



HOW TO TALK SENSE IN COMPANY

*Since no one is purely reasonable,
there will be some hitting in the clinches,
but here are the rules*

Mortimer J. Adler

The right to *talk* is a democratic right. The right to *think* is beyond the reach of any tyrant, except, of course, in so far as he poisons men's minds. But the man who has the right to say what he *thinks* is a free man. We abuse this liberty unless we make every effort to think straight. Free thought and free speech fuse to form the foundation of democracy. Outside the realm of force, the most important single thing we democrats can learn to do is to talk sense.

Not all our thinking involves talking to others. Sometimes we talk sense to ourselves. Sometimes we discuss our problems with an author in the course of reading a book. But sooner or later we get into real conversation, two-way or many-sided. We meet with our friends on the street, at lunch, in each other's houses. The casual exchange of opinions becomes an airing of our common problems. It is such discussion, in which men try to learn from each other and persuade each other, that I want to consider here.

The purpose of this article is to tell you how to talk sense in company. (If you can do that, you can certainly talk sense to yourself.) If I sound impudent, let me acknowledge at once that I violate, every day of my life, one or another or all of the rules I am about to set down. No discussion will ever follow all of them at every stage, simply because men are not gods. The rules of talking are idealistic the way the rules of tennis are. They are counsels of perfection. Even though we violate some or all of the rules of tennis when we play, we try to follow them if we are trying to play tennis.

What is extraordinary is that so few people seem to realize that there are rules for good conversation. A distinguished educator recently pointed out a paradox about our country. We have achieved wonders in mechanical communication, but human communication has been breaking down. People still gather socially, but more and more they turn to the radio or bridge; and if they talk, they tend either to talk about trivial things or, if they begin talking about serious matters, they tend to get into bitter and fruitless disputes. I have been teaching young people and adults for twenty years and I find that even among my students at the University of Chicago, an institution whose standards are probably the highest in the country, the one game played without any rules is that of discussion.

Let me say here what I mean by "good conversation." Discussion is good when it is both pleasurable and profitable. To be able to persuade someone to see a point your way—to win his agreement by moving his mind, not by bludgeoning or intimidating him—is certainly as pleasant as winning at bridge or golf through an exercise of skill. To learn something as a result of being genuinely open to persuasion is a profitable use of conversational time.

Now the rules, even though they are "ideals," are neither hard to understand nor impossible to follow. I suggest that the next time you meet with your friends and begin discussing, say, the war, you place a copy of these rules in the hands of the coolest-headed member of the group. Appoint him chief umpire and bouncer. See if it doesn't make a difference.

An orderly conversation has a beginning, middle and an end. The

rules fall into three groups, corresponding to the three phases of discussion. First, there are the preconditions for serious conversation, without which it cannot be undertaken at all. Second, there are the rules to be followed during the course of the discussion. Third, there are the precepts that deal with its conclusion.

I. BEGINNING A DISCUSSION

Pick the right occasion.

There are times for small talk and times, so to speak, for big talk. A dinner party is a bad place for big talk. Whenever conversation must be larded in between other activities, such as going to the theatre and going to bed, it might just as well be trivial. You must always have plenty of time. Good talk is usually slow in getting started and long in winding up. A gathering in which many of those present are strangers is usually a small-talk group. An evening of relaxation, when most of those present are tired, is no occasion to solve the problems of the world. But when friends are gathered and they share an impulse to talk about their common problems, then serious discussion can take place.

Pick the right people.

Don't try to discuss everything with everybody. Even some of your best friends may lack competence on certain subjects. Some people aren't interested in some subjects. Sometimes it isn't competence which is lacking, but the affinity of temperaments. Some people "just don't get along together." If you happen to know that Green and Robinson hate each other, keep the conversation on the weather. And be sure that everyone present is going to participate. People who whisper on the sidelines disrupt discussion as fatally as kibitzers spoil bridge.

