

# **How to be a Master Communicator**

## **Speak Effectively in Any Situation!**



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## Introduction

For most of us, the faculty of speech is something we acquire through the years as we mature, though there are those who seem more adept at it than others. Why is it your next-door neighbor finds it so effortless to articulate his disapproval of your dog relieving itself in his backyard or your car blocking his driveway, whereas you think that the very act of talking, in any form or kind, is an exercise in futility? Let's face it. If we were all born conversationalists, then there would be no such things as miscommunication and misunderstanding in the world. So don't be disheartened. If ease in speaking doesn't come naturally to you, this e-book is here to help you hone your skills. Knowing how to be a great conversationalist can be quite handy, too. It can help you land that dream job you've been eyeing for years, or it can give you the confidence to finally approach that person you've been attracted to since third grade. So if you're serious and willing to learn and apply this skill in your daily life, read on.

## **Chapter One**

# **WHAT IS CONVERSATION AND COMMUNICATION?**

The Microsoft® Encarta® Dictionary defines *conversation* as “a casual talk; the activity of talking, especially informally.” It sounds so easy, and yet so many people do it wrong, albeit unknowingly. Still, for others, the very idea of conversing is so dreadful that it is enough to leave their insides, not to mention their tongues, in knots.

Communication is a natural and very essential part of life. Even animals do it. Humans, however, have evolved from the grunting and groaning of our prehistoric ancestors to the complex speech patterns and individual nuances of today’s many languages. And along with that evolution came deterioration, eventually. Truly, the quality of conversation these days is nothing compared to the so-called ‘verbal jousts’ of yore—healthy, lively banter among peers and strangers alike. Indeed, French Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne thought of conversation as “the most fruitful and natural exercise of our mind.” So why the seeming decline?

In fact, many of our present-day conflicts stem from either miscommunication, or a total lack of communication altogether. When we also take into consideration a person’s culture, circumstances, and state of mind when issuing a certain communication, what may be harmless to some could actually be quite offensive to others. For instance, a joke that you find hilarious may be considered in bad taste for another. When a supervisor barks an order, you may either take it personally or just assume they’re having a bad day.

Today's fast-paced, technologically advanced but emotionally detached lifestyle plays a huge part in this misunderstanding, as well as in the decline of quality conversation. Because there is an overabundance of hi-tech, though impersonal, ways of communicating—texting, email, instant messaging—face-to-face discussion has been rendered practically obsolete. Or if not, it is largely deemed an inconvenience. Really, why talk in person when all it takes is a few clicks or keypad presses to state your message? And so, many people have lost touch with that human connection that was once innate in all of us.

**Perhaps it is time to reclaim it.**

In recent years, emphasis has slowly shifted from IQ, or intellectual quotient, to EQ, or emotional quotient, as the greater barometer for just how successful a person becomes in life. In almost all jobs, having the right people skills is one of the foremost requirements expected of applicants. At the very heart of these people skills is an above average aptitude for communication. The master communicator, therefore, is the one who is able to express him/herself with more clarity and precision, the one who is able to relate to clients and coworkers alike with equal ease and confidence, the one the boss turns to in order to get things done. In short, if you are a master communicator, you are a winner and a leader, not only in the workplace, but also in life.

Being a huge success, however, cannot be achieved alone. You'll need all the help you can get, and this is where communication comes in.

Communication skills have proven to be so extremely critical that they are part of all major business schools' MBA curricula. Special courses on communication, public speaking, and speech power are legion, and the fact that you have to pay good money to enroll in these courses and learn all about the basics of communication is a testament to its importance and indispensability. Unless you are a hermit entirely cut off from all human contact, you won't be able to survive without communication.

Indeed, communication has ballooned into a multi-billion dollar industry, and today we are connected in ways that people a mere generation ago would never have imagined. Mobile phones, video conferencing, wireless Internet—the possibilities are endless! But, as stated earlier, as advanced as these modern devices and systems are, they have only made face-to-face communication and personal correspondence that much more rare and precious. Do you even remember the last time you wrote a handwritten letter and mailed it the old-fashioned way? Have you ever even done so at all? Or how about meetings at the office? Was there ever a time you did not think they were a complete waste of time and that communiqués via email would be more practical and efficient?

The capacity to converse and communicate is an invaluable skill that, though currently overlooked for more futuristic means, will never fade away. After perusing this e-book, and given time and practice, there is no reason why you, dear listener, should not become a master communicator and a great conversationalist yourself.



## **Chapter Two**

# **BENEFITS OF BEING A GREAT CONVERSATIONALIST**

Whether at home, at school, at work, or even at the bus stop, being able to converse properly and communicate clearly is imperative. And to be more relevant to 21<sup>st</sup> century telecommunication, you could translate this ability onto paper or onscreen, so that even email can be less impersonal and more of a friendly exchange or correspondence.

Perhaps the most impressive of these benefits is that being a great conversationalist can turn any social setting into a land of opportunity for you to market yourself and expand your list of contacts that might proven invaluable in future business endeavors. The more you stand out when it comes to small talk and mingling, the more people will remember you, which is always good in any enterprise. Not to mention the heads that will turn in your direction. Being a great conversationalist is a very sexy and attractive trait, indeed, and people will be drawn to you as a result.

On a more personal level, simply taking time out to sit with a loved one, a friend, or even a stranger and engaging them in heartfelt conversation is an excellent chance for you to bond and get to know each other more. You get exposed to different points of view, plus you learn to be open-minded and more accepting of others. It's a very humbling experience, too, because you realize that there is so much you don't know—until you reach out and talk to someone.

Likewise, you learn to be less selfish and more considerate, because being a great conversationalist means focusing more on the other person rather

than yourself. You begin to think in terms of how to make the other person feel more special by directing your full attention on them. By doing so, you make them feel good about themselves, and they derive a sense of importance and self-worth from it, and this is an amazing gift you can give anyone at absolutely no cost, thus benefiting you *and* your conversation partner.

## **Chapter Three**

### **WHAT MAKES A GREAT COMMUNICATOR?**

You are a master communicator if you are able to get your message across, clearly and concisely. The late Ronald Reagan, 40<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, was known as the 'Great Communicator' precisely because of his ability to reach out to people from all walks of life and make the biggest impact with the simplest and most basic of words. He spoke words of substance and did so while keeping his public in mind at all times. He did not regale them with grandiose elocutions and flamboyant, highfalutin language. Instead, he paid careful attention to their reactions and was more concerned with conveying his meaning effectively and making his listeners understand him. So if a certain speech did not work, he made sure the next one did, and that made people respond to him positively and appreciatively.

Surprisingly enough, the key to being a great conversationalist lies not in your gift of gab. Rather, it is your ability to listen that should mainly come into play. The average human being is capable of uttering about 150 words a minute. Compare that to the 500-600 words that the brain can process in the same amount of time. This is why it takes so much more effort to listen rather than talk. And so you find yourself drifting away into sweet oblivion when a particularly chatty coworker accosts you at the water cooler. It takes time, discipline, and a whole lot of patience to develop a talent for listening. This will be discussed further as we go along.

Lastly, you are a master communicator if you have great conversation skills. Conversation takes place when there are two or more parties involved and the message is successfully passed from point A to point B. But what happens when it turns into a one-way street and transmission does not flow back from point B to point A?

