

Some 'Bigger Picture' Thoughts on Making Conversation

Most of the advice on making conversation I've come across focuses on what to say and how to say it. You know: make eye contact, ask open-ended questions, be a good listener, be up-to-date on current news and events, avoid loaded topics, etc.

I'm going to pull back and look at some of the 'bigger picture' factors that can affect how easy it is to talk to others. I'll give some 'bigger picture' advice on making conversation as well.

There are factors that help or hinder a conversation before it starts

When it comes to social interactions I'm a big believer in the idea of 'the outcome of a battle is decided before it even starts'. When you chat to a co-worker or a friend at a party, many of the factors that determine how well the conversation will go are already in place. Some of them are:

- Your basic personality, skills, interests, knowledge, outlook on life, etc.
- How you come across to people and the overall impression you make. This will determine things like whether people want to talk to you, for how long, the attitude they bring to the table, topics they'll bring up or avoid, etc.
- How eager the other person is to talk to you. Related to the point above. They decide this on their impression of you, their previous experience with you, their previous experience with similar people, any preconceived notions they have about you, etc. Also included here are things beyond your control like what kind of mood they're in, etc.
- Whether you have anything in common with or to talk about with the person.
- Whether you're off-putting or intimidating to the other person in some way. Things like being very good-looking, having a higher career or social status, or having a certain reputation can intimidate people. Things like having a bad attitude, being awkward or creepy, and bad dressing and grooming habits will put people off you. When people are intimidated or put-off by someone they tend to be more tongue-tied.

Conversation flows out of who you are as a person

You're your own conversation generator. Someone who is sociable, knowledgeable, witty, and interested in a lot of things will naturally have better conversations than someone who is defensive, doesn't like many people, and who has narrow interests. If you think of good conversations you've had, you never really had to think of what to say, it all just popped into your head from your reservoir of personality, knowledge, and past experiences.

How you present something is as important as what you talk about

Someone who's naturally funny/insightful/a good story teller/etc. can take the same basic material as someone else and, as if they're running it through a filter, make it more interesting.

Conversations don't have to have any goals or proper progression

Reading some other advice on making conversation, you can get the impression that they have a certain structure and goal. Like first you must make small talk. Then you must move deeper. The goal is to get the know the person and connect with them.

That's definitely true at times, but often talking to people is just fun for its own sake. Shooting the bull and joking around or talking about something interesting is also just preferable to being bored at work or standing around and not talking. I have friends I've never really 'connected' with. We just hang out and joke around and chat about random superficial topics that interest us. It's still fun though.

Having something in common you both want to talk about is a big key to conversing easily

The key phrase is 'that you both want to talk about' so if possible try to find a common interest and then start chatting about that. Most people can talk freely and easily about something that interests them because

can talk freely and easily about something that interests them because they have a lot of knowledge/opinions/questions about it floating around in their minds. They don't have to think about what to say, for most possible tangents they already have a couple of things ready to go.

I think it's practical to know a little about a lot of topics, especially things other people tend to be interested in and are likely to bring up. Even if you can't have an in-depth conversation about a certain area, being able to chat about it for a minute or two can earn you points. Like you may not know everything about a certain t.v. show, but having a factoid or two about it to bring up may help a conversation go more smoothly.

Another key is being comfortable with the other person

You'll have trouble thinking of things to say if you're not comfortable with someone or their type of person. When you're familiar with someone the words flow much more easily.

If certain types of people make you uncomfortable then you can aim to understand and get used to them. You can do this by hanging around them or by digesting the types of experiences that they've had (e.g., if you want to understand the slick salesman types at your job then read a few books on sales and marketing to get a better idea of how they see things).

It's not unusual to feel a little nervous and on the spot when you first start talking to someone new. If you hang in there and don't expect too much of yourself in the first minute or two, you'll usually start to relax.