Don't argue to win.

Of course, you want to persuade, but you should also be open to persuasion. Good discussion is an *exchange*, not a blitzkrieg. If you want to fight, join the Army. You know the difference between brawling and fencing. There is the same difference between wrangling and arguing.

Don't argue for argument's sake.

Don't pick an argument on every point regardless of what you really think. Don't disagree just to keep the argument going. There is no point in going on and on. Better taper off into small talk before everyone is antagonized and discussion becomes a feud.

Don't be polite.

Discussions are often nipped in the bud because people don't want to quarrel. They suppose you can't argue without losing your temper. They don't want to quarrel with their friends and, if they suspect they disagree on fundamental issues, they definitely avoid serious conversation. This is an unfortunate mistake. The minor agony of examining a difference of opinion is one of the best expressions of friendship. Those who are willing to take pains in honest and forthright discussion are helping, not offending, each other. (When I say "Don't be polite," I don't mean that you should be rude. The boor who interrupts all the time ruins any conversation.)

Don't listen only to yourself.

Don't sit around thinking of a bright remark with which to break in and win applause. It is not your private train of thought which matters most. If you lapse into soliloquy, you will lose track of the argument; and then, no matter how good your next idea, it is likely to be irrelevant. Of course, you may get a good idea at a moment when someone else is making a long speech. It is hard to be patient—but it is the only way to talk sense.

These rules state the preconditions of conversation. Though some of them may actually operate during its course, they really govern the mood and attitude with which you enter discussion.

II. CARRYING ON A DISCUSSION

Find out what the issue is.

Until the issue is clear, it is impossible to tell what points are relevant and what, are not. The best way to make the issue explicit is to state it. Either the New Deal is on the right track in regard to unemployment or the opposition is right that you cannot put men to work without encouraging private enterprise. And if it is the economics of the New Deal you are talking about, don't let the discussion drift into politics or personalities.

Take one thing at a time.

This is a good rule in talking, as it is in living. Every serious problem has many angles. Our first obligation is to separate a jumble of related questions into a number of distinct issues. Deal with one at a time. Let's say you are discussing religion. That's a complicated subject, involving many questions, each with an order of points. They can't be discussed all at once. If you try, you bog down in confusion. Cover, say, the historical question about church origins before you take up the theological question about church doctrine,

and that before you consider the political question about church practices.

Stick to the issue.

Irrelevance is the rock on which most conversations are wrecked and the worst of it is that, unless everyone is on the lookout for it the victims don't realize before it's too late that they got off the course. A familiar enemy (though often an innocent one) of intelligent conversation is the man who is "reminded of a story" by something someone said. If the story is relevant—fine. But nine times out of ten it isn't.

Keep moving.

After a point has been settled push on to the next one. This doesn't mean you shouldn't come back to a point if it needs reopening. But it does mean a conversation should be a progress. The man who hasn't listened attentively usually raises from the dead some point that was settled. Backing and filling is one of the mortal diseases of conversation.

Don't take things for granted.

Since few conversations begin at the beginning, and something is usually taken for granted, the rules might be better stated as follows: ask your companions to grant the assumptions you are making. We frequently suspect that the other fellow is making assumptions, though precisely what they are we seldom know. We too infrequently recognize that we ourselves are also making assumptions. The best cure is for everyone to try making his own assumptions explicit and beg the others to accept them *pro tem*; Sometimes the assumption can itself be argued, but when that is not possible, because it would take you too far back, it has to be granted for the sake of argument. Otherwise, sooner or later, somebody says, "But wait a minute, Joe. What makes you think we all agree that men are equal?" And the preceding conversation is a total loss. If you see the point of this rule, you also see that all argument is either about the assumptions themselves or their consequences. I can grant your premises, and still think you have reached a wrong conclusion.

Don't disagree until you understand.

