

## 5 BUILDING HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIPS

### 5A1 Lesson — Increasing Meaningful Conversation

Conversation is a fundamental means of civilized communication. Thus, learning to articulate in a comprehensive and thoughtful way is critical to our social education and to building healthy relationships. This lesson teaches you, by design, a quality approach that will add pizzazz to any conversation, particularly topics to discuss, steps and priorities to consider, as well as courteous gestures to apply.

*"Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships he makes with others and what happens to him in the world about him." Virginia Satir, noted American author and psychotherapist. (1916 – 1988)*

#### CONVERSATION EQ

As mentioned in the summary, conversation is a fundamental means of civilized communication and, as such, a skill critical to our basic education. Learning to articulate well in conversation is not only about appearing intelligent and interesting to others, but more importantly, it's about revealing how thoughtful, diplomatic, and resourceful we are.

Building such skills improves our sense of composure and connection with those in our immediate circle of friends and family, as well as other people we encounter each day. It is an expression of kindness and a measurement of one's credibility. The more appropriately we are able to express ourselves as we communicate, the more approachable others consider us to be.

Observing the quality of our existing conversation skills is necessary to sharpen our self-awareness about them. Such investigation can help us to realize the need to improve and apply more advanced steps and guidelines. It is, thus, to our advantage to take inventory of how meaningfully we currently know how to converse.

We may feel relaxed and confident about our current level of skill, but if we take a look at the content, the *quality* of our contribution may instead appear rather lethargic and indifferent. Being aware of the dynamics of *meaningful* conversation and learning to apply the elements involved is a distinct personal and professional asset. Yet like learning to become a good writer, it takes educated direction and practice to build such skill.

An important aspect of understanding how to relate well with other people involves learning how healthy, well choreographed conversation comes together. To converse with a high conversation EQ, doesn't usually *just happen*. We can begin to improve our conversation EQ by developing a more delicate sense of what is involved and what is fitting. There is preplanning homework required, particular steps and guidelines to memorize and follow, as well as much detail to consider. In effective, well-choreographed conversation, there is an order of importance of what people discuss: meaningful questions to ask and comments to make.

To assist you in building more meaningful skills, we have organized lists of criteria, steps, and do's and don'ts, as well as other resources in this lesson that explain more detailed specifics of meaningful conversation. If you aren't used to it, preplanning and practicing to choreograph better conversation may be somewhat hard on your nerves, initially. But as with beginning any new positive endeavor, what's good for us emotionally is sometimes a bit hard on the nerves!

Conversation can be similar to the difference in difficulty of playing a game of checkers or chess. How well we do depends on which game we are trying to emulate playing. The difficulty in chess strategies obviously compares more closely to meaningful conversation strategies.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PREPARATION

Television personality, Barbara Walters, stressed the importance of *preparation* in her book, “How to Say Practically Anything to Practically Anybody”. She tells us that doing our homework is as essential for a successful party as it is for interviewing heads of state. She researches her own interviews and has more questions prepared than allotted time to ask them. To converse at our best, it holds similar preparation requirements.

Thoughtful preparation is essential, no matter whether we are conversing with friends, family, or casual acquaintances. This principle applies to people we’ve known all our lives or people we’ve just met. It makes no difference whether they are uneducated, mentally handicapped, geniuses, impressive professionals, big business executives, or heads of state.

The way we think, the things we say and the manner we say them does make a difference! We can add more meaning to our encounters by preparing to greet others warmly and contributing skillfully and courteously.

Although there are several elements to grasp, the number one golden rule of healthy conversation is never to monopolizing the conversation, whether it be about yourself or other interesting subject-matter. Healthy conversation should most frequently be an interchange of comments, back and forth as much as possible—sort of like a slow motion game of table tennis. It also requires applying the same navigational criteria we apply while driving—these include paying attention to our direction, being cautious, and acting courteously.

