



# How to Have Better Conversations

From a blog by David Pollard

*"Human existence takes place in the relational space of conversation. This means that our way of living - that is to say, our human condition - takes place in our form of relating to each other and the world we bring forth in our daily living through conversation." -- Humberto Maturana*

## These are some reasons that people converse:

- to recall past experiences/learnings (**remembering**)
- to articulate, validate, test and confirm your own beliefs and decisions (**reassuring**)
- to acquire and provide information in a context-rich way (**educating**)
- to bring new ideas or perspectives to bear (**conceptualizing**)
- to achieve a specific, desired objective (**prompting action**)
- to persuade someone of your point of view (**convincing**)
- to help (or perhaps hurt) others (**assisting**)
- to help make up your own mind (**thinking through**)
- for fun/entertainment (**entertaining**)
- just to spend time with other people (**socializing**)

## Nine do's and don'ts for good conversations:

- listen as much as you talk, give and take, share the 'conversation space' fairly
- prepare for the conversation by researching the subject and other participants in advance
- be honest and forthcoming, and reciprocate others' candor
- don't gossip (pass along rumor, or talk about people behind their back) or complain
- be willing to put forth and defend your reasons for differing
- keep your cool and your sense of humor

- if you don't feel understood, re-articulate your points
- avoid conversing with people who manipulate, deceive, bully or condescend
- if the viewpoints are too different, or the issue too emotional, consider whether the conversation might be futile

**Here's a 'cheat sheet' of Ten Steps to Great Conversations**, in the approximate order that they apply during the course of a conversation, that you can think about and keep in front of you while you practice to become a better conversationalist:

1. **Prepare:** Research the subject and your co-conversationalists in advance. Get an idea of their expectations, their individual objectives (from Marcus' list of ten purposes above) and the roles they will want or try to play. Get a sense of their different communication styles (assertiveness, openness, tentativeness, need for reassurance etc.) and prepare to try to accommodate them. Assess the degree of trust, honesty and fairness you can expect from each participant and what bearing that will have on the tone of the conversation and achievability of your and others' objectives. If there is little likelihood of objectives being achieved, assess whether the conversation might be so frustrating and futile that it would be best not to have it at all.
2. **Set the Stage:** Try to get everyone to articulate up front their objectives and expectations from the conversation. It may make sense to actually suggest 'roles' for people to achieve synergistic objectives (e.g. have one person 'interview' the other).
3. **Listen with Your Whole Body:** While others are speaking, pay attention to what they're saying and what their eye, face, hand and body language is 'saying' -- even conversationalists' proximity to each other can communicate a great deal about their engagement and reaction to the conversation. Be patient and let each speaker finish, even if they drone on. Understand and appreciate the many cultural differences in conversational styles and body language, and incorporate that understanding in your interpretation of what you're hearing.
4. **Collaborate:** A good conversation is like a dance, with give and take. It is more than just iterative, with people taking turns being active and passive. If you learn what it takes to be a good collaborator, you'll also be a good conversationalist.
5. **Think Through Your Response:** The hardest part of conversation is doing three things simultaneously: (a) listening fully to what others are saying even while you're preparing to respond, (b) organizing your thoughts and

thinking through what points you want to make, and (c) deciding how you want to make those points to be articulate and persuasive. I don't know how to do this well. I do know that the best conversationalists somehow manage this juggling act.

6. **Listen to Yourself Talk:** Just as they listen to others, great conversationalists have this knack for listening to themselves and correcting, on the fly, what they're saying that is unclear or subject to misinterpretation. Most of us, when we finally get the floor, just blurt it out. Again, this seems to be a skill that only comes with practice, but it also requires calmness and 'mindfulness' -- full engagement with and presence in the conversation. Those of us whose attention is easily diverted have a real challenge acquiring this skill.
7. **Incorporate Effective Speaking and Facilitation Techniques:** Good speakers are generally good conversationalists. They are engaged but dispassionate. They are attentive and responsive to their audience and 'let them in' to the conversation. They relate stories (with their rich imagery and context) often in their conversation. They offer clever, stimulating and imaginative ideas, thinking 'on their feet' and changing direction as appropriate, instead of just sticking with the conversation they imagined they were going to have before it began. They offer more information than they receive in return. They are facilitators, defusing conflict and steering the conversation back on topic when necessary. They look at the person they are conversing with, both while talking and listening. They are absolutely genuine.
8. **Resummarize the Conversation, During and After:** It's a good habit (and often illuminating) for each speaker to reiterate the key points made by the last speaker before stating their own points -- it ensures they were listening, and that the previous speaker's points were properly understood. Same thing at the end of the conversation -- summarize what you think was learned, what new ideas were surfaced, and what decisions and actions were agreed on, and ask others to critique your summary. Even better, use a mindmap to track the information/learnings, ideas and agreed-upon decisions/actions in real time as the conversation proceeds, displayed so all of the participants can see it and, if you've got something wrong or missed something, amend or clarify it.
9. **Think About How It Could Have Been Better:** What would you do differently if you had it to do over? Did you sense that some participants failed to meet their objectives? Were disengaged? Wanted to leave? Did leave? What can you learn from that?

10. **Develop, Teach & Communicate Simple Conversation Protocols:** Some conversations use graceful, tacit signals (a nod, a raised hand) or props (the talking stick) to guide the flow of the conversation without the need for interruption or distraction. Great conversationalists quietly 'teach' others (by example) signals and protocols that can be used to welcome additional participants to the conversation, and to encourage good behaviours and discourage disruptive, destructive and unproductive behaviours, many of which do not require saying a word. It's fascinating to watch a group of people who have learned such protocols quickly, effectively and gracefully disarm a bully, a liar, a manipulator, or a conversation-hog.

And, of course, the eleventh step, necessary to become competent at the other ten: *Practice, practice, practice.*

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