Unless you can state the other fellow's position just as well as he can, you have no right to oppose him. The man who says, "Now look here, you're saying..." usually misstates the other fellow's position. Begin, "Let me see if I can state your position," and unless he agrees that you've done it, you can't tell him he's wrong.

Don't agree until you understand.

To agree with something you don't understand is inane. We all have the tendency, at times, to say, "Uh huh," when we should be saying, "Wait a minute—I'm not sure I get you straight," or "What's your proof of that?" Most of us are too prone to suppose we understand. Moving on to the next point is important, but we oughtn't to agree just for the sake of motion, or because we are too lazy to pursue the matter.

Use arguments, not authorities.

If George Washington was against entangling alliances or third terms, it may be worth mentioning. Great men have a right to our consideration. But great minds have made mistakes, and those that were right on a certain point a century ago may be wrong today. Authorities may support your position; but reason alone can make it tenable.

Don't take a vote.

Just as authorities may be wrong, so a majority of your friends may, at any given moment, be wrong. Everyone in the party may disagree with you, and you may still be right. And you can be wrong even if the majority agree with you. Counting noses settles nothing except the number of Ayes and Nays. Voting may follow arguing, but it should never take the place of argument.

Beware of examples.

"Why, I know a fellow who..." Everyone knows a fellow who. Examples may be helpful, but they may just as often be harmful. The fact that you saw a W.P.A. worker leaning on a shovel doesn't prove that the W.P.A. is shovel-leaning. And the discussion starts going in circles when, after you've cited an example, everybody else cites one to prove something else. An example is like an assumption. You ought to ask permission to use it. Unless everyone sees its direct relevance, it can do no good.

Never argue about facts.

You cannot settle by argument the precise size of the national debt, or how far it is by air-time from New York to the Azores. If you have doubts about a fact someone has cited, express them, but don't argue. Perhaps you can stop talking long enough to find the answer in the *Britannica* or the almanac. If that cannot be done, accept the dubious fact for the purposes of discussion, or put it on ice until you can ascertain the truth about it.

Explain your disagreement.

If, after you understand the other fellow's position, you still disagree, you do so for one or more of the following reasons: you think that he simply lacks knowledge of some relevant point; or that he mistakenly supposes he has knowledge when he doesn't; or that he drew the wrong conclusions from things you were willing to admit were so; or that he drew the right conclusions but didn't push them far enough. You ought to be able to tell your opponent precisely what you don't see eye to eye about. Disagreement never gives way to agreement unless the difference is located. Trying to define it helps you find out when the disagreement is only apparent, due to your divergent use of words. This happens frequently. People who are of one mind are often separated by the babel of tongues.

III. ENDING THE DISCUSSION

Don't expect too much from discussion.

If you engage in argument with no hope of reaching agreement, you expect too little. If you suppose agreement can always be reached, you expect too much. At one extreme, the hopeless folk suppose that everything is a matter of opinion and that one opinion is just as good as another. If everyone is entitled to his own, there's no profit in discussion, and ping-pong seems more enjoyable than conversation. At the other extreme, the over-hopeful fail to distinguish between the realms of knowledge and opinion. Reasonable men can agree wherever knowledge is possible, but there are many matters about which even reasonable men can only entertain opinions.

Distinguish between theoretical and practical questions.

This helps you follow the preceding rule. Whether 2 plus 2 equals 4 is what is known as a theoretical question. When you discuss problems of this sort, you should expect agreement on the truth. But when you discuss practical problems, problems which concern *what should be done in this case*, you are in the realm of opinion. Here honest, intelligent men, trying to be reasonable, may disagree

Distinguish between principles and cases.

Not all practical discussions are about what should be done *in this case*. Many times we discuss the general principles which underlie our moral, economic or political conduct. The general principles we must appeal to in arguing questions of policy are always true everywhere and for all men. Reasonable men can agree about the

nature of justice; they can disagree indefinitely about whether a certain business deal was just or unjust. Arguments about *practical* principles are like theoretical disputes. We can hope to reach agreement. But in the application of those principles to particular cases, reasonable men may disagree because of different estimates of the probabilities and different judgments about the circumstances.