Read, read, read, learn, learn, learn

The more random stuff you have floating around in your head, the easier it is to chat with people. If you have enough stuff stored away in your brain then pretty much anything someone says will remind you of something you can contribute. A couple of times I'll have been reading about some obscure topic earlier in the day out of my own interest only to have it come up in a conversation that very night. So read new books and articles. Expand your knowledge. Have interesting experiences in your life.

That *je ne sais que* lack of rapport with people

We've all been in conversations where there's just an awkwardness in the air that you can't quite put your finger on. Talking to the other person is like pulling teeth.

- Often this lack of rapport is because the two people are put off by each other in some subtle way. They perceive each other to have values or traits that they don't like.
- This can also happen when two people don't like each other but are forced by their circumstances to be in close contact.
- It also sometimes happens when two people seem superficially similar, but on a more subtle level are actually from different worlds.

This concept is a bit hard to explain, but one place where you can see it yourself is in office environments between the people who make the products (R&D, Programming, Tech Writing) and the people who sell them (Sales, Marketing).

Again, if there are certain types of people you have trouble talking to, try to get in their shoes and see where they're coming from. No one is really that bad once you get to know them.

Take the attitude that you will have to pull most of the weight in the conversation

If you're half-decent at talking to people this is often true. Many people are awkward at making conversation to one degree or another. It also puts the onus on you to develop your conversational skills and become more interesting.

Don't worry too much about the technical details

If the bigger picture factors are solid then you can get away with a lot when it comes to the little technical details. As long as everyone involved is happy with the interaction there aren't many hard-and-fast little rules you always have to follow. For example, for most of my life I had a bad habit of not making eye contact with people. This continued on for years even as I improved other aspects of my social skills. It would have been better if I did make eye contact, and I eventually learned how to, but I still got by and had several successes without it.

Making artful segues are another thing you can often ignore. Just going ... "Oh yeah..." or "...oh, I just remembered..." is fine as long as they don't come totally out of left field.

Even lulls and long silences are no biggie;

- Sometimes people just come to the end of a tangent and they both have to take a second to figure out what to say next.
- Everyone may just want to be quiet and relax for a second.
- A particularly interesting or profound point may require both people to pause and digest it for a moment before it sinks in.

Not every conversation can go perfectly

I've read my share of advice on making conversation and in a lot of it is this implicit message that the ideal is to be able to talk to anyone at any time. I think if you're a good conversationalist you can hit pretty close to this mark, but realistically you can't win them all. Sometimes you're going to talk to someone and it's just going to be awkward and stilted, or you won't have much to say to each other. Maybe it's your fault, maybe theirs, maybe the circumstances, or some combination of the three. There's no need to be hard on yourself if you can't have a sparkling conversation with every last person you meet. This is especially true if you just want to be somewhat better at talking to people than you are now, but don't feel any need to be a social kung-fu master.

Obvious lesson one more time:

Take a look at yourself and see if there are any bigger picture factors you can improve to make future conversations go better.

People who have trouble with conversations often have trouble in these areas. Ask yourself:

- Is there anything about your personality or attitude that could use a tune-up?
- Could you improve the impression you give off to other people, perhaps by improving your look?
- Are you so socially inexperienced that you're uncomfortable and unfamiliar with most types of people?
- Are you so socially inexperienced that you're too lacking in commonalities with most people in terms of implicitly shared knowledge, life experiences, and what not?
- Could you benefit from knowing more things, or a wider range of things, or having more life experience, so you'd have more to talk about?

In other words, get your act together overall and the details will start to work themselves out.

A final random thought: In books and articles about making conversation, why are the example phrases they give you always so long?

You know, they'll say things like: "It's important to ask open-ended questions. A good tip is to ask about a current topic in the news such as:

I was reading the paper the other day and I saw an interesting story. It explained that the fallout from the United States government's nuclear bomb testing in Nevada in the 1950's is still in the soil and may be causing Hispanic women in their 30's and 40's to be more likely to have pulmonary problems. What do you think about nuclear fallout and its consequential environmental impact on subsequent generations?"

Why not keep it brief and say something like: "Did you read that fallout story? What do you think???"