Here you will learn that in order for a conversation to be considered successful, you will have to talk less. A great conversationalist does not need to do all or most of the talking. Rather, it is the conversation partner who will happily carry that burden unsuspectingly. And you will find, to your pleasant surprise, that the other person will be most responsive as well. Remember, a great conversationalist is the one who asks good questions, and then listens intently to the answers.

## Chapter Four

# DO'S AND DONT'S IN A CONVERSATION

### What to Do

Here's how to achieve the right skills and cultivate them, and you'll be a great conversationalist in no time:

**It takes two to tango.** Know what type of person you're talking to. Be sensitive to their own personality and adjust your approach accordingly. Some are more shy and withdrawn than others, so don't be too aggressive and come out with guns a-blazing or you'll scare them off. Do they look you straight in the eye or prefer tracing mental patterns on the floor? Be confident and refreshing to put them more at ease. Being nervous yourself won't make things any better. If you can't help it, at least take consolation in the thought that the other person is just as nervous as you are, and that puts you on level ground. Nervous habits include touching your face, especially your mouth, or raising your glass to your lips even if you're not drinking. Resist the urge to move in such a way. Always be aware of yourself and try to control your mannerisms. Relax. Smile and greet the other person. Introduce yourself. Reintroduce yourself if you've met previously. Never assume that they remember you. If they do, let *them* say so.

**Check yourself at the door.** You already know you anyway, so forget about you and find out more about the person with whom you're conversing. If there's one subject a person knows best, it is him/herself, though they may not always get the opportunity to talk about that certain favorite topic of theirs. No doubt they will definitely be grateful if you give them the chance to do so. What makes

them tick? Be avidly curious. If you can steer the conversation so that they do most of the talking and you do most of the listening, rest assured that by the end of it, the other person will think *you* were the great conversationalist.

**Ask, ask, ask.** How do you get a person to talk? By asking questions, of course. Not the kind that get monosyllabic or one-word answers, though, but more substantial open-ended questions that will allow the other person to share more information. Start off with the usual *who*, *what*, *when*, and *where*. Later you might try using questions that begin with, “Tell me about...” or “What do you think about...?” Don’t be so preoccupied with what you’re going to say next that you fail to catch what the other person is saying. Pay attention instead, and after they talk, react to what they said. Even more questions can be derived from the answers they give, and on and on it will go, enough to keep the two of you busy for quite a while. Slow down, though. Don’t bombard them with rapid-fire queries. Give them room to breathe. It’s a conversation, not an interrogation.

**Ask some more.** This is where the more in-depth *why* and *how* come in. Ask the other person to expound on their answers with questions like “Why is that?” and “How do you mean?” Remember, not only are you making friends, but you are also getting an opportunity to learn new things. There is a wealth of information you can gain just by listening to others. You’ll be surprised how eager they’ll be to share with you what they know if they see you are genuinely interested and have a sincere desire to learn from them. Encourage them to open up to you. You might say that understanding the other person is one of the more noble goals of any conversation. When you ask questions, you get to know

them more, thus, you get to understand them more. Give and take is the way to go, however. Though you'll mostly be the 'interviewer,' you'll know the other person is a great conversationalist as well if they ask you questions in return and want to get to know you, too. But remember to keep yourself in constant check as you might easily get carried away and launch into a never-ending autobiographical discourse till you drop.

**Rewind and replay.** Use phrases like "So you're saying..." and "Let me see if I understand you correctly..." and then repeat in your own words what you've just learned from them. It will show you've really been paying attention and they will appreciate you a great deal for it and think very highly of you in the end.

**Name game.** Don't forget to mention the other person's name at least once or twice during the course of the conversation. This will help you remember it. It is also to get their attention and subtly get them to focus on what you are saying. Also, people derive pleasure from being addressed that way. They like hearing their name spoken, but not too much as it can get annoying when overdone.

**Pause.** Think before responding, especially if you tend to disagree with what's been said. The last thing you'd want is to appear hostile and offend or antagonize the other person by going into attack mode all of a sudden. Choose your words carefully and be tactful. Pausing likewise serves another purpose, and that is to gauge whether or not the other person has, in fact, finished speaking. They may simply be stopping for a breather and have more to add, but by not pausing before taking your turn, you might interrupt them unintentionally.

**Relax.** Lulls in conversation are quite common and are nothing to panic over.

Take the opportunity to go over your discussion and see if you've missed anything that is worth mentioning again. Bring up a new topic from that. Or use the break to gracefully segue into another unrelated subject altogether.

**Be in the know.** Just because you'll be doing most of the asking and listening doesn't mean you are excused from making timely and thought-provoking remarks. Quite the contrary. If you can inject your conversation with witticisms and wordplay, it is a very good indicator of a highly capable and dynamic intellect and people will be drawn to you as a result. On the other hand, if you haven't the slightest clue what's going on in the world, or the last thing you read was a required textbook back in high school, people will find you dull and uninteresting. So read, expand your vocabulary, watch the news, and never allow your mind to become static. See to it that you never run out of pertinent things to comment on and talk about.

**Mind your body language.** Face the other person squarely. Smile. Maintain eye contact. Lean forward to assure them you're really listening, but don't lean too far forward as that's just plain creepy. They'll pick up more by the way you move than from the words you speak, which account for only 12 percent of all that is transmitted during communication. The whopping 88 percent of that is nonverbal, meaning body language plus tone of voice. So don't turn away as you may look uninterested. Don't sigh or cross your arms or you'll appear impatient.



**Mind their body language.** Be sensitive to the other person's actions and reactions. Are they getting anxious or irritable? Do their eyes keep darting to their watch or their cellphone or the exit? Perhaps you are beginning to bore them, in which case you must know when to shut up.

**Know when the conversation is truly over.** Alas, eventually all good things must come to an end. Shake hands and express to the other person what a pleasure it was to talk to them. And because they found *you* to be a great conversationalist, they will very likely seek you out again on future occasions.

### **What Not to Do**

Just as there are things to remember during a conversation, there are several *don'ts* to keep in mind as well. Here's what *not* to do when engaging in a conversation:

**Brag.** No one wants to hear about how much your brand-new Lamborghini cost, or how you managed to seal a lucrative business deal in record time, unless it is specifically asked of you to share your incredible story. It's always best to remain humble, both in words and deeds.

**Gloat.** If you've just been promoted at work and a colleague vying for the same position was overlooked in favor of you, do not rub it in their face or turn the conversation back to your promotion over and over again. It's insensitive, not to mention irritating to everyone else you remind of your great triumph ad nauseam.

**Be a know-it-all.** Do not act superior and above everyone. Avoid employing the "I know more than you" tactic. Nothing kills a conversation quite like a know-it-all.

Really, why would anyone even bother having a conversation with you in the first place if you know everything already and make darn sure they don't forget it?

**Give unsolicited advice.** Though you may argue that your intentions are good and you have only the other person's welfare in mind, touching as that may seem, hold your tongue unless they ask for your input directly. Telling them outright how to properly lose excess poundage or which anti-aging cream will work best on their face will only offend them. In other words, mind your own business.

**Steal someone's thunder.** If a coworker is currently basking in the much-deserved limelight and telling their story to willing listeners, do not snatch away the attention they're getting by butting in and imparting your own experiences in the same situation or circumstance. Worse yet, do not imply that you are better than they are.

