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## HOW TO MAKE CONVERSATION PROFITABLE AND PLEASURABLE

**Mortimer Adler**

PART 2 OF 2

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An hour of good social conversation is like an hour of good amateur sport. It can be more than simply pleasurable, it can be hilariously amusing, especially if the participants observe good manners in every respect and there is equal give and take.

The topic or topics can change and develop as the conversation goes along. People may be the subject of discussion, or events, or even ideas. It is important to find topics of mutual interest to all concerned. If you see a dull glaze come over any listener's eyes, it would be advisable to change the subject, whether you are the speaker or not.

Let me put down a brief list of things to be avoided in social conversation in order to make it as enjoyable as it can be: (1) vulgarity and blasphemy; (2) ethnic jokes and slurs; (3) conceit, especially name-dropping; (4) clichés; (5) foreign words and phrases, unless perfectly pronounced and understood by all; (6) foreign clichés, such as *entre nous*, *ciao*, *savez-vous?* and the like; (7) uncommon words, especially words that are familiar only to the academic specialist or the expert; (8) the repetition of old stories or events that others have heard many times before.

There are certain subjects that need not necessarily be avoided, but should be touched on only with close friends who are really interested in what you may have to say about them: (1) one's state of health or recent surgical operations; (2) one's babies and their cute little tricks; (3) one's children and their brilliant accomplishments; (4) one's domestic pet, unless it happens to be an elephant, an alligator, or a boa constrictor.

In addition, there are a certain number of don'ts to be observed, sensible strictures that are too frequently violated.

1. Don't digress or change the subject if the conversation is going well.
2. Don't pry into another person's private life; and don't ask questions that are too intimately personal.
3. Don't indulge in malicious gossip.
4. Don't speak about confidential matters if you really expect them not to be repeated to others.
5. Don't just chatter or repeatedly embellish your speech needlessly with social noises such as "you know," "I mean," and "as a matter of fact."
6. Don't say "Look" when you mean "Please listen."

On the positive side, there are a number of things worth recommending, such as the following:

1. Ask others about themselves; at the same time, be on guard not to talk too much about yourself.
2. Keep your voice modulated. Laugh when moved to do so, but avoid raucous laughter, and don't giggle at your own remarks.

3. Listen to whoever is speaking and make it apparent that you are listening by not letting your eyes wander or your attention be diverted.
4. If another person joins the conversation, bring him briefly up to date on what is being discussed and encourage him to join the conversation.
5. At dinner parties, break the ice by turning to the person sitting next to you and asking some question that is calculated to elicit an answer that can then become the subject of conversation. It does not make much difference what you ask if it succeeds in getting the other person to speak.

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The recommendations for conducting impersonal conversation—mind-to-mind talks that are either theoretical or practical in aim—divide into two sets of rules.

One consists in the intellectual rules, rules governing the use of your mind. The other consists in emotional rules, rules for controlling one's emotions and keeping them in their place.

In practical talk that aims at persuasion, eliciting and managing to direct the emotions of others enters into the picture, as I have already pointed out in Chapter 4. Nothing more needs to be said on that subject here. I will, therefore, deal only with the managing of one's own emotions, after I have suggested the rules for using one's mind effectively in impersonal conversations.

Some of the intellectual rules I have already touched on. Some I have not mentioned before. Among the recommendations to be added are the following.

1. If you are an active participant in a conversation or discussion, your first obligation is to focus on the question to be considered. What is the problem to be solved, the issue to be settled, the subject to be explored? If the matter is complex and has a number of component elements, those engaged in the conversation would be well advised to break it up into its parts, label them, and put them in some order. This amounts to saying "Let's take this point up first, then let's turn to that, and finally we can deal with the one remaining point."



A prepared agenda for a conference or a business meeting does something like this as a guide for carrying on a discussion. But something like it can be done informally at the beginning of any conversation if the participants are wise enough to recognize that they have taken up a complex question or a subject that can be broken down into component parts.

2. Stick to the issue. Stay within the framework of the subject under consideration, either as a whole or with respect to one or another of its parts. Don't wander off and talk about something else or intrude irrelevancies into the course of the conversation.

