

# Zeitgeist

## The Art Of Good Conversation

A You Need This Article By Scott Solder & Mark Palmer

What's your favourite form of entertainment? As you think about that, quite a few options will probably cross your mind. Watching television? Going to the cinema? Playing sport or going to nice restaurants? The list is endless. What's the one thing, though, that you do most of the time in order to entertain yourself and others? The answer is that you talk.



*David Letterman: A master of the art!*

Unless you're reading this alone right now, look at the people around you. What are they doing? Many of them will be talking. When you arrive at the office in the morning, how long is it before you start speaking to another human being? It's usually a matter of seconds. Make a mental note now to pay attention to what you talk about when you next arrive at work in the morning. You might chat about what you got up to the night before, what was on TV, how that date went or, in true British style, you might start talking about how warm, cold, wet or windy it is.

Conversation is mankind's biggest form of entertainment. It's how we interact. It's the most intimate form of human contact after sex. Yet nobody teaches us how to do it properly. From the moment we're born, we're expected to pick it up as we go along. Actually, we do it rather well most of the time, but it's all by trial and error. How many times have you put your foot in it? And when was the last time that you woke up after a few drinks the night before, and cringed as you remember what you said?

When you think about it like that, it seems absurd that we're not given proper lessons in conversation at school. Words used rightly – or wrongly – can start and end wars. They can change lives. Relationships start with a conversation and also end with one. Your next pay rise, your next job and

your next love affair (unless you're happily attached already) will depend on how you perform in a key conversation beforehand. Your ability to talk is the most potent tool in your armoury, yet you've never been trained in how to use it. That's a bit like being given a machine gun with no instruction manual and no guidelines on when it's acceptable or not to shoot people. Mad eh?

You've been in great conversations before and you've also been party to some terrible ones. Most of the time, though, the conversations you have, and witness around you, are pretty mediocre or – in other words – small. That's because nobody has taught you how to make your conversation good. By the time you get to the end of this booklet, all that will have changed. You're about to learn how to use your conversation skills like the powerful weapon they are. And not before time!

*The biggest word in the world.*

You use it all the time. Yet you bandy it around almost without thinking. You certainly don't treat it with nearly the level of respect that it deserves. When you're making good conversation, no other word compares. This word is intimate and personal. It will draw a person in, make their eyes light up and give you their fullest attention. This word is selfless. This word is generous. And interestingly, when you find someone to be a crashing bore, you'll notice that this word is largely missing from their repertoire. This word is 'you'.

**Big conversation rule one: keep using the word 'you'.**

Get it into your first sentence when you meet someone for the first time. And then keep using it throughout that conversation. Make a point of using it more often than usual when you're next chatting to your friends, your partner, your colleagues or your family. Notice how warm and close and good natured the conversation becomes. If you don't believe it, look at like this: how many times have you said or heard someone say "I've really got no time for X.... it's all all 'me me me' with him (or her)." Nobody likes people who talk only about themselves. On the other hand we all love people who appear to take an interest in us. That's because the latter are using the word 'you'.

*The four building blocks of good conversation*

Think back to the last time you were in a good conversation. It may have been on a one to one basis, or it may have involved a group of people. Think about how you felt, why it was that you enjoyed it, and what it was that made this conversation stick in your mind more than many others. You may now be thinking of being in a crowd of people sitting around a table having a laugh. Or perhaps it was an intense heart to heart with someone close to you. Maybe it was a good, meaty debate. Or maybe you were just fascinated by what the other person was saying. Whatever is in your mind now, you can be sure that the reason for this is simple. That exchange contained at least

one of the four building blocks of big conversation: storytelling, humour, opinion and wisdom. Try to spot it the next time you find yourself in, or witnessing, a thoroughly enjoyable exchange. One, two, three or all four of the building blocks will be present. Guaranteed.

### **Good conversation rule two: tell stories, have a laugh, give opinion or share wisdom**

We all know people who seem to be sickeningly popular with just about everyone. They're the ones always invited to parties, they have armfuls of friends and they're the sort of people that others will be dying to introduce you to. They're usually described as 'hilarious' or 'fascinating'. Consider those words one more time: 'hilarious' and 'fascinating' or, if you prefer, 'funny' and 'intriguing'. Now, as you look again at the four building blocks of good conversation above, notice how it's beginning to fit together. Someone who tells great – or funny – anecdotes tends to be popular. So too are people who are witty, mines of fascinating information or brilliant debaters. That's simply because they have perfected at least one of the building blocks above. It's that easy. Think about which one you're best at – and make a conscious effort to build it into your conversations as much as possible. Notice how the world changes for the better. And quickly at that.