Don't stop with agreement.

Argument is not the only form of profitable conversation. Men who agree can often help each other clarify a point by discussing it. Conversation is a useful device for exploring a theme about which there is general agreement. You may all agree that Fascism is a bad form of government and yet spend many evenings (many years, for that matter) helping each other discover the reasons why. People who stop talking when they agree seldom probe their beliefs very deeply.

Don't go on forever.

Even in matters where agreement is possible, discussion sometimes reaches an impasse. After all, man is an animal, even though rational, and there always is, as William James pointed out, a certain blindness in human beings. When you see it is fruitless to go on, change the subject. If the conversation is paralyzed by the obstinacy of the opponents, let it die naturally. And don't whip a dead horse.

These three sets of rules are what might be called the technical precepts for talking sense. They direct you in the use of your mind. But these technical rules will be useless unless you can also follow what I shall call the "emotional rules." Many of the technical rules, especially those which concern the preconditions of discussion, have emotional aspects. But throughout its course *reasonable* discussion is impossible if emotions run away with it.

Of course, our emotions play an important role in everything we do and say. *But they don't help us talk sense.* When you find yourself getting excited or angry during a conversation, take a trip to the water cooler. If that does not help, stand up and say, "Friends, I'm sore as a boil. I'm hitting below the belt, but I can't help it. I'm mad." It will do you good, and the rest will admire you for admitting it.

If another member of the group gets fighting mad, you have only two alternatives. Soothe him in a friendly way. If that does not work, change the subject. He's probably just as nice a fellow as

you are, but someone happened to hit him in a tender spot. Get off the spot. The barkeeper's advice, "If you want to fight, you've got to fight outside," is indispensable to good conversation.

And how do you know when your emotions are getting the better of you? First, you find yourself shouting the other fellow down. Or you stop thinking and merely repeat your claim over and over, each time with greater heat and less light.

Second, you find yourself making irrelevant references to his grandmother, his nationality, his occupation or his personal habits. All such tactics go by the name of *ad hominem* argument. It is an argument against the man, rather than against his ideas. The most exasperating form of *ad hominem* is the bedfellow argument. You say, "So you agree with Hitler," as if that necessarily made the other fellow wrong. All bad thinking and arguing is some kind of irrelevance, but the emotionally motivated type always gets personal in one way or another.


Third, you find yourself being sarcastic, or trying to get the laugh on your opponent, or baiting him by harping on unimportant mistakes he has made. All these devices are calculated to goad your opponent into losing his temper also. If he resists all your efforts, and keeps cool, he will probably enrage you further. When a discussion reaches this stage, it becomes a battle of wits in the worst sense of those words.

Fourth, you will find yourself suppressing points which you see, but which weaken your case.

Finally, you find yourself stubbornly refusing to admit what you see, namely, that you are in the wrong. By this time you have so completely lost your head you cannot remember the wise counsel that there is no point in winning an argument, or even in standing pat, when you know you're wrong. Unfortunately, you will remember it after the evening is over, when passions have cooled. If you let yourself get out of hand this way very often, you will eventually ruin your disposition.

By following these rules, and controlling your emotions in order to do so, you will find pleasure and profit in serious conversation. The better you follow them, the more pleasure and profit. But more than your personal gain is at stake.

Democracy, no matter how many wars we fight and win, rests ultimately on intelligent discussion. The right of the minority to be heard is void unless we know how to give our opponents a hearing. Unity freely arrived at by free men is the only unity that is worth

achieving in political affairs. If we want to achieve that unity—and we must in the face of the unified forces against democracy—we shall have to revive the art of conversation. We shall have to talk sense, not only for the human pleasure and profit it gives us but, more importantly today, for the preservation of that human way of life which we in this country cherish. 

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