To improve our conversation EQ, we may wish to start by considering it a game of sorts that challenges us to monitor and to attain high scores on the items on the check-lists below. Realize that in the beginning, you may not score so highly, but should continue to improve as you practice gathering meaningful subject-matter and placing it where it fits well into the flow of conversation. To contribute toward healthier conversation, we must search for particular details and consider thoughtful gestures.

## PREPLANNING CHECK- LISTS

### Particular Details and Thoughtful Gestures to Consider Beforehand

- Try to pre-select meaningful questions to ask. Be sure to include things you remember or have noted that occurred in the other person’s life when you last connected, especially significant issues, events, and common acquaintances.
- Prepare to ask what has been going on in the other person’s life and make a point to record in your mind some highlights for future reference.
- Define and memorize interesting information to share in the conversation about your life, current events, or interesting things you’ve recently accomplished, learned, received, or shared.
- Review and consider other ways to show your interest and that you appreciate and care about the other person (e.g., complimenting, congratulating, honoring, respecting, thanking them).
- Consider sharing any articles, cartoons, jokes, and e-mails you receive or find that you think would be helpful or entertaining to others.
- Try to remember when and where you last saw the person and plan to ask or comment about how long ago it was and/or about the event.
- Perhaps ask the person to bring pictures of loved ones or recent travels.
- Take your camera for a friendly photo with each other, if it seems fitting.
- Exchange cell phone numbers when scheduling a visit, and place this information where you will remember to take it with you; this will come in handy should you realize the need to postpone the visit or to arrive late.

## More Tips to Help Prepare Your Mind for the Occasion

1. It may be helpful to inform the other person early on that you are studying *meaningful conversation* and to explain what you are trying to do in conversation as part of your practice and lesson homework.
2. You must remember and may also want to share that your role in conversation is not to be critical about what the other person does or doesn't ask you or bring to the conversation. This is of great importance.
3. Timely prepare for your arrival. Realize that there can be a self-centered bent about being untimely with others. Running late, however, is not something to make up for by speeding on the highway to get to our destination, either.
4. Be prepared to direct your thoughts meaningfully.
5. Remember, above all, to take turns and not to monopolize the conversation. Asking others questions and allowing their input should lessen this problem. If there are three or more people, be sure to include them in the conversation as well.
6. Remember to listen well to identify and note meaningful points to comment on later in conversation, for closing and/or to applying to your next conversation with the person.
7. Remember to listen well to their life situation and to assess and support their needs.
8. Remind yourself to listen for topic word associations. Points being brought up in conversation can remind you of other subject-matter to talk about. Often times, with less preparation ideas, these association points are the driving force of conversation.
9. Be sure to use similar navigational criteria we apply while driving—paying attention to our direction, being cautious, and acting courteously.
10. Similar to business, there are important particulars to define that people need to know and certain information it would be better not to share.
11. Timely review this lesson to assure quality content and flow.
12. Review of “2A2 Lesson—Avoiding Harmful Reactions to Emotions” may be helpful to extinguish any anger that may arise or improve your choice of words should you get into a situation where you need to critique something the other person does.

Without enough training in the appropriate etiquette guidelines of meaningful conversation, we can too easily approach conversation from a socially deficient standpoint and appear rather self-centered, backward, or uncaring. We may omit asking or suggesting meaningful points and valuable topics. We can forget important things going on in other people's lives and seem cool and indifferent by not inquiring. The other person can misinterpret our less educated mode of understanding about conversation as lacking attention, consideration, and friendliness.

## Steps to Meaningful Conversation with Family, Friends, and Acquaintances

We hope by now to have convinced you that it is important to acquire quality policies as to how you orchestrate your conversations, with particular emphasis on subject-matter. Weighing what is appropriate can sometimes require complex analysis, yet other times it may be just a matter of what seems practical. Overall, be aware of the conversation flow, taking care not to go off on a tangent, to discuss a topic too long, to change topics in the midst of discussion, or dwell on your own situation.