**Interrupt and contradict.** Just because you presume to know what the other is going to say does not give you license to cut them off. If you don't even have the decency to let them finish what they're saying, no one will want to talk to you. And while disagreeing in private or in a respectful manner is acceptable, actively contradicting almost everything isn't, and you shouldn't seize the opportunity merely to showcase your debating skills.

**Hog the mike or monopolize the conversation.** You will only come across as someone who relishes the sound of their own voice, and nobody likes people who care more about being heard than about actually conversing. You might as well perform a soliloquy while you're at it. And if nobody else is interested, do not

force the subject you want to talk about on them. If the conversation has moved on to different things, don't keep going back to the topic *you* want to discuss if your listeners are obviously tired of it.

**Pry.** Asking questions is fine, so long as you steer clear of the more personal ones like how much they weigh or who they went out with the night before and what that led to.

**Overuse conversation fillers like, “Yes,” “I see,” “Uh-huh,” or “Is that so?”**

Use them sparingly, if at all, otherwise it will appear as though you are merely trying to be polite though you're not really listening, or rushing the other person into getting to the point of their story, or worse, the end of it.

**Fidget.** This signals unease and that you'd rather go find something better to do than just suffer through a conversation. Sit still. Do not nod repeatedly and robotically. Try your best to keep your mind and your eyes from wandering everywhere else and focusing on anything but the person in front of you, or you risk offending them.

**Stare.** Maintaining eye contact is essential, but don't be looking hungrily at any other part of their anatomy. It is rude and it will make them uncomfortable, if they haven't already fled from your presence. This is a surefire way to get people to avoid you at all costs.

**Discuss touchy subjects like politics and religion,** unless you're fairly certain the other person shares similar views to your own, in which case it is relatively safe to talk.

**Pick a fight.** Do not argue, especially just for the sake of arguing, and don't belittle the other person's opinions while imposing your own upon them. Worse, do not end up insulting the other person or someone they know. Name-calling is a huge no-no! You wouldn't want to appear childish and immature.

**Laugh when you don't mean it.** If your boss cracks a bad joke and you think you can score brownie points by laughing, think again. Fake laughter is one of those things that can be detected a mile away. It's embarrassing, insulting to whoever is at the hearing end of it, and you'll only make a fool of yourself.

## **Chapter Five**

### **TOPIC SUGGESTIONS**

So now you know how to be a great conversationalist, what to do, and what not to do. But what should you talk about? Although it is near impossible to be interested in everything, try to be as open and broadminded as you can. It'll be so much easier for you to appreciate and carry on a great conversation if almost all subjects the other person talks about intrigue you, too. You don't have to be a theater aficionado or an authority on reptiles or a Scottish Highland games expert. But if you learn to see the world from the other person's point of view, you just might begin to understand and value the things they find fascinating, and that makes for some really good conversation. Always read and study, learn and remember. The more you know, the more you'll be interested. And the more interested you are, the more you'll know.

Here are some suggestions, just some of the most common things under the sun that people discuss. But do not limit yourself to this list. If you can think of some more to add here, all the better:

- The weather. Formulaic as it is, it does have its practical uses, especially if a hurricane warning's just been issued or you're snowed in and stranded at a convenience store with fellow customers.
- Gadgets, especially if the other person has one, like a cell phone or a PDA.

- Movies or TV shows you've both seen recently. If the other person hasn't seen the same film or show, be considerate enough not to give away the ending.
- Current events or the latest news (if they're not touchy or controversial). And not gossip, mind you, or you risk appearing shallow and superficial and the other person might even end up thinking you will most likely gossip about them to someone else.
- Jobs or hobbies. What does the other person do for a living? For fun? What are they doing right now? Are they working on a book? What's it about? Do they go mountain-climbing on weekends? Where have they been? How does it feel to be on top of the world, literally speaking? Do they paint or play an instrument? How long have they been doing so? Who are their influences?
- Find common ground, or things you might both be interested in, like favorite books, music, or sports. This ought to be enough to keep the two of you occupied for hours. After all, having something in common is how most friendships and relationships start off.
- Good food or highly recommended recipes and restaurants. Who doesn't enjoy a good meal?

- Home or family matters, if you've both got similar circumstances. Otherwise, leave your marriage and child-rearing expertise at home or save it for a fellow parent. If the other person's single, they probably won't want to hear that kind of thing.
- Do *not* talk about sex, past relationships, divorce, or any other topic you wouldn't normally talk about with complete strangers. If you have a health condition, do not describe each and every symptom you've ever had and all the medical procedures you've ever undergone in terrifyingly accurate detail. If there's something you're just dying to talk about, but the other person is unresponsive to it, be gracious enough to change the subject to one that's acceptable to both of you.

## **Chapter Six**

### **HOW TO ASK GOOD QUESTIONS**

Have you ever attempted small talk with someone, only for it to lapse into awkward and uncomfortable silence every two seconds? Discussing the mundane may seem like the easiest ticket to Conversationville, and it probably is. Everybody's got to start somewhere, right? "Do you play sports?" "What type of music do you listen to?" But wanting to know the basics, their likes and dislikes, gets old after a while. It would be quite strange if you were on your second or third meeting (or date) and you're still inquiring about their favorite movie of all time. If you really wish to get to know a person and discover their innermost thoughts and desires, then all you have to do is ask.

Francis Bacon said, "A prudent question is one half of wisdom." There's something about a good question that simply demands a reply. You'd be surprised how ready most people are to answer. Therefore, if you want good answers, ask good questions. Help the other person give you a satisfactory response by knowing the right things to ask. How do you know if a question is good? One indication would be its originality: if nobody else has thought of it before or if it has rarely been brought up. For instance, instead of asking the usual, "What do you do and why did you choose that particular career path?" you could ask good-humoredly, "Have you always wanted to be a systems analyst since you were a kid?" And from there you could branch out into the other person's earliest ambition in life, what they were like as a child, and whether they would do things differently if they could. Coming up with very original and offbeat



questions may be quite difficult, so one way to help yourself is to think of something *you* would like to answer. What would you want other people to ask *you*? If you need extra help, do some research beforehand. *The Book of Questions* by Gregory Stock, PhD offers ideas and conversation starters you might want to try out, like “Would you accept 20 years of extraordinary happiness and fulfillment if it meant you would die at the end of the period?” It’s interesting, thought-provoking, and not at all a touchy subject to bring up with a stranger. It just might lead you to discover each other’s personal values and philosophies in life, without resorting to fierce debate and, heaven forbid, fisticuffs.

Another way to know for sure that you’re on the right track with your questioning is if the other person actually stops to think, to wrack their brains and dig into their memory bank for what to say. Treat their answer like a gem of a story that needs to be told. People like to tell stories after all. Don’t just gather information about them, ask for their opinions. The best question is the one that leads to deep and meaningful conversation, the tiniest spark that ignites the entire crate of fireworks.

Lastly, and most importantly, listen. It doesn’t matter how trivial their point or how tiny and insignificant their statement may seem. Be attentive to everything they have to say and the way in which they say it, especially if it is in response to a question you asked, and you will gain keen insight into what kind of person they are.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **TO BREAK OR NOT TO BREAK (THE ICE)**

Approaching the other person and beginning the conversation is perhaps the most difficult part of it. But once you get that out of the way, it's all smooth sailing from there, depending on how you handle the rest of it. Start off with a sincere compliment. Note the word 'sincere.' If you can't be so, it's better not to say anything at all rather than appear artificial and patronizing. Say something nice about the person's tie or handbag or shoes, but never get too personal like commenting on their looks or body as this might make them self-conscious and ill at ease, despite your good intentions and positive feedback. Never compliment yourself or go fishing for compliments. The other person will do that for you if you prove to be deserving enough. And when they do compliment you, say 'Thank you' or 'Thanks, I'm glad you approve.' If they tell you, "I like your shirt," do not answer, "This old thing? You should see my whole wardrobe collection."

