

By Larry King

World-Class Communication

What I've Learned from Interviewing
the World's Most Influential People



Would you would rather be Indiana Jones in a pit filled with snakes than sit next to someone you don't know at a party? Have you ever had a problem with giving presentations in front of a crowd, and not even picturing them in their unmentionables helps? Or maybe you have a brilliant idea that you want to pitch to your boss but you get nervous when you try to explain it?

I talk for a living and it's always been something that I loved to do. My pals even nicknamed me "The Mouthpiece" because they know how much I love talking! However, I used to get anxious about talking, afraid of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time or giving a speech in front of lots of people or worried that I would run out of things to talk about.

It was my life's dream to be in broadcasting, and when I finally got my big break, I froze up like an iceberg! I was terrified, and under a lot of pressure, but somehow I managed to muddle my way through my first broadcast and learned one very important thing: I needed to get better at this. So I practiced and practiced, and then practiced some more, learning anything and everything I could about what makes for good conversation.

I've now been in broadcasting for over 60 years and it's my goal to share what I've learned in that time with folks like you who want to improve communication skills—whether you want to improve your communication ability in the workplace, or just to become a better conversationalist in social settings.

Maybe you struggle to communicate with your family and friends. Maybe your words aren't coming out the way you like, and you want to express your thoughts more clearly. Maybe you're having troubles talking to your boss, or communicating your ideas with your employees and co-workers. The struggle to communicate effectively with the people around you is the reason I wrote this book. I want to share the communication tips I've learned that helped me turn my weaknesses into my strengths.

It's my hope that this book will start you on the path of being a fearless conversationalist—because you can talk with confidence when you have the right tools. Just by developing a few small communication habits, you will be ready to talk to anyone, anytime, and anywhere!

Conversation Basics

Talking is something every person can do just by wagging their tongue to form words, but it takes an understanding of the fundamentals and a lot of practice to do it well. Even those who are considered good speakers need to work to develop their ability.

So what are some basic principles to keep in mind when we find ourselves faced with a situation where conversation doesn't come easily?

Honesty

My debut into the world of broadcasting went less smoothly than I expected. I suddenly found myself in the booth one day when the morning deejay quit, enthusiastic about finally getting my big break. I played my theme song, and then when the time came for me to speak into the mic, no words came out. This repeated a few times, then my new boss kicked open the door to remind me this was a communications business and to communicate. The only thing I could think to say was this: “Good morning, this is Larry King. Fifteen minutes ago they gave me a new name and this is the first time I ever said it. This is my first day ever on the radio. I’ve always wanted to be on the air and I’ve been practicing all weekend, but my mouth is dry, I’m nervous and the general manager just kicked open the door and said ‘This is a communications business, so communicate.’” It wasn’t the debut I had dreamed of, but saying something gave me the confidence to say more.

I learned something valuable that morning: be honest. Arthur Godfrey once told me how to be a successful broadcaster, reminding me of the importance of letting your listeners and viewers share in your experiences and emotions. You can never go wrong in letting them share in your struggle because not only will it help you feel better, but now everyone knows your situation or dilemma and suddenly they’re all in your boat. They share in what you are experiencing and can relate to you, understanding any mistakes you might make.

The Right Attitude

When it comes to talking, the right attitude is all about the will to talk and to get better at it. After my unfortunate case of “mic fright”, I decided that not only was I going to keep talking, but I was going to improve. I took every opportunity I could find to talk on the air, making it my way of getting some extra “batting practice.”

There is a lot that you can do to sharpen your skills. Talking out loud to yourself or to your pets around the house can be helpful in working out how you want to say something. If there is a joke you might want to use in a speech, or if you want practice saying something off the cuff, it helps to say it out loud. Sometimes when you say it out loud, it doesn't sound the same as it did in your head, and you can think about better wording.

Standing in front of a mirror and talking to your reflection is a common technique used by people trying to improve as public speakers. This same technique works for everyday conversation, too. Talking into a mirror trains you to make eye contact as you look at your own image and gives you the chance to get your tongue around awkward wording or pronunciation so you can avoid stammering later.

The key is the willingness to work on it.

Interest In the Other Person

Looking your conversation partner in the eye and showing them respect goes a long way in being a good conversationalist—and you haven't even opened your mouth yet! Listening intently, asking questions and being interested in what the other person has to say will lead to great conversations.

Finding common ground with the other person or discovering a subject of interest can take a little time, but something important to keep in mind is that everyone is an expert on something. Asking questions will uncover that special topic your partner loves to discuss, and showing that you respect their expertise and insights will make the conversation enjoyable for both of you.

Here's a little hint: asking "Why?" is a great way to deepen the conversation. Asking people "Why?" opens the door to the other person and lets them know that you care about what they think. People know if you don't respect them or what they are saying. When they feel like you do respect them, they'll probably listen more when you talk, and enjoy the conversation more as a whole.

