

New Associates A Special Report

It's More Than Chatter

Good conversational skills can help make, or break, a promising legal career.



BY OLIVIA FOX CABANE

In the 19th century, William Gladstone was running against archrival Benjamin Disraeli to be prime minister of England. The story is told that a young lady happened to dine on consecutive evenings with each man, and the press asked what impressions the rivals had made.

She said: "After dining with Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest person in England. But after dining with Mr. Disraeli, I thought I was the cleverest person in England." Can you guess who won the election of 1874?

The importance of good conversation skills cannot be underestimated. They will help in your everyday contacts with people inside and outside your firm. They are particularly important in your first few years, when you don't yet feel like an expert on anything.

HOW TO STAND OUT

If two of your senior partners are chatting and you've somehow wound up with them, instead of thinking, "Oh, it's not my place to say anything; I'm not important enough to speak," you need to shine. This is what will get you noticed. It's an important rung on the ladder to partnership, since people skills are often deemed just as important as the quality (or quantity) of your work. As your level of client contact increases, these skills will become all the more important: You need to be able to converse with a Texan chief financial officer just as easily as with a Japanese scientist.

Conversation skills are not a question of wit, wisdom, or wordplay. In fact, they all boil down to one thing: attitude. All you need to become an outstanding conversationalist is to decide to regard your conversation partner as the most interesting person you've ever met. If you change nothing else from your habits than this one item, your conversation skills will already increase tenfold.

According to Dale Carnegie, "You can make more friends in

two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." Bill Clinton is said to make anyone he's speaking with feel that he or she is the most important person in the room. Disraeli's genius was in making whomever he was speaking with feel intelligent and fascinating.

If you want to make people feel this way around you, all you need to do is focus the conversation on them—and keep the spotlight on them for as long as possible. What one thing captivates human beings more than anything in the world? Themselves, of course! One person's headache matters more to him than all the famines of humanity. "Talk to a man about himself and he will listen for hours," Disraeli said. Actually, the longer you keep people talking, the more captivating they'll find you.

The easiest way to keep them talking is to ask questions, preferably upbeat and open-ended ones. Closed questions, once they are answered with a yes or no, land you right back where you started—and you'll have to think of another question to keep the conversation going. Upbeat questions are important, too, because people tend to associate you with whatever feelings your conversation generates.

Ideally, you want to ask questions that will make people dive into their memories. When somebody searches through recollections to share something with you, he'll feel as though you can hear, feel, see, and taste the things he's remembering, which creates a sort of instant intimacy.

A good question in this vein is, "Where are you from?" No matter what the answer, it will give food for further questioning. Whether it's New York, Norfolk, or Albuquerque, if you're not from that area, you can follow up with, "What was it like growing up there?" The smaller the town, the more delighted the person will be that you express any interest in it. And if you happen to be from the person's hometown, rejoice—you now have much in common to talk about.

Any question about their past, near or far, is thus the simplest way to get people to take a stroll along memory lane. If you're

in a social setting, you can ask them about their last vacation. If their answers are a bit short, if they need prodding, if they're a bit shy, you can use the "echo" technique—simply repeat their last words back to them with an interrogative tone of voice. For instance, if they say, "We went white-water rafting," reply, "White-water rafting?" and make sure both your facial expression and tone of voice convey your interest. This technique has the same effect as an "extender" question such as "Really?"

In a business setting, you can ask people how they got started in their career and what the early days were like. When they reach their present situation, to bring out more good feelings, you can ask what they like most about their job. You can ask them to share stories with you—the wildest request they ever received from a client or the strangest situation their job put them in—since people like telling stories. You can also ask them to forecast the future of their field or to reflect on its evolution.

But you can't just let them talk, and zone out. You need to show that you're truly listening and understanding. So while you listen, pay attention to small details. For instance, if a man mentions his daughter's swim meet, allude to it further in the conversation (or better yet, during another conversation several days later). The same way, when people tell a story, pay rapt attention, and be ready to pick up the thread if they're interrupted.

When a speaker is disturbed, few really notice the interruption—except the speaker. Everybody else forgets that the tale was not completed, but the speaker will probably regret that he didn't get to finish. If you turn toward him and ask for the rest of the story or, better yet, remember where he was and then ask, "So, what happened after that?" he'll be full of appreciation for you as the spotlights swivel to him once more.

Of course, you're going to do some speaking, too. But even when you're speaking, try to translate everything into the listener's terms by starting as many sentences as you can with the word "you." Instead of saying, "The O'Dwyer newsletter has some great tips on that subject," say, "You'll find great tips on the subject in the O'Dwyer newsletter." You should (see how well it works?) also focus on your conversation partner's fields of interest and choose images and analogies from these domains.

If he's into golf and you want to talk about success, speak of hitting a hole in one. If he sails, talk about finding the best course or staying afloat. Listen to the words people use, and mirror them. You also want to use the word "we" as much as you can. This will create a certain feeling of closeness, of "us versus the rest of the world." For instance, "How do you feel about the market? Do you think we're going to get out of this slump?"

Remember, it's all about them, their lives, and their needs, so spend as little time as possible speaking about yourself. The worst mistake you can make is to try to sell yourself, your services, your practice group, or your firm to a contact in the beginning. This is the fastest way to ruin a business relationship before it even begins. Instead decide that your goal is to contribute your time, talents, and expertise to your conversation partners. This "givers gain" attitude has direct benefits; by showing the person you're speaking with that you truly want to help, you set in motion the "rule of reciprocation," and that person feels driven to help you in return.

Throughout the conversation, take note of any difficulties he mentions, or any issues he's facing, about which you may know something. Recommend resources or books; offer to introduce your new contact to someone you know or to someone in the room you think he should meet. Aim to provide as much value as you can, and use the back of your business card to write this information—this ensures that your card will be kept and treasured.

Whatever happens, don't waste a thought worrying about how smart or dumb you sounded or how witty you were (or weren't). In the final analysis, what people will remember is not what was said—after all, less than 20 percent of information is transmitted through words—but how it felt to be talking to you, the emotional imprint of the conversation. As long as you keep the spotlight on others and make them feel like stars, the emotional imprint of the conversation will be simply splendid.

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