Also, always take it easy. Everybody loves a great sense of humor. Never take yourself too seriously or you'll come off as boring and severe. Nobody wants to hang around someone who's got about as much humor as a corpse.

A crucial tip: be truthful. Remember to talk only of things you are knowledgeable about. Do not pretend to know more than you really do. Don't attempt to impress the other person by making up all kinds of tall tales that will most likely trip you in the future when you can't quite recall what you told to whom.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **DO TALK TO STRANGERS**

You're not going to get anywhere by sitting in front of the TV at home every night or supergluing yourself to your cubicle seat at the office. Get up and mingle. Use your newfound knowledge in the art of conversation and put it to good use. The more you do, the better you'll become at it, till it is all but second nature to you.

The rule "Don't talk to strangers" is fine for children, but as an adult, you want to find ways to enlarge your circle of acquaintances. Get involved in clubs, groups, or organizations, whether socio-civic, professional, or recreational. The idea is that while you learn new ideas and impart your own, you also meet as many new people as you can. You never know just how many friendships or potential business partners and contacts you may gain from these events. Try and find one person you are not familiar with, and approach them first. Engage them in conversation and get to know them. Don't worry about being ignored or rejected. The fact that they've joined the same organization means they're there to meet new people, too, and will be quite eager to respond to you. Relate to everyone. Do not make distinctions by gravitating toward the richest or best dressed or most popular. More often than not, it is the most unassuming one who is the most interesting individual with the best stories to tell. The more diverse each person's background is, the better, as you can gain exposure to whole new sets of beliefs, ideas, and perspectives in life you would normally be unaware of had you kept to yourself or stayed at home.

If you're ever on a bus, train, or subway, and you find yourself just dying to talk to that very nice-looking stranger you come across, do not hesitate. Their stop might be coming up soon, and you may never see them again. However, don't be too aggressive in your approach, as people don't always like to be bothered on their daily commute. There are some who are willing to converse, and it's up to you to decide whether or not to take the risk and find out. So be nice yourself, and courteous, and interesting enough to merit the other person's attention. But proceed with caution if you notice they are accompanied. If you see that they're more than just acquaintances by the way they hold hands or even kiss, admit defeat and leave them alone. But maybe the person at their side is just a friend or a sibling, or even another stranger who's thinking of making friends with them, too. In that case you may go ahead and approach them. If the person is alone, notice whether their left ring finger is bare. (If not, be sensible enough to respect it.). If you see them at the bus stop or the station, wait till they board so you can find a seat or a place across from them for better eye contact. Or if they are seated and you aren't, make sure you don't stand too close to them. When your eyes do meet, try to hold their gaze for about two seconds, then break it and glance away. Wait another 30 seconds before looking back at them, and when they meet your eyes again, smile. If they return the gesture, that can be a very good indication of your chance of success. Read their body language and be aware of your own. Is the other person open to conversation? Or do they turn away and put headphones on or busy themselves with a book or newspaper? If they're responsive, ask for directions, like how to

get to the library or the museum, for instance. It doesn't really matter what you ask, as long as the answers will be more than a 'yes' or a 'no.' The objective is to get the other person to talk to you. Hopefully, you can make small talk from whatever answers they give. If they entertain and accommodate you, it means they're interested in getting to know you as well and you are in luck. If they aren't interested, you'll be able to discern it pretty early on, so you might as well just leave them in peace.

It takes a certain amount of courage to approach a stranger on public transport, and if you're the type who can't bear to be rejected, especially in such a public setting, you could get off at the next stop and take another ride if you're too embarrassed by the turn of events. Do keep in mind, though, that you mustn't take rejection personally, as the other person may simply be too shy or mortified about the prospect of meeting strangers on a bus or a train. Perhaps under different circumstances, they might have been more than willing to strike up a conversation. The bottom line is, you'll never really know for sure unless you take a chance. The worst that could happen is that you remain strangers and perhaps never see each other again. But the opposite could also occur and you might end up the best of friends—maybe even a whole lot more than that.

It's always important, though, to use your gut instinct and common sense. If a certain person is a suspicious-looking character to you, someone whose mug seems to have come straight out of a most-wanted flyer, then perhaps it is best to move on. And while introducing yourself, give only your first name. You may choose to give your last name only when you've gotten to know them more

closely and are fairly sure they do not have ill intentions toward you, like stealing your identity or clearing out your bank account. More importantly, do not give out your address or any other personal information because they could be an ex murderer, for all you know. And the same should go for them as well, because as far as they're concerned, *you* could be the ex murderer.

It is quite understandable that you might be very reluctant to go out and actually communicate, especially with the opposite sex. This condition is rather common and all it takes, really, is practice. If, however, you suffer from a more extreme form of social anxiety, like an irrational fear or phobia of social interaction, you might want to seek professional assistance or get counseling.

## **Chapter Nine**

### **BE A GREAT CONVERSATIONALIST ON THE PHONE**

The same rules for face-to-face conversation pretty much apply here as well. Take note that body language is still important, despite the fact that you can't even see each other or that oceans separate the two of you. Smile anyway, and keep on doing so. The other person will, in fact, *hear* you smiling. Compose yourself as though the other person were right in front of you. The expression you wear on your face can actually affect the tone of your voice. As for the tone of the person on the other end of the line, you're going to have to listen twice as hard as when talking in the flesh as there's no other way for you to tell what their own actions and reactions are. Are they pausing too much? Do they sound tense, nervous, or hesitant? Perhaps they're smiling as well? Pick a single focal point in the room and stick to it as though you were maintaining eye contact. This keeps your eyes from roaming and becoming distracted, lest you leave out valuable information. Try not to grip the handset too tightly or press it too firmly to your ear. Sit back, relax, breathe deeply, and speak slowly. Your casual and conversational air will reflect in your own tone of voice and will travel through the phone lines to put the other person at ease. If the conversation is of a more official nature, sit up straight and mind your posture. You will come across as calm, confident, and professional.

Check every now and then if they understood what you just said, or take a pause in your conversation as an opportunity to ask them to clarify something you might have missed or misunderstood. Do this more often than you would

during a face-to-face discussion. Again, go back and recap to be sure nothing is lost in your conversation and mutual comprehension is achieved.



## **Chapter Ten**

### **WHEN THERE'S MORE THAN JUST THE TWO OF YOU**

Whether at social functions, class discussions, group study, or brainstorming sessions at work, conversation can take place on a much bigger and broader level with more than just two people communicating. Though you may not be the official 'discussion leader,' you can maneuver the conversation in such a way that everyone gets a chance to chip in. Of course, in any social setting, there will always be the more vocal members who will all but drown out everybody else. You can likewise expect varied personalities and differing reactions. Some may get easily angered, others more upset, especially when their beliefs and opinions are challenged. That's human nature and you can't change it. You can, however, try and strike a balance by listening to all their views, and then asking the less aggressive ones for their take on the matter or whatever it is you are discussing. Don't pressure them into talking, but give them time to gather their thoughts. Encourage them to speak, and respect and value everyone's opinions equally. This will rein in the more verbal ones and boost the confidence of the quieter ones. Maintain eye contact with everyone. This assures them that no one gets left out and you're all in it together.

