THE ART OF PROFESSIONAL CONNECTIONS

Seven Steps to Impressive Greetings and Confident Interactions

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Chapter 5 Section

OVERCOMING TOPIC DILEMMAS AND AWKWARD MOMENTS

We have all encountered awkward situations, and how we deal with them often determines the success of the conversation. In this section, we will discuss areas that disrupt the flow of the conversation, topics that are inappropriate or create tension, and how to deal with uncomfortable situations, cultural differences, and language issues.

Develop a Conversational Flow

Awkwardness may occur at the start of a conversation, during uncomfortable pauses, or when trying to bring the conversation to a close. As previously mentioned during the conversation DNA section, it is important to pay attention to the context of the discussion (purpose), body language, and nonverbal (communication style) clues as the conversation progresses.

Here are some tips to help get you started:

- When you are meeting with people you do not know and you want to get the conversation moving, ask a question, pick up where the conversation left off, or reference a current event.
- If the discussion reaches an impasse, or the other person starts looking around or at their watch, either change topics to something more interesting or consider bringing the conversation to an end.
- When the conversation needs to reach a conclusion, thank the other individual or individuals for their time, let them know how much you enjoyed the conversation, and suggest a follow-up meeting if more dialogue is needed.
- To avoid unintentionally dominating the conversation, conclude the conversation by saying, “You have answered all of my questions. Do you have any questions that I can answer for you?”

Never use harsh or unusual words when there is a common or easy way to say something. Be especially careful to avoid industry-related terms and phrasing. In cases where
industry jargon or acronyms may actually help the conversation, mix in some non-jargon occasionally to ensure that everyone understands. Read the body language to ensure that everyone is following along.

Finding Appropriate Topics
As in many cases where you are dealing with other people, there are no hard and fast rules for what is appropriate. In situations where the participants have strong rapport, the conversation may broach topics that would be out of line in a different context. Given that, most topics designed to inform (e.g., fitness, current events, books, movies, sports, hobbies or special interests, occupations) or directly related to the event at hand are generally safe.

Unfortunately, many people speak before they think. One individual may consider a comment offensive that another individual considers humorous. Be sure that you set the better example by paying attention to body language and using caution when the topic changes to something that may be out of line.

The biggest difference between an appropriate or inappropriate topic is how you address it. You can talk about a special exercise program you have started, but do not discuss your operation or go into detail about an illness you recently experienced. Watch for body language cues. If a topic is uncomfortable, the body language will communicate the discomfort. Promptly apologize or drop the topic and move on to another one.

Inappropriate Topics

If you sense that the topic has gotten into an offensive area, you can change the subject to something more neutral in order to get the conversation on a more comfortable path. This puts you back into a leadership role, and moves to something that is less offensive.

—Terry Banks, Toyota

In general, any topic can be inappropriate if discussed with a lot of negativity or brought up at the wrong time. In addition, there are certain areas that put stress on any conversation. The following inappropriate topics can create discomfort and possibly end a valuable
connection or business relationship.

- Revealing or complaining about personal issues (health problems, weight/diet issues, finances, unemployment, bad situations, etc.) with someone who isn’t interested.
- Sex, politics or religion
- Strong opinions about controversial topics out of context
- Off-color or discriminating jokes, sarcasm or damaging gossip
- Awkward comments about gender-related, generational, or cultural situations

Even asking where people work may be risky. If they have been outplaced due to company cutbacks, they will have difficulty responding. Instead, ask about their expertise or profession.

A good conversationalist has the ability to make conversation comfortable for everyone by leveling the playing field. However, awkwardness can always occur. In situations where levels of comfort vary, find topics that are less controversial to get started.

**Strategies for Inappropriate Questions or Topics**

We tend to feel obligated to answer when someone asks a question that makes us feel uncomfortable. Though you should resist the pressure to answer an inappropriate question, you do need to be diplomatic in your response.

When topics make you feel uncomfortable, diplomatically move on to another subject, paraphrase with something like, “Did you mean to say . . .” or politely excuse yourself from the conversation. Alternatively, when the conversation gets too personal or you do not feel comfortable with the subject, politely say so and ask that the subject be changed or excuse yourself.

