

THE ART OF SMALL TALK

8 tips for improving your conversation skills.

By Patricia Fry, ATMS

Your Toastmasters training has helped you feel comfortable when speaking in front of a group and self-assured when leading a meeting or giving a speech. But what about when you are conversing one-on-one? Does your confidence level take a dive during your day-to-day communication with others?

There is often more at stake during casual conversations than in other

have been many studies showing that people who see you as similar to themselves will like you more. In a social setting, I think the most important thing to do is to 'click' with the other person, because that's really the only way you will open up the doors to potential friendships, romantic relationships or even business opportunities." She adds, "The easiest way to initially click with another person

ing ourselves after others and receiving peer feedback.

As we've learned through our Toastmasters experience, feedback is a powerful tool that can be used to change poor speaking habits. This is also true when it comes to conversation skills. Most people, however, aren't comfortable with criticizing the communication habits of others. They aren't apt to say to a co-worker, "Hey, stop monopolizing the conversation. Give me a chance to say something." They don't often say, "I hate talking to you because you never respond to what I say. You go off telling your own story all the time without ever acknowledging mine." You are not likely to be told when your communication skills need finessing.

It's elementary but worth repeating: There are two parts to effective conversation—speaking and listening. And both parts require thought and skill. Consider the following tips for becoming a better, more respected conversationalist:

1 Become more social. For many, lacking conversation skills boils down to their lack of confidence in social or business settings. Reading up on how to develop better communication skills can be helpful, but experts advise putting yourself in social situa-

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— Denise Marinacci, CC

more formal situations when you are more prepared. As Denise Marinacci, CC, of Edmonds Toastmasters club in Edmonds, Washington, says, "In business, everything starts with a conversation. Whether it's making a sale, hiring an employee or negotiating a lease, excellent conversational skills are a must."

Meaningful communication is an aid to building personal relationships, as well. Diane Windingland, DTM, of PowerTalk Toastmasters in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and author of *Small Talk, Big Results*, says, "There

is to find common ground—to show the similarities between you."

Why is it that we receive so little training to help us hone conversation skills when we rely on this ability every day of our lives, in so many situations? You may remember your parents or grade school teachers saying, "Don't interrupt when I'm talking" or "Look at me when I'm speaking to you." These words of advice remain valid; but for the most part, our conversational style and habits weren't taught to us. They developed over a period of years through model-

tions as often as possible. Pay attention to the flow of conversations within your business or social circles. Observe those who seem to be the most effective communicators. What techniques do they use? How do they relate to others in the group? Listen to what they say and notice what they don't say.

Instead of arriving late to a Toastmasters meeting and leaving at the drop of the gavel, show up early and strike up a conversation with whomever is there. Ask if you can help set up for the meeting. Stick around

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afterwards, even for a few minutes, and talk to someone before leaving. Once you feel more comfortable in this friendly environment conversing with a stranger, practice your skills by attending a social event

2 Be a good listener. This is not to say you should stand on the outskirts of a conversation and just listen. Engage in the conversation. Be attentive to whomever is speaking, and respond accordingly by nodding or smiling. Let the speaker know you have been listening by commenting on the message. You will gain more respect in social and business circles when you demonstrate good listening skills.

A good listener is someone who is genuinely interested in what others have to say. Roy Schott, DTM, of Scottsdale Toastmasters in Scottsdale, Arizona, says, "The most important Toastmasters skill is the ability to listen. Our evaluation process teaches us to be critical listeners and to ascertain what the other speaker is saying. Without the ability to understand others, we fall short in our goal to communicate with them." Likewise,

when we are thinking about our next comment instead of paying attention to the speaker, we are not demonstrating good listening skills.

3 Encourage the other person to talk. If you want to be considered a wonderful conversationalist, just invite others to talk about themselves. We are all more comfortable speaking about a subject that is familiar, and what is more familiar to you than you?

4 Ask questions. Start a conversation or demonstrate your interest

in what a person is saying by asking questions. Open-ended questions elicit more interesting responses. That's why they are called "conversation starters."