Do not attempt to unleash the full contents of your brain upon the hapless population. That's what blogs are for; either people read you or they don't. At least they have a choice in the matter. But when they are faced with an auditory barrage of opinions from you with no signs of let-up in the immediate future, they may endure it for the sake of propriety, but that doesn't mean they'll appreciate it.

You may have stated your bit (or whole chunks of it), but it will be at their expense, and neither you nor the others would want that. Instead, in any civilized forum, try and act as a moderator of sorts. Volley questions around and let each person have a touch of the ball or a turn at the mike.

But perhaps you are nervous in the presence of many. You may argue that a one-on-one conversation is nerve-wracking enough, not to mention a conversation involving an entire group of people. Maybe you are one of those who would rather disappear into the background and let others do the talking.

First of all, try and put things into perspective. *Why* are you nervous in the first place? There is no logical and rational reason why you should be. It's a simple conversation, not a graded recitation. If you're afraid of being ridiculed for what you have to say, don't be. The world's not going to end just because you voice ideas you think aren't good enough. Your insights are just as important as anybody else's.

Take a deep breath and get that oxygen flowing through your bloodstream and up into your brain. Breathe out before talking, as holding it in will only make you even more nervous. Speak up if you disagree with something or you may regret it somewhere down the line. If you don't speak up, you might unconsciously pave the way for people to walk all over you. If something's not making sense to you, ask questions. Not only will this clear up any confusion you—as well as others in the group—may be having, but this also gives you an avenue for further discussion. If you share your knowledge and expertise,

people will know what to approach you for in the future. Take note of their talents and interests for the same reason. Always be respectful.

## **Chapter Eleven**

### **JOINING OTHERS IN THEIR CONVERSATION**

This is much trickier since you weren't there when the conversation started. Therefore, you don't know what it is they are talking about. So it wouldn't be wise to just plunge into the unknown lest you blurt out something stupid or completely inappropriate and make everyone uncomfortable as a result. Or worse, do not come barging in and change the topic completely. If you've got something to add, do so at the most opportune moment, not while someone else is talking or holding court. If you don't know what they are discussing, ask politely and express your interest and they'll most likely accommodate you.

Do remember to be sensitive to the others' body language. Perhaps it is a private conversation, for their ears only, and you just might end up intruding. If that's the case, back away and leave them to their privacy.

## **Chapter Twelve**

### **DEALING WITH DIFFERENT CHARACTERS**

Unless you live under a rock, you can expect to encounter all sorts of personalities—whether it be the motormouth, the meanie, or the mute—at least once in your lifetime. That is why it is important for your people skills to be up to the task, so that you will be prepared to handle any type of situation and carry on a decent conversation, no matter who it is you're sharing it with.

People who talk too much are more of a nuisance than anything else. Sure, some of them may actually be a source of amusement and even enlightenment, but let's face it: motormouths are just plain annoying, especially when there's simply no room or time to accommodate them. But maybe they are just insecure deep down. Perhaps they are driven to talk excessively because it gets them noticed and they bask in the attention their gift of blab brings them. If your get-that-faraway-look-in-your-eyes-and-yawn ploy doesn't drive home the message, you'll have to try a more direct approach. If it's a coworker who talks a mile a minute, just say, "Sorry, but I really need to get back to work" or "Could we continue this some other time? I'm way behind my schedule." They'll have no choice but to let you go. The good-natured ones won't take it personally, but there are those that do, and that's when it gets a bit trickier. Don't worry about hurting their feelings if you know for a fact—and your other coworkers agree with you—that their talkativeness disrupts productivity. Better they be stopped than risk the good of the majority. (More on dealing with an excessive talker in the next chapter.)

At the other end of the spectrum, there are some people who are naturally quiet. They would rather listen than talk. Believe it or not, some even take pleasure in just allowing the other person to go on and on, provided that other person talks sense. So don't be immediately discouraged if you try and strike up a conversation and all you get in response is "Mmm" and "Uh-huh." You'll be able to tell by their body language whether they're not interested and are merely being polite, or if they're genuinely into your subject though they may not say much. Be patient and they'll warm up to you eventually. Just because a person is quiet doesn't mean they're unfriendly. Give them time to adjust and get comfortable with you, and try not to call attention to their quietness. They already know that and don't need you to point it out. They'll open up when they're ready. Meanwhile, you'll have to take over the role of the speaker more often, which shouldn't be a problem. You've already got a wealth of information from which to draw whatever topic may be of use at the moment, so go ahead and talk. But ask for their own input from time to time. See if they agree or disagree and why. Don't expect them to just do a 180-degree turn and get chatty all of a sudden, though. It may be a slow and gradual process, but one that should be pleasant and enjoyable for you both.

If the other person is the type who seems to have a grudge against the world, who lambastes everything and everyone within their peripheral vision, or who can't open their mouth without letting loose a string of shocking profanities, it's best to just avoid them altogether. If not, employ the same pretext you would use on the talkers and excuse yourself. Perhaps you could bring them to your

supervisor's attention so that something can be done about their destructive behavior.

## Chapter Thirteen

### GETTING OUT WITH GRACE

There are good conversations. And then there are conversations that scream “Run like hell.” Much as you loathe admitting it, there are times when you wind up in a conversation that just bores you to tears. It may seem to you that it is going nowhere fast, or straight to that place where conversations go to die. Either the other person is a walking advertisement for what not to do in a conversation and knows only the pronouns *I*, *me*, and *mine*, or they are more tight-lipped than a clam, no matter how hard you try to get them to talk.

If it is the former you are faced with, and despite all your best efforts to keep your tête-à-tête from becoming too one-sided, you still find yourself wishing you’d never approached them in the first place, you can wait for that crucial pause or lull (pray that it happens). When it comes you could say, “I’m sorry, I would love to hear more, but so and so just walked in and I have something very important I must discuss with him/her.” You might also excuse yourself to answer a phone call you’ve been waiting for all night. Thank the person, shake hands, say it was a pleasure meeting them, and then do exactly what it is you said you were going to do. You don’t want to appear like a liar. On the other hand, you don’t want to hurt their feelings either by being so blatantly anxious to get away from them. Just keep in mind that whatever you do, do so politely, tactfully, and with grace.

If it is the opposite kind of person you encounter, there is no need for excuses. Simply go straight to thanking the person for the time and pleasure of



their company, and move on. Make no apologies. Most likely, they'll be relieved you left them alone. You should be able to tell the difference between a person who's simply quiet, as opposed to someone with serious antisocial tendencies. Don't think that you have failed as a conversationalist when you are given the cold shoulder. It happens to everyone and there will always be at least one person in every situation who'd rather be somewhere else, preferably in blessed solitude.

Conversely, you yourself might not be up to the task of talking, especially if you're on your way to work and chatting it up with complete strangers during your commute is the last thing you want to do. So make sure you have a music player with you, or anything with headphones or earphones. Or simply earphones will do and you can just pretend you're preoccupied with your music, as long as it's not too obvious your earphones are merely props. You could also read a book, a magazine, or a newspaper. Text your friends or tinker with your phone, or just close your eyes altogether and pretend to be asleep. Hopefully, people will get the picture and stay away from you. If you can't do any of these things for lack of props or simply because you are rendered less aware and alert of your surroundings when doing so and you wouldn't want to be, just occupy a place with the fewest passengers, as much as possible. Don't make eye contact as some people may take that as an invitation for them to approach you.