In short, be relevant, first, last, and always. I wish I could write out a prescription for being relevant. It would provide the remedy for so many of the ills that beset our talking with one another. Being relevant simply consists in paying close attention to the point that is being talked about and saying nothing that is not significantly related to it.

Knowing what is or is not related in some significant way to the point under consideration calls for nothing more than understanding on your part. Either you have it, or you don't. If you don't there is little that can be done about it, except perhaps what most people resent and that is being told that they are off the point or irrelevant.

When two persons have the skill of talking relevantly with one another and never getting off the point, that skill resembles the skill exhibited by two persons who have long been dancing partners and know how to keep step with one another. Imagine the result if, in dancing, both persons try to lead and neither to follow. Many conversations, full of irrelevance, are precisely like that.



3. Stick to the issue or the point, but don't beat it to death. Don't stay on it forever. Keep moving on to the next point when this one has been sufficiently explored or discussed. Repetition can become deadly. Conversation can falter and fade if the persons engaged in it are unable to pass on from one point to another, if they get stalled by someone's being unable to recognize that enough has been said on a certain subject.

After a point has been settled, push on to the next one. This does not mean that you should not come back to the point if it needs re-opening. But it does mean that a good conversation should be progressive. The person who has not listened attentively usually raises from the dead some point that was settled some time back. Backing and filling is one of the fatal diseases of conversation.

4. Individuals not only bring unacknowledged assumptions to a conversation in which they are engaged, they also take part in it without knowing what their blind spots are—matters concerning which they lack understanding and have difficulty in attaining. Like unacknowledged assumptions, blind spots can ruin a conversation or at least prevent the minds engaged in it from really meeting.

What's to be done to overcome these obstacles? My only recommendation here is that you should be on the alert to recognize when you are failing to understand something and press for help in understanding it. You should be aware that you have certain pre-conceptions and assumptions, and try to dredge them up from the

recesses of your mind and lay them on the table for everyone to examine.

Since few conversations begin at the beginning and different things are taken for granted by the persons talking with one another, the rule might better be stated as follows. Ask your companions to grant the assumptions you wish to make, and state your own assumptions when it comes their turn to ask you for them.

We frequently suspect that the other person 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 to make his own assumptions explicit and beg the others to accept them *pro tem*.

If this is not done, then sooner or later somebody says, "Wait a minute, Joe. What makes you think that we all agree that men are created equal?"

Sometimes the assumptions declared can themselves be made the subject of the argument, but when that is not possible, because it would take too long or go too far back, the assumption should be granted for the sake of going forward with the discussion. It can then proceed in a hypothetical manner by noting what consequences follow on the supposition that a certain assumption is true.

The argument can move forward either by dealing with pros and cons about the assumption itself or about what follows from supposing it to be correct. I can accept your assumption as something to take for granted for the moment, and still think you have reached a wrong conclusion from it.

5. Avoid the most obvious fallacies. Never argue about facts; look them up if you wish to settle a difference of opinion about them. Never cite authorities as if the citation of them were conclusive. Even if you don't make that mistake, keep the mention of authorities out of the talk unless mentioning them really makes a contribution to what is being said. That happens only when the authority is not simply named as supporting what you yourself are trying to say, but when a significant statement by the authority can be accurately quoted and when quoting it genuinely adds something to what you yourself have already said.

If George Washington was against entangling alliances or a third term in the office of the President, it may be worth mentioning. What great or wise men have said deserves our consideration. But great and wise men have sometimes made mistakes, just like the

rest of us. Even when they were right about a certain point centuries ago, they may be wrong today. Authorities may support your position, but only sound reasons and the weight of the evidence can make it acceptable to others.

Related to the mistake of citing authorities as conclusive is the even worse mistake of calling attention to the kind of person with whom someone who disagrees with you is aligned. You suppose everyone will recognize that the kind of person you are referring to is one of ill repute. This is arguing *ad hominem*. It is attacking persons rather than attacking the point being considered. It is a vicious form of irrelevance.

Never make irrelevant references to the other person's grandmother, his nationality, his business or political associates, his occupation, or his personal habits. All such tactics are instances of the fallacious *ad hominem* argument. The most exasperating form of this fallacy is the bedfellow argument. You say to someone, "So you agree with Hitler," as if this suffices to discredit the point he is trying to make. Hitler may be in ill repute with everyone present, but that does not mean he is necessarily wrong about everything.

