



## CONVERSATIONAL SKILLS

There are a number of skills involved in starting, maintaining and ending a conversation. Look through the following list of skills and note those you feel you may be not so good on, as well as those you may be better at. Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses in conversation - use your assets - while over time developing other skills.

Improving your ability to talk to people, to express what you are feeling and thinking, has great potential to increase your pleasure and welfare in life.

### SKILL 1: OPENERS or GREETINGS

"Openers" refers to initial greetings that demonstrate friendly intention and are often an invitation to conversation. These cover the conventional questions such as "how are you?" Body language usually consists of mutual gaze, smiling, head tilt or toss or warm facial expression. Greetings are virtually essential to starting conversations. Failing to respond to a greeting often leaves the other feeling insulted and makes him or her less inclined to greet us again or to make conversation.

### SKILL 2: 'START-UP' ROUTINES

#### 2a. QUESTIONING

The previous skill will encourage the other to talk but won't get him or her started. For this we need questions. We usually start with *general* questions, go on to *specific* ones and finally on to *feeling* questions; that is questions that ask what the other thinks, believes, feels about something. Hence many conversations move from the superficial to the intimate, though this requires a mutual sharing of feelings, opinions and experiences at deeper and deeper levels.

Our questions can also be *open* or *closed*. Open questions encourage longer answers.

e.g. "How did you get to know the host?" is open.

"Do you like your work?" is closed.

Questioning topics and examples follow.

### TOPICS

1. Anything the other person has been involved in recently.

2. Things he or she is doing, has done, or belongs to.

- (i) work
- (ii) home
- (iii) travel
- (iv) hobbies
- (v) social

3. Things in common.

- (i) being "here"
- (ii) TV, movies, pubs
- (iii) cars, sound gear
- (iv) people (friends, acquaintances etc.)

### EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

- (a) General: "What have you been up to?"  
"What's been happening recently?"  
"How are things going?"
- (b) Specific: "What did you do exactly?"
- (c) Feeling: "What was that like?"  
"Were you angry/surprised?"

- (a) General: "How's work going?"  
"How are things at home?"
- (b) Specific: "What do you do exactly?"  
"How's your baby?"
- (c) Feelings: "What's it like?"  
"Do you find it interesting?"  
"Do you get annoyed/fed up?"

- (a) General: "Have you been here before?"  
"Have you seen any good movies recently?"
- (b) Specific: "What did you do here last time?"
- (c) Feeling: "Did you like.. (being here)?"  
"What do you think of ...?" (this place etc.)

4. Current local and national topics.

(i) news, gossip

(ii) sport

(iii) personalities

(iv) forthcoming events

(a) General : "Anything happening this week?"

(b) Specific: "Are you going to (event)?"

(c) Feeling : "What do you think it will be like?"

## **2b. APPROACHING STRANGERS**

People often feel anxious about approaching strangers for fear of saying the wrong thing, appearing silly or forward or being rejected. There are conventional and accepted ways of approaching strangers that nearly always get around these problems. For example, to start a conversation in a club where you are a complete stranger, common steps are:

1. Turn head to face the other, make brief eye contact, social smile and brief greeting.

2. If returned, make a request for information e.g. "What are the prices like here?" or use a conventional statement or question "What nice weather."

3. Introduce self as an aside ("By the way, I'm ....) with reason (...I've just joined.")

4. Exchange information about yourself - work, home, etc. ("Do you live near here? I live ...")

## **SKILLS 3: SELF-DISCLOSURE**

This means being willing to talk about yourself. A good part of any conversation involves talking about topics centring on you or topics you comment on, rather than those you question the other person about. These topics can be exactly the same as those set out in Skill 2a. above. Hence some self-disclosure could touch on -

What happened to you today/this week.

What you do at work/home/socially.

Your hobbies.

Films you have seen.

Local events.

If you are trying to move from a superficial relationship to a closer one it is suggested that the information you share be gradually increased to more intimate levels.

People who say they have lots of acquaintances but few friends often have problems with too little (but sometimes too much) self-disclosure. Generally there needs to be a rough balance between displays of 'interest in other' and 'interest in self.'