## **Chapter Fourteen**

### **GETTING YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS**

Earlier it was mentioned that in order to be a master communicator, you must be able to express your intentions in a clear and precise way so that no misunderstandings take place.

When giving speeches or when selling commodities and services, you must first know your audience or your customers. If it was just you and another person, you'd make an effort to find out about that other person, wouldn't you? But if you were to speak in public, before a large group of spectators, or if you wanted to be effective in business, marketing, or advertising, you would do the same, only on a much grander scale.

Jack Welch, former Chairman and CEO of General Electric, and an advocate of simplicity, once said, "Insecure managers create complexity." Don't be vague and esoteric. Use simple, straightforward language and do away with unnecessary jargon that will not only confuse your listeners, but will irritate them and cause them to lose interest. If they don't understand you, how do you expect to hold their attention? Therefore, never make the mistake of assuming that they already know what you are talking about. Be more specific. If you feel what you are conveying is already as simplified as it can get, try breaking down complex information into smaller parts, and then expanding on each one.

Focus more on your audience than yourself. Do not be condescending or come off as though they should be grateful for the privilege of hearing you speak.

Instead, show them what an honor it is for you to be able to do so in their company.

Try and make eye contact with as many people as you can for as long as you can. It would be ideal to do this around 90 percent of the time. If each of them sees you looking straight at them, it will make them truly feel you are addressing them personally, and you will communicate more effectively than if you talked to the ceiling or the back wall or the microphone. Don't be so rigid that you appear cold and uninviting. Avoid nervous gestures like tugging on your shirt collar or wringing your hands. Hum a single note before speaking and then lower your pitch a little so that once you start talking, your voice won't come squeaking out in a mousy rush. Reduce tension in your shoulders as the muscles there support your larynx and, therefore, have a direct impact on your voice. Simply relax your stance and radiate enthusiasm and warmth.

Connect with your audience. Encourage them to ask questions and repeat what they don't understand. Exercise saintly patience even if you have to repeat yourself several times. And when all's said and done, thank them for having you.

## Chapter Fifteen

### HOW TO BE A GREAT LISTENER

It cannot be stressed enough just how vital listening is in any kind of conversation, whether it be between two people or two hundred. More than your ability to speak, it is your skill in listening that is the ultimate key to success in communication. To hear the other person is not enough; anyone can do that, unless they are hearing-impaired. But what the speaker says actually has to register in your brain and hopefully, leave an impression from which you can derive an intelligent response. This is how true, meaningful conversations are born, and it is how they are sustained.

The art of listening, however, is just that—an art. And like speaking, it must be learned, practiced, and acquired with time. Here's how:

**Focus.** Though living in the modern world certainly has its conveniences—producing instant results with little energy and even less time expended—one undesirable byproduct is a considerably shortened attention span. Try to work on yours, even if this is difficult for you, so as to give the other person your whole and undivided attention, as though you were the only two people in the room and this person was the only one that mattered to you in that place, in that moment. There will be many distractions, to be sure, like incessant chatting from others in the same room or nagging voices in the back of your mind demanding to know if you've left the kettle boiling on the stove again before leaving the house. Keep these diversions at bay and concentrate on the person in front of you. If you can,

set your meeting in an area that is free of such distractions and will afford you the privacy you need to talk properly.

**Don't come to hasty conclusions.** This is one of the root causes of miscommunication—when a person speaks and you think you already know what they mean or what they are going to say. And since you're such an accomplished mind reader and interpreter, you block out the rest of the message and zone out or formulate your response long before the other person has even finished. You'd be surprised just how wrong you are most of the time. Bottom line, hear them out. Save your own interpretations of the message for later.

**Enhance your memory.** What good is it to listen attentively, only to have the speaker's words go in one ear and out the other? Try to remember as much as you can of what's been said. If you are not so confident about your powers of recall, you could practice memory-enhancing exercises. One of the more popular ones is the use of mental pictures or image association. Try to assign an image to every important point the speaker makes. For example, the other person mentions having eaten the other night at a French restaurant, the name of which you can barely pronounce. You could instead assign an image of a croissant to that statement. If the other person next talks about going to the movies after dinner, think of 'popcorn' or 'theater' or the actor who starred in the film. The way the pictures are arranged will help you recall the flow of the conversation and exactly what was discussed.

**Ask questions (again).** This cannot be stressed enough. This is where your own interpretation of the speaker's words comes into play. You are not,

however, to impose them upon the other person. Rather, you should ask them politely if your understanding was right on the mark. If not, request that they explain themselves further to enlighten you. Speakers appreciate it when their listeners ask good questions. It means they are paying attention, and the speaker feels empowered—nay, compelled—to continue talking and opening up.

**Exercise patience.** Never rush the other person, especially if they are in emotional disarray at that moment and are simply looking to unburden themselves upon you. Oftentimes, they don't really need someone to offer them help or give them advice, but rather, someone who is just willing to listen. Allow them to gather their thoughts and feelings and articulate them in their own time. If they seem reluctant to talk, despite your encouragement, do not pressure them. Assure them instead that when they are finally ready to do so, you'll be there to listen. And when they do talk and you feel as though it is beginning to take a toll on your patience, just hang in there. Even though it may be trying for you, it could be very important for them to have someone to listen to. This is a good opportunity for you to build up your capacity for sympathy and understanding.

**While you listen, let your body do the talking.** You can't claim to be a great listener if your body tells the speaker otherwise. The slightest movement of your eyes can betray you more than your mouth and words ever could. Keep in mind as well that it is best to maintain eye contact more while you are listening than while speaking. Remember, too, that you can reassure the other person a thousand times over that you are all ears, but when you constantly avoid eye

contact or cross your arms, those gestures indicate that you're not really interested. Also, try to match your energy level and the volume of your voice to those of the speaker's to assure them that their message is getting across. For example, if they're positively high-strung and you're completely lethargic in your replies, then they won't be nearly as motivated to speak.

**Pick up on the other person's body language.** Learn to read between the lines. Sometimes there are things that are left unsaid, whether intentionally or not, and it's up to you to pick up on them. Is there something else they're not telling you? Is there a particular reason they may not be revealing it? Is it better left unsaid, or would the other person appreciate you bringing it to their attention? Be sensitive to, and perceptive of, the other person's own movements and facial expressions.

**Offer what you can.** If there is any way you can be of service to the other person, especially if they are hurting, confused, or indecisive, then offer to help. If the best you can do is just listen and be a shock absorber to the other person, that's okay, too. Anyway, it's better than promising to come up with a solution to their dilemma and giving them false hope, only to fail in your delivery.

**Do not judge.** Do not let any preconceived notions of the other person cloud your objectivity. Just allow them to tell their story without fear of being judged or criticized by you. If you must, put yourself in the other person's shoes and try to see things from their perspective. This does not mean, however, that just because you once went through the exact same thing they are talking about, you may already get ahead of the story and inundate them with suggestions or detail

every single step you took to solve the problem. Remember, what worked wonders for you may not necessarily bring them the same results. Instead, wait until the other person specifically asks for your input and advice. Listening, after all, is about understanding, more than anything. Let them know you care about them and what they have to say.

