

TOASTMASTER®

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Speaking One-on-One

6 tips for better conversations.

BY KATHLEEN FORDYCE

Every day we exercise our communication skills during social interactions. The way we communicate one-on-one can make or break a relationship, and how we express ourselves, handle confrontation and work toward a compromise makes all the difference.

Fortunately, Toastmasters is a great help in this area. The skills practiced in club meetings help you talk with children, hold difficult discussions with employees, speak effectively to bosses, engage potential new clients and handle disagreements with friends.

Liliana Valle, ACB, an airport manager in California, says, "It was those skills that you learn through public speaking—the hand gestures, the eye contact, trying to get buy-in to be on the same page, being able to pick up on those cues, those movements—that I think helped me get my job." She earned a promotion just six months after joining Toastmasters.

Perfecting your interpersonal and speaking skills can help in all situations, says Mary Claire O'Neal, a communication consultant, coach and author from Lexington, Kentucky. "The better you get at the interpersonal part, the better speaker you become," she says. "You can be so situationally aware that you connect better with your audiences."

Begin improving your communication skills and relationships with these expert tips.

1 Consider Your Audience

Toastmasters know that before you prepare a speech, you must consider your audience and their familiarity with your topic. What's in it for them? Do they share anything in common with you? Perhaps a career, a passion or an interest? Likewise, it is important that you develop an understanding of any person you speak to one-on-one.

Robyn Hatcher, a New York City-based communications-skills expert and author of the book *Standing Ovation Presentations*, says the key to good communication with other people is "figuring out three things: what motivates them, what their communication style is and how they prefer to get information."

Hatcher offers an example that she often sees when working with companies to improve communication. Many employees, when talking to a boss, provide detailed information when the boss just wants a quick summary. If you know someone who struggles to sit through lengthy discussions, ensure your message is succinct so the person won't get frustrated.

Planning your message beforehand is also important—especially so when a situation has the potential to get heated, says O’Neal.

“Too many times people are in drama mode and they confront someone—and that doesn’t do anything but create a bad result,” she says. Strategize your communication like you would with a speech, O’Neal advises.

2 Examine Your Intent

It is important to examine your feelings and intentions before a conversation,

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to ensure you know what you want to say and why you want to say it. Pinpoint your ultimate goal and how it will impact the person you are talking to.

“We have to think, *What’s in it for them? What’s my bottom line and how am I going to get it across?*” says Hatcher.

If you are talking to your child or spouse about an issue at home, don’t vent or accuse, say experts, but present your message in a way that shows you want to work together to solve the problem. For example, don’t say, “You always leave your shoes in the middle of the floor.” Instead, say, “When you leave your shoes in the middle of the floor, I feel like you don’t care if I trip over them.”

“It’s about aligning the heart and the mind,” says O’Neal, “and making sure that the intent of your communication is the highest it can be and comes from a place of compassion, or in the case of a family, love.”

Stephan Labossiere, a relationship coach and speaker from Atlanta, Georgia, says that being positive is critical. “If you do that, even if [someone] has a different style than you, it becomes easier for them to be receptive to what you say.”

3 Pay Attention to Your Nonverbal Cues

Eye contact, posture, hand gestures, vocal tone and other nonverbal cues impact conversations just as much as they do speeches. “It’s like there is a magnifying glass on you, because most of the time when you are talking, there is nothing else [for the other person] to do but to watch you,” says Hatcher, the communication-skills expert from New York.

Nonverbal cues are even more important when you first meet someone. For example, eye contact is needed

but shouldn’t be overdone, because it can make someone feel threatened, say communication experts. People can also interpret a great deal from the tone of your voice; for example, if you end each statement like a question, it might make you sound insecure.

Jeanne McDermott, CC, a small-business owner in Massachusetts, says the feedback she gets in her club has made her more aware of nonverbal cues. “When out with friends, and in networking situations, I think about not only what I am saying but how I look,” she says.

4 Listen Intently

“Communication is about speaking and listening,” says Labossiere. “Not listening to make a rebuttal, but listening to understand how the other person feels.”

O’Neal suggests working on being present in the moment and blocking out all distractions. “A person speaking to you deserves nothing less than your undivided attention. That means you have to hear exactly what is said in the moment.”

Make sure you focus on what the person is saying and not on how you will respond. “If you are just waiting for your

chance to jump back in, the conversation is not going to make the progress it can make,” notes Labossiere.

Having trouble staying focused? Be curious. “When you have a conversation with someone, think of them as the most interesting person in the world. Being curious will take you away from being judgmental,” says Hatcher.

5 Acknowledge Others

An easy way to improve relationships, communication experts say, is to regularly acknowledge the people close to you. Pointing out what you love, admire or respect about someone, along with thanking them for small actions, can help at work and in your personal life.

It is also important to acknowledge someone’s feelings during a discussion. “If you dismiss somebody, you hurt the potential of future effective communication with that individual because they will feel like they can’t talk to you,” says Labossiere, the relationship coach from Georgia.

He adds that “some people think, *I can’t be dismissive to my co-workers and my spouse—but with kids, I don’t have to acknowledge how they feel.*”

Not true. “We’ve all been kids,” he says, “and we know how it feels when we try to express ourselves to our parents and they dismiss us. It makes us not want to talk to them again.”

You can discipline children and disagree with them, but acknowledge their feelings so they can be comfortable talking to you.

6 Assert Yourself

Being assertive means that your opinion is just as important as another person’s, says Hatcher. Stating your opinion must be done without harming, hurting or disrespecting the other person, she adds, but “you need to make it your right, or duty, to assert yourself.”

Many new Toastmasters fear speaking in front of an audience, but they are slow to address their fears as they progress in the program. It can be the same when facing others one-on-one. It takes confidence to feel

comfortable with sharing your thoughts, ideas and feelings. Practice helps build confidence in dealing with difficult situations.

"I'll sometimes role-play with my husband before having a difficult conversation with somebody, to make sure I am doing it in a way that is non-threatening," says O'Neal, the communication consultant from Kentucky.

Hatcher also suggests making small changes to build your confidence. Altering your body language and vocal tone can raise your confidence level. "Power posing" is another great tool, she says. In a hugely popular 2012 TED Talk, social psychologist Amy Cuddy introduced the concept of power posing to boost one's confidence. Standing or sitting in a powerful pose—one in which you essentially take up as much space as possible—is like shouting internal encouragement to yourself, says Cuddy.

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— relationship coach Stephan Labossiere

Moving Forward

In every relationship, there will be conversations that don't go as planned, but if you set out with good intentions and follow through, you should see improvement. As O'Neal notes, the only thing we can control in this world is ourselves—our reactions, responses, thoughts, feelings and statements. So if we get those things right, then even if someone doesn't like our message, "we have done the very best we can," she says.

"If people learn to deliver their messages in a more positive, loving manner," Labossiere adds, "they will see a significant increase in effective, productive conversations." ■■

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