



Word Power

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Using Your Verbal Assets to Accumulate Relationship Capital

Imagine for just a minute what it would be like to be a highly regarded leader — someone who is respected, transparent, sincere, and genuine. Can you picture everyone wanting to talk with you because you are a great conversationalist? What would it mean to your career if you could use your voice — in both the written and spoken sense — to make a difference in the world?

Seem a little like a fairy tale? It's not. It can happen to you. You can become more dynamic whether you are speaking one-on-one, writing an e-mail to one or many people, or speaking to a group. All it takes is the ability to connect with others.

This section is devoted to making you a powerful communicator regardless of what stage in life you are in or what your role in your career is. By capitalizing on the power of words, you can position yourself as someone who is influential, engaging, and in high demand.

The section covers with techniques for making meaningful conversation that is based in the fine art of asking questions — the kind that creates the

threads of conversation that begin to weave together a relationship. You'll also learn the secret to being memorable, the most powerful communication tool of all, and what to do if you forget a name.

Chapter 6 is full of information that your communications teacher never told you. It includes the three most important mysteries that prevent people from listening to you. You'll be surprised to learn that it has little to do with you. You'll learn to identify the roadblocks and find a way to navigate around them.

This section closes by helping you understand how to use the communication tools available to accommodate any communication need. Using the techniques, you'll be able to design a communication strategy that will help you whether you are looking for a job, organizing a fundraiser, speaking to a client, or working with a team at your office.

Utilizing all the tools in this section will help you garner the respect you've earned. It's easier than you ever imagined. Does this mean that you'll never make a verbal mistake? Of course not, but you'll have the knowledge to make fewer mistakes, overcome them quicker, and make a difference in the lives of others so you enjoy sweeter success.

CHAPTER 4

Leading Meaningful Conversations

I was getting ready to leave for a business trip. I had made plans with my husband, Tom, to drive me to the airport. We went to dinner the night before and we started that familiar “What’s for dinner?” conversation.

Her: What would you like for dinner, dear?

Him: Oh, I don’t know. What would you like?

Her: I don’t have a preference tonight. What are you hungry for?

Him: I don’t care where we go. You decide.

Her: Okay, let’s go get Chinese food.

Him: No, anything but that.

Her: How about barbeque?

Him: No, not that either.

Her: [in a disgusted tone] I thought you didn’t care.

Him: I don’t care. You decide.

And so goes the conversation.

At our house, that conversation is followed next by the question about who is driving to dinner. On that particular evening, when I asked which car we were taking to dinner, Tom said that we had to take mine because his gas tank was empty.

The next morning, I needed to be at the airport at 6:30 a.m. to catch my flight. When I dragged my bags into the living room at 6:15, Tom tells me in a his best “frustrated husband” tone that we have to stop for gasoline, and we were now going to be late.

Not leaving time for that, I assumed that we’d take my car instead. To my

surprise, he announced that taking my car wasn't an option. When I asked why, he explained that he didn't like to drive my car, and we needed to take his. Hmmm ... I'm thinking out loud, "So what — be flexible for a change." Oops! Did I say that out loud? At 6:00 in the morning, I'm not great at solving problems or being tactful and he isn't flexible. The frustration escalated.

As we loudly discussed the gasoline problem while loading my luggage into his car, I quizzed him about *when* he told me that we would need to stop for gasoline in the morning. It sure seemed like the first time that I had heard it. He assured me that he told me the night before. I asked "When?!" and he said, "When we were going to dinner!"

It finally dawned on me — his words on the way to dinner were, "My car is out of gas. You'll have to drive yours." From that, I was supposed to deduce that we would have to allow time to stop to put gas in his car because he didn't like to drive my car and that meant leaving at 6:05.

What I got was an encrypted message. We seldom get lucky enough to work with, marry, or give birth to people who communicate the same way we do. We live in a fast-paced world of encrypted messages, and we don't all communicate the same way. Life requires a focused approach to communication.

The words we choose are important. The quality of the relationships we possess depends on the delicate balance of the spoken word and the implied intention. And when you get to the core of the cause of social anxiety, you'll find a good deal of the cause is rooted in a lack of ability to communicate effectively and confidently.

People in general struggle with making conversation and stating their opinion. Too commonly, people will not engage in conversation because they are unsure how to state their opinion without risk. For many people, the risk of being misunderstood, controversial, or different is too great. Instead, they mutter to themselves inside. This chapter is about understanding what to say and how to say it.