Openness About Yourself

I like to follow The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you... in conversation. You should be as open and honest with your conversation partners as you'd want them to be with you.

Being open (even a little vulnerable) with the people you are talking with builds trust. Opening yourself up doesn't always come naturally, but it gets easier the more you do it.

Of course, this doesn't mean you should talk about yourself the whole time, or reveal your more personal secrets. Would you want to hear about your neighbor's kidney stones or your co-workers problems with his in-laws? Probably not. So don't open up about everything. You may have met people that share too much personal information too soon, and this over-sharing can make people uncomfortable. Asking yourself, "what would I like to know from someone else?" is a good way to find the right balance between sharing too much and too little.

So, what are some safe, interesting topics to talk about? Telling people of your background, your likes and dislikes, and other general things about yourself is almost always a safe bet. This is what makes up the give and take of the conversation. As you learn about the other person, you can ask further questions and go from there.

Breaking the Ice and Socializing

Whether you are at a social gathering or a professional function, one of the first things you need to accomplish as a conversationalist is putting the other person at ease. It's easier said than done—especially when you're talking to someone you have never met before. Most people are naturally shy, so putting someone else at ease when you are in need of the same thing can feel awkward.

Overcoming Shyness

One of the best ways I know to overcome shyness is to remind myself of the old saying: the person you are talking to puts their pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else. It's a cliché, I know, but it's still true.

We're all human beings, so just because you might be talking to a genius scientist with more degrees than you have fingers or an astronaut who has flown in space at thousands of miles per hour doesn't mean you should get the jitters. Whether you feel equal or not, the other person will enjoy the conversation more if they see you are enjoying it too.

Another thing you can keep in mind is that very few were born to a life of privilege and success, so your conversation partner probably started life out in much the same way as you did. You don't need to feel inferior or intimidated, because you belong in that room just as much as they do.

How do we put people at ease when they are much shyer than we are? By getting them on comfortable ground, usually by asking them about themselves and finding that subject that really gets them talking. It goes back to the "everyone is an expert on something" approach and asking questions to find that subject they like to talk about.

Here's a little secret you probably already know: People love to talk about themselves. Benjamin Disraeli once said, "Talk to people about themselves and they will listen for hours." Asking your conversation partner about themselves gives you something to talk about, and they'll consider you a brilliant conversationalist.

Good Conversation vs Great Conversation

So when you are talking to someone at a social gathering, how do you keep the conversation going? First, avoid yes or no questions. They are the killers of good conversation because they produce answers with only one or two words. It can bring a potentially interesting subject of conversation to a quick end.

- “Isn’t this hot weather awful?”
- “Do you think the New York Rangers will win the Stanley Cup this year?”

But if you ask them in more substantive terms that require an expanded answer, the conversation will keep flowing.

- “All the hot summers we’ve been getting make me think there might be something to this global warming business, but then we get unseasonably cold winters. What do you think?”
- “I grew up in Brooklyn and I sure do enjoy watching the New York Rangers play hockey. I admit, they could use some rebuilding, and Detroit is a real threat. What do you think the Rangers’ chances to win the Cup are this year?”

The person you are talking to can’t answer with only one or two words, and they will generate a lengthier answer. This lengthier answer will prompt further questions and thus produce a better conversation.

Asking “Why?” or “How?” is another tactic that can produce further details when speaking on a topic, particularly a topic your conversation partner has some level of expertise in. Not only does it require expanded answers and explanations, but it can also open up new topics and lead to more questions.

The First and Most Important Rule of Conversation

LISTEN.

I can't stress this enough. I've realized over my many years of talking that when I am talking, I'm not listening. And, when I'm not listening, I don't learn a thing. You might realize already how little people listen by how often you have to repeat yourself.

If you aren't listening any better to the people you're talking to, you can't expect them to listen any better to you. On the other hand, if you listen attentively to someone, they will show an equal interest in what you're saying.

To be a good talker, you must be a good listener. When you're an intent listener, you're better able to respond to what the other person saying.

8 Ways the Best Talkers Win People Over

Most successful people are also successful talkers and, thankfully, talking well is a skill that can be developed and improved. So what are some of the things that these successful talkers do that make them such great conversationalists?