## **SKILL 4: CHANGING TOPICS**

People will often terminate a conversation prematurely when they run out of questions to ask or when the conversation begins to focus on an area in which they are not interested. Most initial conversations, especially those between two strangers, take a while to get started. Consequently, before a common topic of interest is found, there may be several silences and several periods where topics are briefly picked up and then dropped. Just knowing that this is a common occurrence helps to alleviate much of this problem. It is also important to know that you have some control over the direction the conversation takes, especially if only two people are involved in the conversation. If you are not satisfied with the current topic of conversation, asking another open-ended question, following up on some free information that has been stored away, making a self-disclosure statement regarding another topic, or simply stating, "I am really interested in hearing more about ...." will often serve to move the topic of conversation to another area which is more satisfying or interesting.

## **SKILL 5: BREAKING INTO ONGOING CONVERSATIONS**

If the other people are open to having you join in, their body posture and eye contact will often convey this. They will look your way, give you eye contact, and they may realign their bodies so that they are facing you. If this seems to be the case, then it is a matter of being able to stand by, listen to the context of the conversation, and then join in with some appropriate statement of self-disclosure, opinion, interest or free information when appropriate.

### **SKILL 6: COPING WITH SILENCES**

Have you ever become aware of the periods of silences that occur in the course of a conversation? These periods do occur and are quite normal. Sometimes this silence can be uncomfortable and at other times, it can feel quite natural. Some people worry about pauses or silences in a conversation. They feel that they should fill every moment of the conversation with words. They irrationally see silence as a "pregnant pause" that will give birth to personal disaster if they cannot end it immediately. However almost all conversations, especially those between people who are getting to know one another better, have periods of silence.

### **SKILL 7: TELLING STORIES**

As people become more comfortable in talking with others, they will begin to talk in longer sentences and may relate some stories, experiences, or jokes. However, in relating these, it is important that each have a beginning, a middle, and especially an end. Some potentially very good stories seem to go on forever. Other stories seem to start from nowhere. Consequently, in relating a personal experience or in telling a story or joke, you should identify in some ways a beginning and an end to what you are talking about: "That reminds me of the time I was in Brisbane and ...." "....and that is how I feel about the situation now."

### **SKILL 8: TERMINATING CONVERSATION**

Can you recall situations where you felt "cornered" by someone talking to you, and you used some excuse such as "I have to go to the toilet" or "Oh, I forgot to make a phone call" in order to stop the interaction? Many people do tell of situations such as this, and, as a result, they are anxious about entering any conversation where they may later feel trapped or imposed upon. Things to say may involve some "canned" types of verbal responses which may be given at the end of a conversation: "I really have enjoyed talking with you" or "I see someone here whom I have not spoken with for a long time. I would like to continue our conversation later if you are free then." Other solutions may involve a change in the verbal content - less self-disclosure and fewer open-ended questions - as well as some nonverbal distance from the other person.

### **SKILL 9: ACTIVE LISTENING**

Active listening is paying attention to what people are saying, picking up on any free information and letting people know you are listening.

You let people know you are listening with words such as "interesting", "really?", "incredible!", "yes", "hmmm". It shows physically with nods, leaning forward, sitting up and so on.

An important part is to ask for clarification if you don't understand something. People often enjoy explaining things to others.

This skill concerns displaying an active interest in the other person. When we do this it is a great antidote for our own self-consciousness in conversations. It ties in with Skill 2a, especially questioning at the specific or feeling level.

### **SKILL 10: OFFERING COMPLIMENTS, PRAISE, OFFERING HELP, ENCOURAGEMENT AND EXPRESSING SYMPATHY**

These 'supportive routines' are all ways to make your conversation more rewarding to the other person - to make the other more responsive and friendly.

Compliments are used mainly for such tangible everyday things as the way the other presents - clothes, hairstyle, jewellery, slimness and for the quality of their company or entertainment, such as food and wine and so on.

Praise is used for less tangible achievements such as creativity, enterprise and sacrifice. People often want to offer praise and help but don't because they think it is out of place or they feel they are not important enough, or they simply do not know how to do it. There are conventional ways of offering praise and help which virtually always bring pleasure to the other. In fact, failure to do so may leave others feeling hurt.

One way to praise is to offer congratulations. This is done with a happy expression, a verbal "congratulations", the reasons for it and possibly a handshake. Follow-up questions (e.g. after congratulating someone on his or her engagement, asking about the wedding) often come next.

To offer help, make the offer and give reasons for it. Confirm the offer and insist if appropriate. Minimise the 'sacrifice' and emphasise the pleasure of doing the favour.

Words of encouragement and expressions of sympathy can also make conversation with you more pleasant and rewarding.

***References***

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