In certain types of practical conversations that aim at reaching a decision, especially in business matters or in politics, it may be necessary to take a vote if it is foreordained that the matter is to be decided by the weight of the majority. Taking a vote is not necessary if the leader of a group, in business or in politics, regards the opinions of his associates as advisory rather than decisive. Then he decides, sometimes against the majority, sometimes with it. But taking a vote is never necessary and always undesirable when the conversation does not lead to action and no decision need be made.

When the conversation is theoretical rather than practical, when it is concerned with getting at the truth about a certain matter, then taking a vote should never be regarded as settling the question in issue. Here the majority can very easily be wrong. Everyone present may disagree with you and you may still be right. You can also be wrong even if the majority agrees with you. Being satisfied with such agreement may delude you into closing your mind to further argument. Counting noses settles nothing except the number of ayes and nays.

Beware of examples. They often prove too much or too little and they are seldom perfectly relevant. The fact that you saw a roadway worker leaning on a shovel and staring into space hardly proves that all roadway workers are lazy or that the indolence of labor is the cause of reduced productivity. The conversation starts

going around in circles when, after you have cited an example, all the others in the room follow suit and introduce examples in support of what they are saying.

Examples can be useful, but only to illustrate what you are saying, never to prove it. They should be well chosen for the purpose of making a general statement of your point more intelligible. Many persons have difficulty in dealing with generalizations, especially when these are stated at a high level of abstraction. A concrete example offered to illustrate something stated abstractly helps them to understand what is being said.

If you don't understand what others are saying, it is not only proper but also prudent for you to ask them to give you an example of the point. If they cannot do this to your satisfaction, it may be fair to suspect that they themselves do not fully understand what they are trying to say.

Examples should be treated like assumptions. Just as assumptions should be allowed to exert whatever force they have only with everyone's explicit acknowledgment and consent, so examples should stand only if everyone sees their relevance and is aware that they are being used to illustrate a point, not to prove it.

I turn now to the rules that concern controlling emotions in the course of a conversation in which they are out of place because it is an impersonal talk either about theoretical matters or important practical problems.

The first recommendation here is to catch yourself or the other person getting angry. The signs that this is happening are many and various: you or he start to shout; you or he become repetitious, raising your voice with each reiteration of the point; you or he become over positive, expressing this by pounding the table or by other forms of gesturing; you or he indulge in sarcasm, in teasing, in baiting, or in getting the other's argument laughed at; or either of you resorts to the kind of irrelevant ad hominem mentioned above.

If you indulge in sarcasm, or try to get the laugh on your opponent, or bait him by harping on unimportant mistakes he has made, or argue ad hominem, you will goad your opponent into losing his temper also. If he resists all your attacks and remains cool, he will probably enrage you further. When a discussion reaches this point, it becomes a battle of nit-picking and of low blows. It ceases to be a sensible or significant conversation worth continuing.




Our emotions play an important role in everything we do and say, but they do not help us to talk sense or to converse in a profitable and pleasurable manner. When you find yourself getting annoyed, angry, or overexcited in the course of an argument, leave the room and give yourself time to cool off.

If another member of the group gets fighting mad, you have only two alternatives. Try to soothe him or placate him in a friendly way. If that does not work, change the subject for a while. He is probably just as nice as you are, but something happened to hit him in a tender spot. The barkeeper's advice, "If you want to fight, go outside to do it," should be followed. Suspend the conversation when it ceases to be an impersonal mind-to-mind talk and turns into a passionate conflict.

Do not allow an impersonal discussion to become a personal quarrel. Argument is not aggression. There is no point at all in trying to win an argument simply by putting your opponent down or beating him up.

Be aware of the results of emotional disorder on your own part. It will lead you to suppress points that you really do see but which weaken your case, because you do not want to give in to your opponent. For purely emotional reasons, you find such acquiescence distasteful.

You may also, for purely emotional reasons, stubbornly refuse to concede that you are in the wrong when you really know that you are. There is certainly no point in winning an argument for personal or emotional reasons that impel you to try to get the better of the other person when your mind either knows now or will recognize later that he was right and you were wrong. 

*[We welcome your comments, questions, or suggestions.](#)*

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