Conversation Is More Than Talking

Idea In Short

Good conversation is more about listening and asking questions than talking. Do your research, be professional, make it comfortable, ask one question at a time and earn the right to continue.

Talking With Clients

A reader once asked for tips on talking to clients. The request seemed basic, but for those who are not client-facing or doing business development daily, the fundamentals matter enormously. Good conversation is more about listening and asking great questions than about talking. Not everyone is an extrovert who enjoys meeting new people. The reassuring news is that effective conversation is a learnable skill rather than an innate trait. The core question is whether you can create a connection and make people enjoy talking with you. 1

Know Your Audience

Do the research before any client conversation. Time is precious, so never waste a client's time by rehashing things you should already know. The worst thing you can do is ask the client something you could find through a search engine. Get a referral rather than going in cold to an interview. Schedule in advance and bring an agenda that demonstrates proficiency, polish and purpose. Understand who this person is, what success looks like to them and their career situation. Preparation signals respect and builds credibility before you utter a single word. The client notices immediately when you have done your homework.

Be Professional

Show respect in every interaction. Knock, ask if it is a good time and check whether they have another five minutes if the conversation runs long. Credentialize yourself subtly, because no one wants to talk to a novice. Find ways to demonstrate that you deserve a seat

at the table, have done the analysis and hold a point of view. You are not an underling. Be purposeful throughout the conversation, because the client is not there to become your friend. If friendship develops, that is winning, but it is not the purpose. Explain how you plan to use the information gathered. If you promise confidentiality, keep it without exception. Follow through on every promise, because only half of people actually do. Send the article, connect on LinkedIn and deliver what you said you would.

Make It Comfortable

Make the conversation a safe place to talk. Clients can be wary of consultants, since consultants are often called in to assess costs or manage layoffs. Be disarming to the extent possible. Find common ground and chat before the formal interview begins. Provide context to make it easy for them to open up, assuming the interview is friendly rather than a cross-examination. Start with open-ended questions and stitch together themes among their responses. Read body language carefully, noting whether they seem hesitant, amused, impatient or excited. Look around and observe your surroundings for clues about things to discuss. Remember their name and your last conversation, because forgetting these details signals inconsideration.

Ask Good Questions

Ask one question at a time. Multiple nested questions confuse the respondent and dilute the quality of answers. Use plain English rather than business jargon that obscures meaning. Draw linkage between questions and answers, just as you would in a smooth case interview. Soften difficult questions by introducing them with appropriate framing. Phrases like this might seem obvious or perhaps it is just me reduce friction. When appropriate, summarize key insights to show you are listening and engaged. Ask whether there is any question you should have asked but did not. Request reports or data when mentioned and ask for other recommended contacts. 2

Be Likable

People like to spend time with people similar to themselves. Shared interests, backgrounds, future plans and aspirations create natural rapport. Call it mirroring or common sense, but the principle holds. Some questions resonate with nearly anyone. Ask where they grew up, whether they have vacation plans or what restaurants they recommend nearby. Be human

and share authentic things about yourself when contextually appropriate. Vulnerability and self-deprecation, when comfortable, make you relatable. No one likes a perfect person. Care genuinely for the person across the table, because on a fundamental level, if you do not wish them well, you are using them. Reciprocate by offering insight, value or connections. Ask whether there is anything you can do to help them.

Be Flexible

Do not blindly stick to your list of interview questions. Follow the conversation flow to different places while ensuring your core questions get answered. Be confident enough to abandon the script when the conversation reveals something unexpected and valuable. Teach something during the interaction. When you are the interviewer, it can feel like you are only taking and sapping the other person of information. Find ways to educate, help or share something useful. Tell them about a resource, a podcast or a book you read recently. Pace the conversation and learn to keep it flowing naturally. Transition to new topics by sharing something about yourself, which lets them get to know you. You open up so they open up, because it is a two-way street. Create variety so neither person feels stuck discussing the same topic repeatedly. 3

Give Them Time to Think

When introducing a question, keep talking until the interviewee is ready to respond. Watch for a nod or an engaged look that signals readiness. If they pause and seem hesitant, help them out by rephrasing the question or offering an example. Be willing to laugh off false starts and remain human throughout the exchange. Rushing someone before they are ready produces shallow answers and signals impatience. The best insights often emerge after a pause, so resist the urge to fill silence immediately. Giving people space to think demonstrates respect and often yields deeper, more thoughtful responses than rapid-fire questioning would produce.

Shut Up and Listen

This might be the most important principle of all. Let them talk. If you ask a question, let them answer without interruption. Practice being a good conversationalist, which sounds unusual but is necessary for those who find conversation unnatural. Life is about storytelling, persuasion and people. The better you become at conversation, the better

consultant, attorney, banker or marketer you will be. Voltaire said to judge a man by his questions rather than his answers. The same applies to professional conversations. The person who asks the best questions and listens most attentively usually walks away with the deepest insights and the strongest relationship. Earning the right to continue means recognizing that a $200,000-per-hour person who gives you an hour deserves at least $100 of value in return.

- 1Harvard Business Review On Asking Smarter Questions
- 2MindTools On Active Listening
- 3Harvard Business Review On Better Conversations

Summary

Conversation is a two-way street that requires listening, curiosity and authenticity. Know your audience, credentialize yourself subtly, ask focused questions and let them talk. Earn the right to their time by making every interaction worthwhile and memorable.