The scarcest commodity today isn't time — it's attention. Ask anyone who has ever organized a meeting with someone who pulled out their Blackberry in the middle of the meeting. Or ask someone who's been to dinner with a friend who took a phone call at the table.

What are you doing when you answer the phone at your desk? Are you paying full attention or scrolling through your e-mail? Ever heard someone clicking away while you talk to her on the phone? They can hear you type!

And speaking of overhearing things while you're on the phone, one of today's most dangerous additions to the home office is the cordless phone. It offers you the ability to do business from your patio or the luxury of fixing yourself a cup of tea while you participate in a conference call. It also provides you the opportunity to use the restroom while you talk on the phone. You might be thinking – what kind of person talks on the phone while they use the toilet? You probably aren't asking that question if you've ever been in a public restroom and had someone in the next stall answer her cell phone when it rang.

This chapter will give you some tools to wade through the world of encrypted messages, misunderstandings, and attention-deprived people.

Creating Meaningful Conversations: It's All About Them

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to create meaningful conversations. Life seems to be full of small talk and shallow conversations. We ask, "How are you?" not because we care but because it's a habit. We talk about what was on television the night before instead of what is in our heart. Conversations aren't made up of questions and answers; they are comments people take turns interjecting without stopping to ask why the other person holds that opinion.

If you broke down every relationship transaction, you'd find that the single element that determined the success of that transaction was your ability to communicate. If you are struggling in a relationship, take a hard look at your ability to get and convey your information. With the right information, you know exactly what that person needs, who they know, how they prefer to receive their information, and how you need to proceed with them next.

The Art of Asking Questions

When I say that you should lead meaningful conversation, what I'm really suggesting is that you take responsibility for leading the conversation. That means asking a series of open-ended questions.

Now there are good open-ended questions such as, "How would you like

for me to handle this?" There are also bad examples of open-ended questions such as, "What kind of a fool do you think I am?" and "What were you thinking?"

My daughter is one of those people who can take any open-ended question and turn it into a closed-ended question. Here are some examples:

- Mom:** "Where would you like to eat supper?"
Daughter: "I don't care."
- Mom:** "What did you do at school today?"
Daughter: "Nothing."
- Mom:** [Watching as her daughter stomps by avoiding eye contact] "How was school today?"
Daughter: "Fine!" [Punctuating the sentence with a slamming bedroom door.]

Sigh. Not everyone is ready to communicate when we are. Closed-ended questions are those that can typically be answered with a short answer. They are difficult to create a discussion with. Open-ended questions are asked in such a way that they require more information to answer. They normally give you enough details to be able to ask another question.

Here are some examples:

- Closed-ended:** How was your weekend?
Open-ended: What did you do this weekend?
- Closed-ended:** How is your daughter?
Open-ended: What does your daughter enjoy doing these days?
Open-ended: What is your daughter doing over the summer?
- Closed-ended:** What was your first car?
Open-ended: Tell me how you got your first car.

Open-ended questions are the fibers that you can use to weave together a meaningful conversation. If you are a budding conversationalist, don't be discouraged if you feel like your questions are goofy. Like attempting a new language in a foreign country, it's the thought that counts. Besides, the more you use it, the easier it will become.

The Value of Meaningful Conversation

There are several benefits of leading meaningful conversation. First, it places the other person at the center of the conversation. It puts them at ease because they can relax and just answer questions. It also puts you at ease because you're not worried about what to say next.

It also enables you to mine for information that you need. Through a series of open-ended questions, you can also determine if your new acquaintance is a potential client for you or someone else you know. Leading the conversation allows you to find out who is in someone's network. Their network includes family, friends, volunteers, and professional contacts.

If you are in a sales role, remember that you are not always selling to the people you meet. Instead, you are teaching them how to sell you to the people who are in their network.

Meaningful conversation also helps you find reasons to follow up. Every good relationship is forged over a series of meaningful conversations. Sometimes you have to be creative to find reasons to contact someone later. If you've asked the right questions, it's much easier. Besides, people don't do business with us the first time they meet us for all kinds of reasons. They may not need our product or service yet or be able to afford what we offer. They may have a good supplier already. However, needs and relationships change, and we need to maintain top-of-mind awareness so they remember us when the time is right.

