distilled from what I have observed and what the research reveals. Adopting even one of these will make a positive difference in improving your conversational skills. Each will have an immediate positive effect. Adopting them all could transform your experience of conversation. TOP FIVE WAYS

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 who has the greatest difficulties in life and provides 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 employees' ideas. We know the results: Distance and negative feelings between the people. 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. For example, a husband whose marriage is troubled and who faces separation and even divorce because he expresses so little interest in his wife may choose to "become interested" about his wife and what she has to say. When he 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 conversations and life experience a rich adventure.
2. Balance the talking and listening. Take turns. We Americans tend mainly to be out-going, extraverts, talkative. That's 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 don't think you are giving up any interest in sharing your ideas. Having balance in a conversation suggests safety and fairness and creates a supportive climate for honest ideas to be expressed and heard. 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. In large groups, a chairperson or a facilitator can monitor and direct the talk and make certain everyone has a chance to speak fully. In casual conversation, we must manage ourselves to make sure we have balance.
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 suspect, not helpful. And not only for children, but for adults as well. Writing in his landmark 1996 book, "Punished by Rewards," Alfie Kohn makes four solid points about giving compliments and praise:
  - a. "Don't praise people, only 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),' whose 'most pernicious effects . . . encourage a view of others as rivals rather than as potential collaborators. What's more, they lead people to see their own worth in terms of whether they have beaten everyone else - a recipe for perpetual insecurity." Kohn supports each of these points with solid research as he suggests ways to encourage people and build their intrinsic motivation. During my early life I had difficulty giving compliments, and now I enjoy doing so. The Scandinavian culture I grew up in was not comfortable with compliments because parents believed that kids would "get a big head" and be prideful. I also had trouble giving compliments because I DID see my fellow students and friends as competitors in classes and on the playing fields. I needed more maturity to be able to give genuine praise to my rivals. For many years now I have enjoyed complimenting others in specific ways because I can see the positive effects that result. When I coach professionals on their performance, the specific compliments I give them on their behavior and the work they produce helps them grow and develop. 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, Sally! 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, Fred. 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. Nor is it genuine for the football star who scores seven touchdowns to say "It wasn't me; it was the other guys on the team." 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. A professional colleague, Dr. Robert Rausch, is a specialized consultant to many large companies. In his work with management, he has them look at those factors in the company that drain human energy and those factors that increase the energy. Energetic people thrive, and low-energy people barely survive. His excellent book, "Energy Matters," gives you many ideas on how to enhance your personal energy and avoid being drained by difficult or toxic interactions. 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's good and what works instead of griping and complaining. A fine resource to enable positive talk is the book, Encyclopedia of Positive Questions by Diana Whitney and others (2002). This approach of "Appreciative Inquiry" is now being widely used in organizations to make the energy more positive and motivating. 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. Most are easy to learn and can be self-applied. Here are some excellent references if you wish to follow up on this topic: Energy Medicine, by Donna Eden (1999) Become an Energy Addict, by Jon Gordon (2003) The Mars and Venus Diet and Exercise Book, by John Gray (2003)

5. Ask better questions. A routine question will evoke a routine response. Thus, "How's it going?" will generally get a "Fine, thanks," or perhaps a "I can't complain." If the purpose of the question is only to acknowledge an acquaintance briefly and move on, your purpose is served. This is the social function of language that the anthropologist Malinowski called "phatic communion," which is nothing more than a brief and superficial verbal connection, the smallest of small talk. A routine question will evoke a routine response. 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 a 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's 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." For some excellent examples of effective questions, check this book, Questions That Work, by Andrew Finlayson (2001) Although it's mainly for business and professional life, this book has many good ideas about the structure of questions that apply to any conversation. As well, it contains plenty of question examples, such as "27 questions to inspire creativity in a group." and "66 questions to ask when you're investigating a problem."

## About the Author

Loren Ekroth - 2004

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