**Earn their trust.** Once the other person's poured their heart out to you, don't betray them by divulging to others what the two of you have discussed. Be a trustworthy confidant and keep everything confidential.

**Practice.** Each time there is an opportunity for you to apply these steps, grab it with relish, even if the person who's just approached you is someone you're almost always at odds with and you're fairly certain you'll only end up disagreeing on some point or other. Perhaps all it takes is a really good listen. Who knows? It might help you to get along better with them.



## **Chapter Sixteen**

# **READING AND COMMUNICATING WITH THE HUMAN BODY**

### **Your Body Language**

The three main components of body language are your eyes, face, and body.

Nothing says “I’m listening” quite like an expectant look. The eyes are called the windows to the soul, and they are able to express thoughts and emotions more eloquently in their silence and intensity than a long string of words. So make certain that what you are communicating with your eyes is of a positive nature. Maintaining eye contact with the other person is a sign of respect. You do not want to convey boredom, impatience, or even irritation by rolling your eyes, letting them droop, or allowing them to roam. Don’t keep your eyes preoccupied by reading the paper or checking your text messages while someone is addressing you directly. If, indeed, you are already doing such activities when you are approached, have the courtesy to stop and look up from whatever it is you are doing and give the other person your full attention. You may not realize it, but when you do so and accord them the proper and utmost respect, you in turn gain theirs.

Besides your eyes and mouth, the rest of your face is also powerful in transmitting nonverbal communication. So smile—always. And it has to be a genuine smile, one that reaches your eyes. You are so much more likely to be approached when you are smiling this way as it is a very warm and convivial

sight to behold. It signals that you are willing to engage in social interaction. On the other hand, when you do not smile, it makes you seem aloof or rather unapproachable, and people will have second thoughts before they do decide to strike up a conversation with you. You might also have a tendency to frown, even without meaning to, so it is very important that you be conscious of your own facial expressions at all times in order to adjust yourself accordingly.

The rest of your body, or your mannerisms, can be just as telling. For example, if you were to put your hands on your hips or tap your feet impatiently, the other person would hear, “Get it over with already” as loudly as if you *had* spoken it, even if your mouth hadn’t made a sound at all. If you would like the other person to open up to you, then you must first look welcoming rather than foreboding. Do not hunch your shoulders, cross your arms over your chest, cross your legs in front of you if you are sitting, or angle your body away from others as these might be taken to mean defensiveness or unwillingness to communicate. You could unknowingly be sending out signals that say, “Go away! Leave me alone!” Instead, keep your arms at your sides and your hands visible, unless you are standing and you shove them in your pockets, which could be taken to mean you are relaxed. Keep your posture open, upright, and unlocked. To exude yet more openness and warmth, use simple gestures like a hand over your firm handshake, sandwiching the other person’s hand in both of yours. A touch to the arm means you’d like for you and the other person to be closer. A touch to the face, neck, or waist means you are attracted to them.

What does your body tell people? What does it tell *you*? If you don't know, try talking in front of a mirror to see your facial expressions for yourself. If it's a full-length mirror, even better, so you get to study your whole body language patterns. How do you look when you're amazed or excited? Does the size of your eyes increase exponentially? Does your jaw drop to the floor? How about when you're displeased? Are your eyes then reduced to a pair of sinister slits? Do your emotions tend to get the better of you, so that you use rather forceful gestures and say things you end up regretting later on?

Admittedly, interacting with yourself isn't quite the same as communicating with a different person, so determining your own nonverbal signals this way may be less accurate in telling you what you need to know. A more ideal method would be to videotape yourself in an actual conversation (with the other person's consent, of course) and then play it back so you can analyze and dissect your every movement, especially the ones you aren't even aware of, so you'll know which ones to improve on, or which to eliminate. Or you could enlist the help of a close friend, someone who knows you intimately and is familiar with all your gestures and mannerisms, so they can point these out to you and maybe even give suggestions on how to correct them and keep your emotions in check. That way, you can keep a level head and will be less likely to mess up your intended message.

Basically, it all boils down to being honest. Say what you mean and mean what you say, and your body language will only reinforce this. Even though it's well and good to become more aware of your own body language and to try to

correct certain things, still, it's virtually impossible to control every single movement and muscle twitch. And even if you managed to do that, it would nonetheless look terribly fake. The solution? Be natural. Body language is supposed to complement your words, not be treated as a separate entity altogether. When you're too conscious about whether or not you're smiling properly, or you're too worried that your limbs have suddenly taken on a life of their own and simply refuse to do your bidding, you'll be far too preoccupied to actually communicate effectively. The best way to overcome this predicament is for you to state your meaning clearly and straightforwardly, emphasizing your point with the right and most natural and positive of gestures directed toward the other person so that they don't misread your body language. If you are merely trying to keep warm when you cross your arms, say so immediately to avoid setting yourself up for misinterpretation.

### **Their Body Language**

When a person looks you straight in the eyes, more often than not, it means they would like to get to know you more and are interested in what you have to say. But when they turn away or lower their eyes and even their head while you are speaking, it could mean a lot of things. They could simply be shy or timid and uncomfortable with meeting your gaze. This does not necessarily mean they are uninterested or aren't paying attention. They might still be looking at your face, though avoiding eye contact due to nervousness. If they refuse to face you squarely and are content simply to cast you a sidelong glance, this

could be a sign of mistrust. If they look away repeatedly and consistently, then maybe they just don't like you, plain and simple. But if their eyes won't tell you anything, maybe they make up for it by nodding intently at your words. If their head is tilted to one side, they are commiserating with you and assuring you of their sincerity. You can tell by the way their eyebrows are knitted and the way their eyes are narrowed that they are in deep thought or concentration and are trying to process and consider the information you are giving them. Other indications of this could be pursed lips and a creased forehead. Raised eyebrows could mean they do not agree with you. Eyes halfway closed could be suspicion. Looking upwards at the ceiling means thinking. Biting the lips is an anticipatory gesture and if they do this, they are probably waiting for you to give them your verdict, approval, or assent to what they've just said. Alternatively, they might also look away because they are distracted and something else is on their mind. You'll know a person isn't listening if you are speaking to a group and one of them seemingly drifts away, and at the sound of something you say that suddenly catches their attention, they will ask you to repeat what you've just said.

As for the other person's body, take note of where they place their arms and hands. As mentioned before, crossing the arms over the chest is a negative gesture that creates a barrier between two people trying to communicate. There should be no obstruction of the sort if it can be helped at all. If they hold their hands behind them, this could mean they are hiding something from you or they're not being entirely truthful. Take note of their posture as well. Is their back straight, chin up, and shoulders broad and open? This is an indication of

confidence and a readiness to open up and make friends. But just as shoulders hunched forward is a negative sign, a back that's too straight is hardly any better. This makes the other person look rigid and stiff as a board and come across as tense and very uneasy. If they lower their head, they could be unsure of their own words and explanations. Gestures like head scratching, nape rubbing, or feet shuffling are all signs of nervousness, embarrassment, or irritation. If you notice them mimicking your stance and movements, either they are sincerely interested in you, or they could be mocking you, or they could be practicing mirroring methods that they read about in a book on PNL. You'll have to rely on your own better judgment to discern the truth.