Hang on, though. Before you go rushing into your next conversation, dying to try out your new knowledge, a word of warning: read the rest of this article first. We haven't yet covered how to make our great conversation appropriate. For example, telling great stories at the funeral of a loved one works really well. On the other hand, holding forth with your own personal views on the world or relaying a side splitting tale from the pub the night before might be a little ill-advised. See?

### *Chatting people up and networking (they're the same thing, of course!)*

When you think about it, of course they're the same. Chatting people up and networking are simply conversations designed to make a connection with another person who you've decided may be of benefit to you in the future. It's crucial you make the right impression. And when you give them your contact details, you desperately want them to keep them and not throw them in the nearest bin on the way home. Before you even open your mouth to say your first word, you need to give the right visual impression. And it's easy: don't be yourself, be their reflection.

For example, if you're feeling a bit grumpy, there's nothing more annoying than talking to someone who's being super smiley, is there? By the same token, if you're feeling great then you would tend to avoid people who were obviously in a bad mood. This – put very simply – is the key. You know *what* you should say to make good conversation, having read the previous chapters. Now it's time to look at *how* you say it and how you should behave as you say it.

Believe it or not, conversation is about much more than just words. We communicate all the time with non-verbal signals: our facial expression, the way we sit or stand, what we wear, and what we do with our eyes and hands. Most of the time, these unconscious non-verbal signals will betray what's really going on inside our heads, whatever we happen to be saying. For example, remember all those occasions when you've tried to be upbeat, even though you were dying inside? Or when you've made a supreme effort to sound interested, even though you were bored senseless? How is it that people somehow picked up on the truth, and instinctively backed off a bit? And how is it, for that matter, that your mother always knows when you're lying? The answer is that your words have been let down by your actions. Criminals come a cropper here all the time. Detectives and lawyers are trained to spot when this happens. They pay far more attention to what they see in an interrogation than to what they *hear*. So, when you're chatting someone up or networking on a professional level, you need to be seen in the right way as well as heard in the right way. The way to do this is to set yourself up as a mirror in front of the person you're talking to.

### **Good conversation rule three: allow people to see their reflection in you**

This is all about putting people at their ease. You do this by 'meeting them in their mood'. Of course you're not a mind reader, so you can't possibly tell for sure what mood they're in. But the best bit about this is that you don't have to be a mind reader! All you need to do is pay attention to what you see and hear in them – and reflect it back at them. Notice their facial expression. Are they smiling, half smiling or not smiling at all? Are they looking at you in the eye all the time, none of the time or some of the time? How are they sitting and standing? Are they facing you, or slightly at an angle? How often, if at all, do they use their arms, shoulders and hands in the conversation? Don't worry about trying to interpret what all of this means. You don't need to know. *All you have to do is do the same – or similar*. Some people call this 'mirroring'. Actually, it's better to call it 'matching'. Matching is when you do the same sort of thing as the other person rather than copy them identically. For example, if they're using their hands a lot as they speak, you do the same but in a slightly different way. This is far more effective. Sit a bit like them, look at them a bit like they're looking at you, smile as often (or as rarely) as they smile, move your hands in a similar way – and at a similar rate – as they do, and so on. Once you've practised this for a bit, you'll be amazed at how detailed this can become. You can even start to match the pace at which people are breathing or blinking if you feel so inclined. The effect of this is huge. Of course, they don't realise consciously that you're doing it – but their subconscious will notice it and will start to inform them about whether they feel drawn to you or not. This is what has happened when you find yourself saying things like 'I don't know why, but we just really clicked right from the beginning' or, when the opposite has been the case, 'I'm not sure about that bloke - there was something about him that wasn't quite right, but I just can't put my finger on it'.

Once you've got your visual work off pat (and it doesn't take much practice before this becomes second nature), focus on your verbal matching. It's the same principle: speak back at the person using their language. Use the same words that they use and resist the urge to paraphrase what they're saying. If they use a lot of metaphors or figurative language, then do the same. If their expressions are very literal then be literal back. Assess how quickly they are speaking and adjust your own pace to match theirs. Match their volume and tone too. And, referring back to the four building blocks of good conversation, notice which building blocks they favour. If they tell stories, then reply with stories of your own. If they are inclined to share their opinions or their wisdom then respond in kind. This is what will lead them to think of you as 'their kind of person'. Try it in stages and work up. The next time you meet someone you want to network with or chat up, focus on one thing to match. Then, the next time, focus on two and so on. Before you know it, you'll be automatically matching people on all kinds of verbal and non-verbal levels. The results will speak for themselves. Here's to a fascinating future of good conversation!

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