Another benefit of meaningful conversation is that it allows you to check your customer service level. Your customer may love you but may have some feedback that will help you serve him and other customers better. We sometimes dread feedback but we shouldn't. Even if it's tough feedback, it's better for you to hear it than for the customer to vent to other people. Make sure you are asking questions that provide insight on how you can serve your customer better.

With your customers, it's important to use the Golden Rule AND the Platinum Rule. Just because you are following the Golden Rule by treating them the way *you* want to be treated does not mean that *they* want to be treated that way. Create some meaningful conversation to learn more about them and follow the Platinum Rule: treat them the way they want to be treated.

Allot enough time in each conversation to build rapport. Listen to their responses, show genuine interest, and give them your full attention. They will feel honored that you took the time to talk with them.

Creating Meaningful Conversation With New People

So what do you say when you meet someone new? Part of the anxiety of meeting new people comes from not knowing what to say. Networking is a key first step in forming business relationships because it fills a pipeline with people we need to meet and possibly get to know better. Networkers often default to talking about themselves because they don't know how to initiate meaningful conversation. Relationships aren't forged in one conversation. A foundation of familiarity and trust requires multiple contacts. Creating meaningful conversation gives you the information you need to follow up later to deepen the relationship.

Enter a conversation with a new contact with the purpose of finding out as much about him as possible. Ideally, you want to learn his name, role, and organization he works for. Then, you want to get to know him at a personal level because that is where we discover ways to follow up to form deeper relationships. For instance, if your new acquaintances are businesspeople, you ideally want to know many of these critical details:

- Their name and company (or department if you both work for the same company)
- Role they play in the organization
- Details about their organization
- Their typical customer
- The city they live in
- Information about their family
- Community activities

This is a general list to get you started. Some of these items may seem nosy, but they have genuine value. Everyone you meet has a network that includes his or her family members, friends, and volunteer and professional contacts. Of course, you want to know all the details about their company so you can provide good referrals. However, knowing information about their network will help you discern what you tell them about your company. If we told people everything possible about our company, their

eyes would glaze over. Asking questions allows you to create a logical balance between too much information and not enough.

Using the Meaningful Conversation Template

I teach this template in all of my business communication and networking programs because I found that far too many people are terrified of making conversation. It's perfect to use with new acquaintances and is easy to modify for people from all walks of life. I encourage you to use it as the foundation for your own meaningful conversation.

Hi! I'm Danny Mason. [They will respond with their name. If they don't, it is okay to ask them their name.]

What company are you with?

What is your role with your company?

How long have you been there [or owned it, etc.]?

Tell me more about what your company does. [Listen to understand; ask questions about the company until you understand their business.]

Who is a good prospective client for you?

Are you from this area? [They usually offer information that tells you where they are from, and you can ask about their family located in other geographical areas.]

[If not from your area] **What brings you to this area?**

[If the last question yields information about their spouse]

What does your spouse do?

Do you have family here in the area? [May reveal children, spouse, or parent information.]

Are you involved in any local charities? [Question further if they answer yes. They may also reveal they want to volunteer but don't know where they fit in. Make sure you keep up with local charity activities so you can offer ideas.]

[Begin your close] **"It was great to meet you. Do you have a business card so I can refer you if I come across anyone who needs to know about you?"**

Normally at this point, they want to know more about you or your company because you have been attentive. If they don't, it's probably because they are just nervous or not very skilled in conversation. In a rare case, they may be self-centered and don't care about anyone else. Those

people soon disappear off the business landscape. Think the best of those people anyway.

Here’s why this works: You aren’t just leading the conversation to gather the information you need – you are placing the other person in the spotlight. They feel flattered that you care enough to get to know them. You appear genuine, interested, and gracious – all virtues of the kind of person people like to do business with.

Brainstorm Some Questions for People You’d Like to Know Better

It’s amazing how we march into the same office day after day but don’t get to know the people we work with on a deeper level. Questions can help team members feel understood and valued. It creates an opportunity for you to find out if they are having challenges and need help in their personal or professional life.

List three of your customers or coworkers.

- 1. _____
- 2. _____
- 3. _____

Write five open-ended questions you can ask any of those people. If you need ideas, check out “Questions for Each Stage in Life” on page 227.

- 1. _____

- 2. _____

- 3. _____

- 4. _____

- 5. _____