*Consider the following strategies:*

**Decline to participate.** When you choose not to participate in a conversation, it’s not just what you say, but how you say it that makes the difference in how others will perceive you. A refusal should not feel like a rejection. Avoid a defensive tone and keep your facial expression relaxed.
One technique is to take the high road. If you consistently think in terms of saying things that you wouldn’t mind seeing on the front page of a newspaper (or emailed to your mother), it will keep you in good shape. In some cases, people will test you with inappropriate topics to see how you react; do not be sucked in!

—Terry Banks, Toyota

Pause and reflect. The first step to maintaining your composure may be to pause for a moment to think through your next steps. You can accomplish this by asking for the requester to restate the question, or merely pausing to think over the answer. Obviously, you don’t want to wait too long before responding, but it is important that your response is appropriate to the situation.

Change the subject or note a distraction. Instead of answering the question, look away and mention the distraction. For example, “Did you notice . . .?” Typically, the offending party will then realize that the question was not appropriate and drop it.

Gently lead the person away from the question. If you are asked how much something cost, reply with “more than I wanted to pay” or “I was fortunate to get a really good buy.” Immediately following the comment, take the conversation in a different direction.

Defer to someone else. Just because the topic is not appropriate for you does not necessarily mean that someone else will not want to pursue the subject. In these cases, you can either listen in or fade into the background. The topic may run its course, and you will be ready to become engaged in the next discussion point.

Offer a vague answer. Acknowledge the question, but do not answer it. You can accomplish this by paraphrasing with a statement. You are asked, “How is your daughter doing with the divorce?” Answer: “Thank you for asking about my daughter; she is fine.”

These are just a few examples to get you thinking about ways to handle awkward situations. The main point here is to deter or reroute an inappropriate question without offending or embarrassing anyone.
Handling Personal Situations
In a society that likes to share too much information, it can be very challenging to avoid questions that are taboo, too controversial, or too personal. If one slips, simply apologize and take it back. However, there are people who like to discuss topics that are contentious. Be a good listener and try not to be argumentative. Remember: questions about the family can be considered intrusive. Refrain from talking about religion, politics, and historically sensitive subjects, such as past wars and conflicts. These topics are best for private moments away from work with close friends and family members who share your views.

We live in an age of total disclosure and some individuals do not know where to draw the line. Regardless of what side of the conversation you are on (speaker or listener), be discreet. For personal questions, it really comes down to the level of rapport or intimacy that you share with the other person, and how you direct your question. In all cases, be discreet and demonstrate respect.

Some individuals perceive personal questions as intrusive, while others enjoy talking about their personal life and family. Pay close attention to nonverbal cues. If you ask a personal question such as “How is your husband (or wife)?” and you sense hesitation, change the subject. Instead of asking a direct personal question, you might phrase it differently. For example, “How is your family?” This is less targeted and allows for a broader response.

Marital Status:
- Divorced. When you learn that someone has recently divorced, just say you are sorry and wish him or her well, period! Then transition to a different topic of conversation.

- Single versus married. Single people hate to be asked dating-related questions just like married people without children do not like to be asked if they have or plan to have children.

Emotional Issues
When people have emotional baggage or are dealing with a personal hurt, they will often look for someone to unload on. Sometimes it just pours out unintentionally. You may have said something (or something happened) that triggered the moment, and it just came pouring out. This can make a conversation awkward for the recipient. The best thing to do in most cases is to listen, show empathy with your facial expression, and then steer the
conversation to positive things. Do not bring your personal baggage into the conversation as a way to show empathy unless it contains a lesson that will help put the distressed person at ease. The challenge is to avoid going on and on about your own baggage in the process.

If the person still needs to talk after you have shown empathy and attempted to diplomatically redirect the conversation, show compassion and listen. By listening with empathy, you create positive emotional currency that will help solidify the relationship and possibly build a real friendship. However, if you are asked for advice, be careful! You do not want to overstep your bounds. Demonstrating that you care by listening is the better option.

**Death**

When you learn that someone has lost a loved one, it makes you feel that you have to show empathy and comment. This is not necessarily the case. If the subject comes up, be sensitive and offer your condolences; then transition to a different topic of conversation. Be careful not to stir emotional pain. If you do, you might want to suggest a break (e.g., coffee break) into order to regroup.