Depending on the length of the conversation, paying attention to the number of details involved in healthy conversation may be cumbersome. If helpful, excuse yourself for a BRIEF pause and go somewhere quiet to review the flow of the conversation and to note the highlights on paper. Noting, in writing, not only assures a documented record, but can also help make a stronger impression on the mind's memory channels.

Another helpful tool that can improve conversation is to create a written form or word processing file on a computer to note what's going on in each person's life after communicating. By reviewing the file frequently, it helps us remember specifics more easily to converse about during our next visit.

To experience a substantial difference in your conversation skills, study and memorize the “Steps to More Meaningful Conversation” listed on the following page.

## Steps to Meaningful Conversation with Family, Friends, and Acquaintances

Consider memorizing and frequently reviewing the following suggested choreography of meaningful content and flow to conversations:

- 1. Greeting with an Industrious Hello!**—Start conversations with an enthusiastic, “Hi, (their name), how are you!” or “Hi, (their name), Good or Great to see you!” You may not want to be the one who says “Good to see you.” if it’s possible that the other person may say “Great to see you!” So consider “Great to see you!” more seriously, with that in mind. If a male/female interchange, and you think that “Great to see you!” may give the person the wrong idea, stick to “Good to see you.” Allow the other person a moment to respond before considering step 2.
- 2. Concerns/Compliments**—If in person, consider whether there is anything different or unusually attractive about the way the other person looks. Complimenting or commenting in regard to a new hair style, weight loss, something striking they’re wearing, a sizable bandage, or a “Thank You” for a gift they brought for you elevates the conversation in a positive manner.
- 3. Concerns/Health issues**—Ask about recent health problems or other concerns, particularly if there are any you remembered to note from previous conversation or are aware of from other sources. Inquire as to others in the family or mutual friends with health problems or other concerns. Appropriate questions could include “How’ve you been since your surgery?” or “How’s your mother doing since her accident?” Perhaps add encouraging comments about the health issues as well.
- 4. Appreciation/Thanks**— Consider any “Thank you” acknowledgements for recent help, favors, courtesies, gifts, appreciations, and other niceties.
- 5. Asking/Telling about Others**—Ask and tell about family and mutual friends and/or acquaintances.
- 6. Asking/Telling about Upcoming Events**—Consider asking and telling about anything that is upcoming, perhaps an event that they’d enjoy.
- 7. Asking/Telling about Recent Experiences**—Consider asking and telling about recent highlights, such as travels, movies, hobbies, sports, new restaurants or recipes, people visited, as well as other experiences.
- 8. Encouraging/Uplifting Comments**—If the person is having a rough time, emotionally, due to events in their lives, encouraging and uplifting help and support would be meaningful. Perhaps you could interject motivational comments or encouragement to seek counseling assistance and/or related self-help reading material you are aware of.
- 9. Comments about Weather**—Whether bad or beautiful, hot or cold, sunny or rainy, it may spice up the conversation. Comments about the weather can be mentioned in the beginning or end of conversation or wherever it seems fitting to comment about it.
- 10. Comments about Holidays**—Consider mentioning holidays in the beginning or end and/or wherever it seem fitting within the conversation. Inquire about their plans and perhaps close with “Have a safe and pleasant holiday!”
- 11. Comments about News/Current Events**—Current events in the news provide fresh information to share and add to conversation. They are fitting to share in the beginning, if they are major catastrophes or very serious or exciting news items. Otherwise, it is less priority than the previous items listed here. Share local/national/international news, places you want to go, good restaurants you’ve learned about worth sharing, as well as movies, hobbies, sports, etc.
- 12. Internet Finds**—Certain Internet web-sites may be worth noting and sharing in conversation.
- 13. Humor**—Light-hearted comments should be considered at most any point in conversation, but shouldn’t be offensive or too subjective.
- 14. Close with Warm Comments**—While conversing, watch for something of value that is being discussed that would be a fitting reminder with which to close your conversation.. Tell people that you look forward to seeing or speaking with them again. If around a holiday, remember to consider commenting about it, in closing.

