Modern Etiquette-When striking up conversation, it's not about you

By Mary M. Mitchell

LONDON Oct 28 Colleagues and friends ask me all the time, "What do I say to people when I meet them for the first time?"

Behind the question lies the real uncertainty: "What can I say to engage them, so they think I'm interesting to talk to, so that they like me?" Notice all the "I"s in those sentences. That's a big clue.

If you want to be truly interesting to your conversational partners, be interested in them. If you really think about it, the people you consider artful conversationalists are most likely wonderful listeners.

They know how to take their egos out of what is being said, how to be present, and how to be genuinely interested in the other person.

Most of us feel awkward making conversation, because, while we're supposed to be paying attention to the other person, we're actually thinking about what to say next.

And at the same time, we are giving ourselves a lot of negative self-talk that might sound like, "I haven't a clue what to say here. She/he must think I'm really stupid."

Imagine that you could focus a movie camera on yourself. You can take this to the bank - when that lens is trained on you, you're bound to be a conversational dud.

On the other hand, turn that camera onto the other person and watch what happens. The gift of your time and attention showered on him or her will make the other person blossom, I guarantee it.

As that person relaxes and opens up, your own self-confidence gets a big boost. It never fails.

Small talk is a safety net. Superficially, it has a bad reputation, yet consider this: those first few moments provide us with valuable information about the other person through their body language, enthusiasm, and choice of words.

Small talk is like a gentle dance on a first date - no commitments yet, only the possibility of a relationship. And in that first gentle dance there are no threatening, invasive gestures or words.

Make no mistake, small talk is crucial, because that's when we determine whether we want to take the relationship further.

It's worth practicing small talk. My dad used to force us to practice at dinner every night. I hated it. Now I am grateful for the experience. Our families are great research laboratories.

Listening, truly listening, is the key that opens doors to the treasures of any relationship. Most of us say much more with what we don't articulate, and a real listener will understand.


A listener hears. When we listen, the gift of our attention bestows value on the person who is speaking. It's a gift. It's the ultimate win-win.

It's so easy to get it backwards, spending all one's time and energy thinking about what we're going to say.
A student once asked noted Harvard scholar Charles Copeland, "Why are there no courses in conversation? Is there anything I can do to learn the art of conversation?"

"Of course there is," answered Copeland, "and if you'll just listen, I'll tell you what it is."

There ensued a long and uncomfortable silence which the student finally interrupted with, "Well, I'm listening." "You see," Copeland said triumphantly, "you're learning already."

Listening takes discipline and practice. Especially listening to one person at a time.

Think about how demeaning it is when, mid-sentence, we see the other person's attention wander, distracted by someone else's voice or presence.

Then there's the challenge of being completely uninterested in what someone is saying. As my mentor Letitia Baldrige put it, "Politeness decrees that you must listen to be kind; intelligence decrees that you must listen to learn."

ASK AN EASY ONE

Here are some ways to get a conversation going: Ask an easy-to-answer question about something in your surroundings, such as, "On the way here, I noticed four different coffee shops at one intersection. That's a lot of caffeine per square foot."

Or, "Isn't this a glorious day? Autumn's in this part of the country are just the best. Are you from the area?"

The person might say yes, and then you can ask what he likes most about it.

If the answer is, "No, I'm from Ohio," you can ask "What was it like growing up in the Midwest? What brought you here?"

Once you've gotten a signal that the other person wants to talk, say something like, "What do you like to do when you're not working?"

Above all, be yourself. If you are naturally reserved, don't try to be an extrovert. When you focus on the other person, authentically and genuinely, your personal style will win the day.

(Mary M. Mitchell has written several books on the subject of etiquette, now in 11 languages, most recently "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Modern Manners Fast Track" and "Woofs to the Wise". She is the founder of executive training consultancy The Mitchell Organization (www.themitchellorganization.com). The opinions expressed are her own.)

(Editing by Michael Roddy)