



IMPROVING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH CONVERSATION

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By Tara Carr, Small Business Development Director at UW-Green Bay

It is difficult to start a conversation with someone you do not know when job searching, career networking or when it is that time of year to spend time with distant family and in-laws. Whether you are extroverted or introverted, the key to good conversation is caring about other people and taking a genuine interest in that person. Social confidence is a skill that can be learned and improved upon.

When conversing with an introverted person, keep in mind that it may take a bit of work to encourage them in a productive conversation. Introverts prefer deeper, meaningful discussion. Talking about the weather is not an ideal topic to converse with an introvert, as they avoid small talk. Ask an introvert their opinion or fact-find to learn more about their experiences or expertise. Introverts do not like attention drawn to themselves; therefore, communication cannot be loud, animated and boisterous.

Find balance in the conversation. If the conversation is all about you...that is not balance. Be aware of body language: crossed arms, facial expressions, voice tone, hand gestures, and eye contact. Pay attention to personal space, voice volume, and yes...bad breath. Don't talk too loud and don't stand too close. If the person you are talking to is backing up, then you are standing too close. If the person you are talking to talks softer and quieter, you are probably talking too loud.

Listening skills and making a connection are key to communication and positive conversation. Strong listening skills result in better personal relationships, higher customer satisfaction, less mistakes, greater productivity, and a more collaborative and creative work environment. Listening skills also have a direct correlation to the number and depth of friendships a person has and their level of confidence and self-esteem. Listening has a two-fold approach to communication: understanding the words and understanding the emotions and feelings being communicated. Listening can eliminate misunderstandings and reduce personal conflict. Paying attention, focusing on the speaker, being an active listener through nodding and smiling, and providing feedback by asking open-end questions are ways to improve listening skills.

Put the phone down! Be in the moment. Outside distractions, such as mobile phone usage, are barriers to listening, conversation killers, and very disrespectful. Distractions by a beeping phone, email checking, internet or social media surfing are annoying and frustrating. Typically, as these behaviors transpire, the conversation is shut down and over. If another situation needs your attention and resolution, communicate that to the individual; go take care of the situation and then return to the person to let them know you are ready to listen. Carrying on a meaningful conversation is not possible while watching TV, typing, or texting.

Multitasking and meaningful conversation cannot coexist. Our brain can only focus on one thing at a time, as a result, the conversation ends up as a failure and the relationship is damaged. If someone walks in your office, stop typing, make eye contact and listen. Make each person in your life a priority. Help them feel respected and valued by giving them your undivided attention.

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Self-awareness and how your words, behaviors and conversation approach affects others are important factors in effective communication. Making changes in communication by paying attention and being focused will build and enhance meaningful relationships.

Tips to Creating Conversation:

- ◆ Pay attention and listen to hear (not to respond).
- ◆ Do not interrupt. Interrupting sends a message that you are more important and do not have time for other opinions.
- ◆ Remove all distractions (phone, TV, computer).
- ◆ Be present.
- ◆ Actively listen by nodding.
- ◆ Be aware of your body language. Make eye contact. Smile.
- ◆ Ask for advice or recommendations. Have you read any good books or seen any good movies lately?
- ◆ Be aware of personal space and voice volume.
- ◆ Fact-find by asking questions:
 - ◆ “What do you mean by...”
 - ◆ “Can you tell me more about...”
 - ◆ “Wow that sounds like a stressful situation. How are you dealing with it?”
- ◆ Be positive and less opinionated. “What a great turnout for this event!” “Did you travel far to get here?” “Did you enjoy the speaker?”
- ◆ Ask open-ended questions: “How is your family?” “How is work?” “What new projects are you working on?” “Do you have any vacations planned this year?” “How about those Packers?”
- ◆ People typically like to talk about themselves and things that are important to them. Ask questions about their kids or hobbies.
- ◆ Try to find commonalities: “Someone mentioned that you kayak. Did you get a chance to kayak much this summer? Where is a good place to go kayaking in the area?”
- ◆ Introduce yourself. “Hi. I wanted to introduce myself... I’m Tara”.

Going out of your way to make someone else feel important goes a long way.

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The Wisconsin Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay is part of a statewide network of SBDCs working with business owners and entrepreneurs to facilitate business growth and improvement, and to launch successful new companies. The Small Business Development Center offers a variety of services: no-cost business consulting, customized business solutions, financial management, growth & strategic planning, and professional development training.