## **Important Conversation Do's**

1. Kindly acknowledge and recognize the other person – memorize the kinds of openings, questions/comments to consider in order of importance from the reference lists included in this lesson.
2. Memorize a reasonable repertoire of meaningful questions to ask and use them.
3. Pay attention to the order of questions and points you're making.
4. Listen for information to remember to inject again later in the conversation or remember for your next visit.
5. Look for ways you can mix a little humor into the conversation.
6. After asking a question and getting a response, expand on the appropriate to expand on the person's answer, without going too far! Give the other person time to comment further and/or ask a question of you, too.
7. Show interest in the other person by listening carefully and searching for points on which to respond - now or later.
8. Dignify the other person's conversation by asking meaningful questions that express interest in what they are saying.
9. Think before you speak. Keep your mind ahead of your mouth as much as possible.
10. Listen constructively for key points to catch, remember, and note on which to comment later.
11. Stop throughout the conversation to review! Even if it means excusing yourself to gather your thoughts elsewhere.
12. Ask questions to show further interest and be receptive to "cross questioning". When the other person asks, "Have you seen any good movies recently?", you'd want to respond in kind with, "What movies have you seen recently worth mentioning?".
13. Take pause in conversation to consider whether it is of value to ask or tell the person any other related things before changing the subject, and before closing the conversation. Again, if you don't seem to have a moment to get your thoughts together, perhaps excuse yourself to take a quiet moments to reflect and note what's meaningful to remember.
14. To assure and show understanding as well as to enhance the memory, paraphrase what was just said by the other person.
15. Be careful to keep secrets confided in you. Divulging secrets can easily damage relationships.
16. Read and learn more about conversation from books, articles, and the Internet.

### **Add more DO'S you learn or want to remember below:**

## Important Conversation Don'ts

1. Don't eat garlic/onion based foods, etc., if you know you are to meet and talk with others the same day or make it a point to take a breath pill or a breath mint.
2. Don't arrive late to meet someone or fail to respond in a timely manner after a person leaves you a message or contacts you in other ways. If you're going to be late, contact the person to inform them and to apologize.
3. Don't converse aimlessly. Pay attention to how the conversation is flowing.
4. Don't absorb the conversation. As mentioned earlier, it can appear as self-centered to speak excessively about yourself or to tell your own stories *ad infinitum*. Watch that you share time speaking more equally, as often as you can, much as in playing a game of table tennis.
5. Don't share rumors or gossip which divulge negative things about others.
6. Don't tell lies or exaggerate truths – dishonesty, like germs, can be microscopic, yet can have as strong effects emotionally as dangerous germs can physically. Dishonesty can sicken or kill our overall credibility in relationships and distance others from us.
7. Don't utter blunt, profane, rude, or sarcastic remarks. These aggressions may threaten our overall credibility and distance us from others.
8. Don't discuss problems you're having with other people, including your significant other. To blame or complain too freely appears negative. Information could also get back to the other person and damage that relationship. With serious concerns, it is best to share these problems with a psychologist or spiritual counselor.
9. Don't ever say "I told you so" to anyone you did tell. The person already remembers or feels the pain of their error enough, without such reminders.
10. Don't ever humiliate a person by talking negatively about them in front of others.
11. Tricky as it may be to listen, reflect on remembering valuable points and consider your own next words, be careful not to miss meaningful comments the other person says. Not paying attention to the details of others' conversation may reduce your own credibility level.
12. Remember that humor and other light-hearted subject matter may not be appropriate for such occasions as funerals, disasters, or other sad situations.
13. Don't make derogatory remarks or jokes about the opposite sex, different nationalities, religions, or political parties. Such remarks can make others feel uncomfortable and suggest feelings of superiority, machismo, or animosity.
14. Don't let your eyes roam. Eye contact is important in conversation.
15. Be careful not to get indifferent about how you are perceived and lose your sense of direction and credibility in conversation.

**Add more DON'TS you learn or want to remember below:**