- 1.** Great talkers consider things from a new point of view, taking unanticipated opinions on subjects. It might be something out of left field, but it gets the people around them thinking in a different way and offers a new perspective to consider.
- 2.** Greater talkers can discuss a wide range of issues and experiences beyond their own daily lives. They ask questions and listen intently to the experiences of others, sharing in them.
- 3.** Great talkers are enthusiastic, showing a passion for what they're doing with their lives, and an interest in what their conversation partner is saying to them at that moment. Their enthusiasm, and how they share it with others, makes them interesting conversationalists.
- 4.** Great talkers don't spend the whole conversation talking about themselves. They will share things about their lives and experiences, but after revealing something, they turn the question around to ask their conversation partner the same thing, keeping the conversation flowing.
- 5.** Great talkers are curious and often ask "why?" They want further details and explanations on what their partner is saying to them.
- 6.** Great talkers empathize—putting themselves in the other person's place to relate to what the other person is feeling, not just the words they are saying.
- 7.** Great talkers have a sense of humor, and they don't mind using it on themselves. In fact, the best conversationalists frequently tell stories about their own mishaps. It isn't forced, but something that fits naturally into the conversation.
- 8.** Great talkers have their own style of conversation. They are true to themselves. At the end of the day, you can't control whether other people like you or not. Your best chance at connecting with another person is just to be yourself. That may be the best advice I can give you: **JUST BE YOURSELF.**

Public Speaking and How to Survive It

Public speaking is a legitimate fear for a lot of people, ranking right up there with spiders and clowns. Some people think there is a special trick to being able to stand and deliver in front of others. The truth is, there's nothing "secret" about successful public speaking. The key is to just remind yourself that public speaking is just another form of conversation. In some ways, it's even easier than conversation because you're in complete control of what's being said, and don't usually need to worry about being interrupted.

Preparation

The motto of the Boy Scouts is this: Be Prepared. The same goes for public speaking, be prepared! The structure of a speech breaks down into three very simple parts:

1. Tell them what you're going to tell them.
2. Tell them.
3. Tell them what you just told them.

If you let your audience know where you are going with the speech right from the beginning, they'll have an easier time following you. Then at the end, you can summarize your most important points in different words from your introduction.

If your speech is on a topic you know well, there isn't a lot of preparation or research required. If you are less familiar with the subject, you'll need to spend some time doing your homework.

When it comes to writing the speech, some people like to write it out word for word and read it, while others use an outline with bullet points. Some use full sized paper, others use file cards. The details are your preference, but the key thing you need to remember is to practice, practice, practice!

During your speech, be sure to make eye contact with the audience, rather than gluing your eyes to the pages in front of you. A mirror works great to practice this, or you can practice with a family member or co-worker acting as your audience.

Also, keep in mind as you rehearse that your speech may take more or less time than you expected while writing it. Practicing ahead of time will help you to adjust your speech to fit into the time allotted.

Other Tips for Public Speaking and Presentations

1. Know the pacing of words and the inflection you want to use in your speech. Some public speakers will underline or highlight the words they want to emphasize, and this will help keep your audience engaged, not dozing off from the monotone voice.
2. Stand up straight. I don't mean assuming a soldier's at-attention posture, but standing comfortably. Conversely, avoid hunching over the podium. Not only does it prevent you from breathing properly, but it just looks terrible.
3. If there's a microphone in front of you, have it adjusted to the proper height. You don't want to have to stoop or crane your neck to speak into it. And, speak at a normal volume within range of the mike.
4. Use humor. Avoid the clichés of announcing your jokes and the assumption that everyone will love it. Tailor your jokes and funny stories to your audience and give them a way to connect the joke with their own experiences by making it something they can relate to.
5. Use plain English and avoid trendy talk and jargon. You want to be understood, and speaking in your personal style will make it easier for your audience to relate to you. However, it should be noted that if your natural speech is full of various four letter words, you might want to curb your usual talk in order to keep your audience comfortable. It's better to err on the side of decorum in your speech because, if your audience is uncomfortable, they won't be listening to what you are saying.

The Most Valuable Skill in the World

Let's face it—no matter what job we have, whether the boss or subordinate, we need to be effective and skillful talkers to be successful. If we want to connect with new and interesting people, we need to master the skill of talking well. If we want to have great relationships with our family, friends, or spouse—talking well is crucial.

Regardless of whether your goals are professional or social, the ability to talk well will lead you to opportunities that you would never have found otherwise. I can't tell you how many times being a skilled communicator has given me the chance to make connections that I couldn't have imagined I'd make—from pro athletes to presidents and everything in between. I look back over my years and I'm still in awe that this is my life, and I know that all my successes came down to one thing: communicating well.

What if I'd never learned to communicate well? Would I have interviewed over 60,000 people from across the globe? No way. I would have missed out on my biggest goals and dreams. My life would be unrecognizable from what it is today. Now I must ask you, what opportunities might you be missing out on if you don't learn to master communication?

Final Thoughts

There's always more to learn about talking. I've spent my whole life talking and I still manage to find new ways to improve. We can always practice and always get better, achieving the success and confidence that comes with it.

Talking should never be a thing we fear, or feel like an exhausting obligation. Talk shouldn't just be a simple way of "fill the time." Talking and communicating well really is the most valuable skill in the world. It's the greatest way we can connect with the people around us.

Regardless of your current ability, remember these two things: If you feel like you aren't very good at communicating, you can be better. And, if you feel like being a great communicator is impossible for you, think again! My life is proof that you can master the skill of communicating well, no matter where you start.

Keep talking my friends!

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