**Dealing with Awkward Subjects**

Too often, differences in lifestyle interfere with conversation because of the awkwardness or discomfort that surfaces. Keep an open mind and do not judge every situation by your own standards. Even if you do not share the other person’s beliefs, you can learn something. Listen without passing judgment by focusing on professional topics, not personal choices.

**Money**

Topics involving money are the most difficult. Do not fixate on money or on how much this or that cost. (Exempt from this faux pas are people who discuss money as it relates to work.) If you need to talk about money, make sure you determine the other person’s sensitivity. If you sense that he or she does not want to discuss a money concern or issue, move on to another topic.

If you are having tough financial times, do not complain and go into detail. Simply say, “Things are temporarily difficult.” On the same note, do not act as if things are very prosperous when they are just the opposite. You will come across as being superficial. Trust human nature. Everyone has experienced difficult times at one time or another.
Money-related topics to avoid:

- An individual’s salary, assets, investments, or bonus
- How much one paid for a personal possession or excursion
- Divorce terms or child support

Same-Sex Relationships

For the most part, sexual preference is a nonissue with individuals who are more liberal. Fear and discomfort typically create complexity where there is not any. Maintain the expectation that everyone is on the same side and pursuing the same goal. Enjoy people as people.

If you are gay or lesbian and you witness or sense discomfort, go to the person who might be uncomfortable and with a pleasant demeanor and tone strike up a conversation about something safe and unrelated.

**For example:**

Jim works at a company that is very open and has several gay and lesbian employees in his department. It is not an issue. However, his wife, Neva, has a different point of view. Jim invited his superior Sylvia to dinner along with a few others from his department. Sylvia asked if she could bring her partner. Jim nervously said yes and did not want to disclose his wife’s feelings.

Upon arrival, Sylvia immediately sensed Neva’s discomfort and discreetly put her at ease by commenting on her decorating and table arrangement. It hit the right note because Neva’s hobby was making her own centerpieces. This gave Neva an opportunity to talk about something she loved to do, and her discomfort became a nonissue.

Do not talk about gay/lesbian issues. Focus on commonalities that are not gender related in nature. Also, do not make a point of saying you are straight or liberal, or give any reason to imply that the situation might be awkward.

Disability Challenges

Do not use the word “handicap” when someone is disabled. Use the word “disability” instead. Try to avoid phrases like “See you later” to someone who is blind. Instead, you
might say, “We will talk again soon.” However, do not overreact if you catch yourself saying a “seeing” word. Blind people will know what you mean, and prefer to be treated normally.

These are just a few of the most common faux pas. While you can use the tips above as guidelines, there are no right and wrong responses. Much depends on the environment and the personalities involved. Use discretion and be diplomatic at all times.

Regardless of the situation, conversation should be elegant and effortless, fun or engaging. Everyone brings something to the conversation. This is what deepens relationships, and in some cases, deepening the relationship is why the person came to you to talk about a sensitive topic. However, if you choose not to deepen that particular relationship, simply continue to show respect and professional courtesy.

Removing Cultural Barriers
We live in a multicultural work environment. Consequently, language issues are becoming more and more common. This section will address the barriers and offer tips to make conversation more understandable.

Language variances are probably the biggest barriers to having a conversation with someone who speaks with an accent. When speaking with someone for whom English is a second language, speak slowly and distinctly, pronouncing syllables and consonants. In media language, this is called “speaking in sound bites.”

Speaking in sound bites refers to being clear and to the point (or more easily understood). This is accomplished by speaking in short sentences or inserting brief pauses between thoughts.

When talking with people who are not comfortable with English, use language that is simple (small words, short sentences). If someone’s vocabulary is limited, intellectual language will not impress him or her, it will cause confusion. Saying things in a simple way is sometimes harder, but it shows a much greater respect for the other person. If you listen very carefully to television dialogue (or read the subtitles at the bottom of your television screen), you will note that simple English is used.
Be patient with accents. It is not easy to translate from one language to another in one’s mind; in fact, it can become fatiguing and confusing. Most importantly, listen very carefully and do not show signs of impatience. This courtesy is important to both your customers and coworkers who do not have a strong command of the English language.

