

Conversation

Self-Coaching Guide

How can I talk to others better?

Most people find talking to others a challenge, particularly if we don't know them. This can cause us to have anxiety at work and socially. To achieve our life and career goals we need to be able to talk to others meaningfully. Improving our conversation skills is a lifetime endeavour which can benefit significantly our life and career. Research into conversation has led to the development of the **TALK** framework which describes four key practices to help us improve our conversation skills.

1) **Topic selection.** Good conversationalists proactively manage the content and flow of the discussion through preparation, flexibility, awareness, and empowered topic switching.

This can be hard because:

- We don't always know what others want to talk about
- We tend to talk about obvious and immediate topics, e.g. weather, family, work
- We're overly hesitant to switch topics due to politeness and could go on with topics too long
- We're bad at coming up with new topics in the moment

We can become better by:

- Preparing a list of topics before your conversations; these might be different for different types of people
- Being willing to switch topics more readily when there's a lull in the conversation

2) **Asking questions.** Good conversationalists use questions to lower people's defences, build trust and empathy, improve information exchange, increase their likability, and create a good impression.

This can be hard because:

- We are self-centred and we forget to ask questions
- We don't want to appear overly intrusive, insensitive, rude, or even incompetent
- We believe making statements is better than asking questions
- We worry it could reveal our ignorance or something about ourselves, e.g. not listening properly

We can become better by:

- Asking more and better questions as this improves communication
- Asking more follow-up questions as this shows we are not only listening but also interested, helping the conversation to go deeper rather than on to the next topic
- Avoiding asking a question to create an opportunity to bring the conversation back to yourself after the response
- Focusing on just learning more about the other person instead of trying to impress them

3) **Levity.** Good conversationalists use humour which makes them look more confident and competent.

Attempting to inject jokes is liked by others as they appreciate our courage in trying. If our joke is seen as appropriate and others laugh, it can make people regard us better. We can become better by:

- Having a good sense of humour; being serious without being solemn

PTO.

More Information

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- Being ready to include humour and laugh at others' humour
 - Avoiding using humour at someone else's expense and unintentionally insulting or undermining someone else's confidence, e.g. backhanded compliment
- 4) **Kindness**. Good conversationalists understand the importance of:
- **Reflection**: Thinking about people when they are apart so they can help them when they get together
 - **Receptiveness**: Accepting opposing viewpoints, disagreeing, and still wanting to discuss them
 - **Responsiveness**: Showing they're listening and having genuine curiosity about what others are thinking and feeling in the moment, not just through nonverbal cues like nodding and smiling, but through meaningful verbal cues like paraphrasing and asking follow-up questions

Performing the four key practices of the **TALK** framework only comes from regular practice, observation and reflection. (See **Conversation Practice** exercise below).

Finally, here is what research seems to be saying about introverts and extroverts:

- Although introverts may struggle with conversation in groups, they are often more confident in one-to-one situations where they can perform well
- Although extroverts may seem to be good conversationalists, they can often be less responsive regarding how others are thinking and feeling in the moment

"Perhaps the best conversationalist in the world is the [person] who helps others to talk." John Steinbeck

Conversation Practice Exercise

Performing the four key practices of the **TALK** framework only comes from regular practice, observation and reflection, as follows:

Practice by picking one thing you should do *more of* and possibly also one thing you should do *less of*. Then in your next conversation put those ideas into action. Afterwards ask yourself: "What went well?" "How could it have gone better?" Take every opportunity to practice your conversation skills.

Observe how others interact by selecting someone who's conversation skills you admire. This could be at work or on TV. Ask yourself: "What makes these interviewers good at posing questions?" "How do some of them use humour effectively?"

Reflect on how well your conversation skills are improving at work and in your personal life. Ask yourself: "What is working well and what is working less well?" "What can I do to build on my successes and avoid failures?" Your actions could include keeping a diary, talking to a wider variety of people, or working with a friend or colleague so you can support and encourage each other and share feedback.

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