However, do not give full credence to body language alone. They might cross their arms in front of them out of habit or try to keep warm as well, and you might immediately come to the wrong conclusions about how unreceptive they are. They might yawn from time to time and you begin to believe you are boring them, when they might've just had very little sleep the night before. Poor posture might not necessarily reflect a lack of confidence and an unwillingness to converse, but could very well be the result of a physical ailment, injury, or exhaustion. Your mind should not go into such a whirl at the slightest nervous tic that you fail to catch the other person's words entirely. Even worse, scrutinizing their every movement down to the last hair follicle could make them self-conscious and give them a sense of being judged. If you know them fairly well and are quite accustomed to their mannerisms, then watch for when they do something rather uncharacteristic. It is that particular movement you ought to be

reading closely and carefully. If you think you may be getting the wrong idea about the other person's message due to discrepancies between what you hear from their mouth and what you see of their movements, seek to clarify the situation. Verify if you've understood them correctly. Sometimes, a person's body language just doesn't convey precisely what it is they truly think and feel.

## **Chapter Seventeen**

### **TONE OF VOICE, THE OTHER NONVERBAL INDICATOR**

In communication, nonverbal signals are far more compelling than mere words. One of these signals is body language. The other is your tone of voice. And like body language, tone of voice can heavily influence a person's meaning and can just as easily be misinterpreted, depending on pitch and volume. Pitch denotes highness or lowness, while volume concerns loudness or softness. And depending on the situation or environment (e.g., background noises) or even the person you are conversing with, you adjust your tone of voice accordingly. Your listener might be hard of hearing and will fail to catch what you're saying if your voice is too soft. If you end up shouting so they can hear you, it might backfire as they might think you're angry and yelling at them. Or you may think you have something interesting to say, but you can't figure out why your listener does not seem to share your enthusiasm. Perhaps you're so monotonous that the excitement of the subject is lost in the delivery. So how do you remedy such problems? It takes time and practice, but it's well worth the effort to develop a clear and pleasing voice.

But just what is the ideal tone of voice? Is it musical and mellifluous? Should it be deep and commanding like Darth Vader? Is it breathy or should it be more cheerful, friendly, and high-pitched? Desirable as all these qualities are, the perfect tone of voice for you is the one that can properly accentuate your message so that people understand you completely. The right tone of voice will make you a pleasure to listen to, because it'll be clearer and easier. Your



listener won't have to work hard to get what you mean. For example, if you speak harshly all the time and sound as though you're barking, even if what you're saying is 'Hello' or 'Good morning,' no one's going to want to hear it.

To work on this, first you must find out how your own tone of voice sounds. As in the case of body language, you could use a mirror to observe yourself as you speak. How do your mouth and tongue enunciate each vowel and consonant? Are your neck muscles tense or relaxed? Are you barely even breathing at all? Then you should record yourself: you could read a passage from a book or an article from a newspaper, or you could record an actual conversation with someone. Make sure you speak and sound as natural as possible. Then play it back and listen carefully. How do you sound? Is your voice expressive, or is it flat and dull? Do you articulate clearly, or do you mumble? Is your tone too high or low pitched, or in a pleasant mid-range? Is your voice well-modulated, or twangy, metallic or harsh?

If, indeed, you are monotonous, this can be fixed by adjusting your pitch to match important points in your conversation. Explore your range, go up and down the scales, and just exercise those vocal chords. Watch movies with speeches or monologues and observe how the actors deliver their lines and put emphasis in certain places. Try to emulate them and rehearse on your own. Once you're satisfied, try reading the same passage and recording yourself again. Are there any marked improvements in your tone of voice and inflection? Keep practicing till you acquire it for good.

Body language not only affects *what* you say, but *how* you say it. Try to remain calm and relax your throat, shoulders, chest, and abdominal muscles so that you are able to sound clearer and more pleasant and in control. Lower your volume the closer you are to your listener. If you are some ways off from them, speaking loudly will work, but it would be even better if you approached them before talking so that you don't have to yell in the first place. It's common courtesy, too.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

### **OTHER FACTORS IN SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION**

So far we've covered conversation and body language, and how the proper execution of these two factors ensures success when it comes to communication. But researchers from the University of Colorado at Boulder and Brigham Young University, while agreeing that words and gestures are indeed very important, note that they can still be often misinterpreted if the speaker's and listener's mutual behavior and interaction with one another, and even their location, are not taken into consideration as well. "Nonverbal communication, vocal conversation and the environment of personal exchanges play a large role in how people relate and communicate," says CU-Boulder communication department Professor Stanley Jones. A perfect example would be a workplace setting, where physical touch between colleagues, like a tap on the shoulder, could be taken to mean either, 'Thank you,' 'Congratulations,' 'You can do it,' or 'I'm very excited about that business deal.' Jones notes that physical gestures such as these could very well be misconstrued to mean something else entirely and inappropriately, unless accompanied by the right words and the right circumstances and environment. Also, both people in the exchange must be in sync with each other so that the intended meaning is communicated and received successfully.

As for a person's physical environment, the place, culture, and even accents ought to be taken into consideration also. Take hand gestures and symbols, for example. The peace sign is perfectly acceptable in a lot of

countries, but is actually offensive in England. A thumbs-up sign may be okay to you, but obscene to someone from Australia. In the US, the power stance is positioning your feet apart. In Japan, it's standing with the legs closed and arms at the sides. Looking people directly in the eyes, which is crucial in a conversation in many countries, may actually be considered rude and impolite in other societies. So if you suddenly find yourself in a different land with a whole new set of social taboos and unfamiliar practices, take the time to observe the locals. Watch how they communicate with one another. Italians, for instance, use their hands, arms, and shoulders a great deal when they talk and are very animated in their gestures. The Japanese, on the other hand, tend to be more reserved. Do as the locals do, and hopefully, you won't have to resort to confusing sign language in order to be understood.

Another important factor is what is known as proxemics, or the study of the relationships of individuals in terms of spatial distances, and their cultural and sociological aspects. We are an extremely territorial species, and that personal space that we establish around ourselves, and whether or not the other person violates it, greatly influences our responses and reactions. In other words, the distance you put between yourself and the other person is an indication of just how willing you are to converse. Leaning forward means you are very much interested in what they have to say and are inviting them to open up to you. But leaning too far forward violates their personal space and is an invasion of their privacy, and they will most likely react negatively to it. If you place yourself too far away, however, it could be interpreted in a negative way and you will appear

distant and uninterested. It would be very awkward, too, if the other person were seated and you were standing while the two of you converse, or vice versa.

## Conclusion

Despite technological advancements in the world today, there is no denying that interaction with our fellow humans is still very much a part of everyday life. “No man is an island,” as John Donne’s famous poem says, and we will always be presented with not only the chance to exchange mere words, but the opportunity to foster new relationships via conversation and communication.

The success or failure of our relationships with others depends on the way we communicate with them. In our families it is crucial that we express ourselves in such a way as to deepen our bonds with those who are dearest to us, and a lack of clear and respectful communication could lead to estrangement and heartbreak. In our jobs, whether we have a calm and productive relationship with our co-workers and whether we advance in our career or stagnate depends to a large extent on how adept we are at communicating. In whatever social situation we may find ourselves, the ability to communicate effectively will be a great advantage to anyone who possesses this skill.

Even if up until now you have not felt as comfortable as you would like in this important area, you must realize after reading this book that making good conversation is a skill that can be learned, just like any other skill. By following the suggestions and advice in this book with persistence and dedication, you can hone this important skill and become a master communicator in any situation.