Crackerjack conversationalists—those people with whom others love to converse—generally have good memories. They pay attention to others. They take in what they learn about others and use that information to engage them in conversation. You might say, "Hi Brad, how was your Hawaiian vacation last month?" Follow up by asking, "What impressed you most about Maui?" or "As I recall, the last time I saw you, you were applying for a new job. How did that go?" or "Hey Sally, how's that grandbaby? Did you have a good visit with her in Atlanta?" A follow-up question to keep this conversation going might be, "What does it feel like to be a grandmother?"

Deb Ferguson, ACB, ALB, is vice president education for Edmonds Toastmasters. She is also a member of the Business Edge Toastmasters, an advanced club in Lynnwood, Washington, composed largely of entrepreneurs and business owners who hone their

communication skills to promote themselves and their businesses. Ferguson suggests supporting the interests of others by not only paying attention to what is being said in conversation, but by remembering it and even acting on it. She says, "Be aware of what's happening around you. When you read or hear about something you know interests someone you have met, tell that person about it. Get a copy of the article and share it with the person. This tells him or her that you listened when they spoke to you and you remembered what they said."

5 Use body language to express interest in the conversation.

This seems elementary, but if you're observant, you'll notice that not everyone follows this good advice. Face the speaker with unfolded arms. Lean forward slightly, if you are seated. Make eye contact. Acknowledge statements with a nod, comment or question when appropriate.

6 Know when to speak and when to listen. Conversation should involve give and take. Each person in a conversation should speak *and* listen. Participate, but don't monopolize. Sometimes, someone else puts you in the position of monopolizing a conversation. This person asks question after question about you without offering any information in return. Having someone express that much interest in you may be the height of enjoyment and flattery but after a while, it will begin to feel like an interrogation rather than a conversation. Avoid interrogating others.

7 Be prepared. A good conversationalist engages the listener and stimulates the conversation. Keep up with trends and current events so you'll have something to talk about. Take a keen interest in others, but also live an interesting life of your own. Try new things. Accept unusual invitations. Volunteer for causes that

interest you. Go back to school. Read. Meet new challenges, and then share your experiences within social circles.

Practice what you learn in Toastmasters meetings in regard to storytelling techniques and vocal variety. Hone these skills to hold the interest of friends and business associates during casual conversation.

Toastmasters meetings provide a good arena in which to prepare for social moments. Windingland, of the PowerTalk club, says, "Table Topics prepares me to think quickly on my feet. Often [in conversations], someone asks a question and I need to respond right away. Evaluations require that I listen carefully. And participation in club and district events gives me practical application for conversations."

8 Model yourself after someone whose conversation skills you admire. Who is your favorite

conversation partner? We all know someone who gets positive attention at social events and business meetings. Consider the people you look forward to talking with. What makes them stand out in a crowd? What are some of his most endearing qualities? How does she make you feel when you're talking? Study her body language, opening and closing statements and speaking style. To improve your conversation skills, mimic someone you consider successful in this area.

Sarah Norkus, ACB, CL, of TriCity Toastmasters in Fort Lee, Virginia, came to Toastmasters hoping to improve her public speaking skills to promote her published books, which are in the Young Adult genre. But in the process, she gained much more.

"What I didn't expect was the added bonus of improving my

conversational skills," Norkus says. "The confidence I have gained through Toastmasters has helped me to converse more naturally with others. ... Having intimate conversations with people about my writing has actually resulted in more sales than any sales pitch I tried with my first book."

Being a good conversationalist isn't necessarily a natural trait. It can take thought and practice. Apply these tools and improve your ability to converse in any situation. **T**

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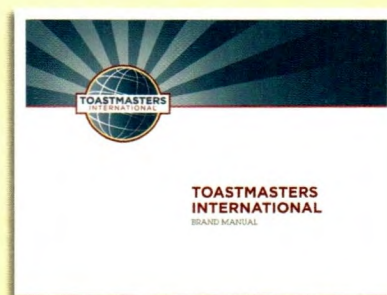


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