When interacting with someone who has a strong accent or speaks very little English, do not speak loudly. They can hear you; they just have a difficult time with the language. Maintain a friendly appearance, avoid looking frustrated, and speak in sound bites. This is not easy, but necessary. There will be a stronger effort to understand as a result.

If unsure of what was said, paraphrase back to the individual, and then ask if you understand correctly. Do not be embarrassed if you were incorrect. Listen again, and try to understand what you misunderstood. You will be admired for your patience and willingness to make the effort.

When words fail, try pantomime and creative gestures, or point to objects that can relay the message that you are trying to send. Or, set up a way to get an overview up front. This can provide a frame of reference for both parties.

Humor does not travel too well from one culture to another. It is best to refrain from humor in a group setting. If you do share a humorous story, be prepared to explain and not embarrass someone who did not understand the point of the humor.

Tips for removing language barriers:

- Speak slowly and clearly (not loudly).
- Face the person to whom you are speaking.
- Use simple gestures, examples, pictures, and drawings to clarify your meaning.
- Use simple, everyday words.
- Avoid slang, idioms, and expressions that require knowledge or familiarity with mainstream American life and culture.

Tips for understanding heavily accented English:

- Prepare a written outline of what you plan to say or ask in advance, and ask your international guest to do the same. This will help keep you focused.
- Listen for key words rather than trying to understand the entire sentence or
comment.
- Try to capture the overall meaning of what is being said.
- Paraphrase what you think the person has said.
- Do not hesitate to ask for clarification or admit that you did not understand a statement or question.
- Consult with a language expert regarding the overall language. Ask questions like, “What type of sentence structure or word order does the language have?”

If English is not spoken, use interpreters (spoken word) and translators (written word) as needed. If the interaction is spoken, both sides should have their own interpreters. Remember to speak to the individual, not the interpreter.

**Unique Expressions That Confuse Conversation**

Colloquialisms are metaphorical or activity-related expressions. A cliche is a trite expression that is unique to an age group, geographical region, special interest or lifestyle, hobby, or sporting activity. Sometimes such expressions are unique to an individual, but when they find their way into a multicultural business environment, they can make conversation confusing and create misunderstandings.

Sanjay Gupta, a University of Chicago international student from India, was participating in a group discussion. He said something profound and another member of the group commented, “Get out of here!” Confused, Sanjay started to walk away. Surely, he had said something wrong. Concerned, the group called out, “Sanjay, where are you going?” A confused Sanjay replied, “You told me to get out of here.” They then replied, “Hey! That is not what we meant. What you said was awesome.” Sanjay returned, eventually discovered the humor in the situation, and quickly learned about that particular American colloquialism.

This type of dialogue occurs in all cultures; however, American culture is probably the most notorious for using language shortcuts and metaphors. There are times when typical American colloquialisms (e.g., baseball jargon) are not of interest, but conversations that include them can offer a better understanding of commonly used colloquialisms.

No matter what the topic of conversation is (sports, hobby, lifestyle) listen carefully for
unique expressions and learn their meaning in their original context. Then when they find their way into group conversations, you are not lost. This is especially important to individuals new to the American-English speaking environment.

**Remain in the Control Seat**

You will, occasionally, find yourself in an awkward or uncomfortable conversation. It might involve an inappropriate or uncomfortable topic, an issue that is too personal or emotional, or some kind of cultural or language barrier.

A language barrier is often caused by variations in phonetics, the rhythm and speed by which a language is spoken, or a strong accent. You become frustrated from your inability to understand what is being said, and this can cause you or others to get impatient.

**The best course of action is to . . .**

- remain in control of your emotions and reactions;
- recognize what is causing the discomfort;
- paraphrase what you think you heard and allow yourself to be corrected;
- speak slowly and clearly; and
- be as discreet and diplomatic as possible.

Do not show frustration regardless of the situation. Instead, learn and enjoy!

Overall, focus on putting the other person at ease, ask noninvasive questions, and think before you speak to ensure that what you say will not be misinterpreted. In some cases, just being genuine will have the best impact.

The next chapter will address the important role of listening in more detail.