

Meeting People & Starting Conversations

Introduction

Meeting people and the ability to strike up conversations is an important part of being a leader. These skills are the corner stone of making connections with those inside and those outside our networks. Peter Murphy of howtotalkwithconfidence.com (2006) tells us that these are the skills that define highly successful people, cause other people to listen to you and follow your lead.

Lesson Objectives

At the end of the lesson, learners will be able to:

1. Describe the formula for meeting people
2. Develop a set of conversation starters designed to work in their particular situation

Lesson Content

It was once said that speaking in public was the number one greatest fear among people. Part of that fear is speaking to strangers. Knowing that, it is easy to see why, for some people, meeting people and striking up conversations may be very difficult. As leaders, however, it is important that we make strong connections, with those that we know, as well as those that we do not.

A Formula for Meeting People

If you were to find yourself in a situation where you are in a room full of people to meet, here is a simple formula that might provide useful to you.

1. Spot someone to talk to.

First, look around the room. If it is a large room and you can not scan the whole room while standing in one place, circulate, scanning as you go. Scan from corner to corner, count to ten as you go and really look to see the people in the room.

Next, identify various situations that you see during your scans. Are there heated conversations taking place? If so, those are situations to avoid. Do you see wall flowers, standing alone? They might be just the people to approach and strike up a conversation. Is there food? If so, that tends to be a hot bed of activity since people like to stand near the food. What other situations might you encounter? Being able to identify situations where starting conversations would be most advantageous

2. Make the Approach

Don't sneak up on people. Who wants to talk to someone who just frightened them? When you identify a situation that you feel is ideal to strike up a conversation, approach that person or people from the front. If you have been introduced to that person before, give a small wave to signal that you remember them. If you are with someone you know, have them break the ice by approaching people that they know.

3. Greet People

Just like you wouldn't want to talk to someone who just scared you, you also want to know with whom you're speaking. After you approach someone you've not yet met, the first thing you should do is introduce yourself. Remember to shake hands. If you've approached someone you've only briefly met, say hello. You may also want to add a secondary greeting after you say hello. Again, if you've met the person before, tell them that it is good to see them again. If you've just met someone, tell them that it is a pleasure to meet them. Something important to remember is that you should never interrupt a conversation. Instead, wait for a natural pause in the conversation, and then extend your greetings.

4. The Conversation

As you move from your greeting to the actual conversation, there are some things to keep in mind. First, be funny. By sharing a funny story that happened to you, others will open up. Just remember to keep the story appropriate. If you can't think of a funny story, a short joke or fun saying will work just the same. Again, remember to keep it appropriate and make sure that it fits in the context of the conversation and the setting.

Next, ask open ended questions. Open ended questions allow the conversation to ebb and flow where it will. Questions also allow people to create their own conversations. Questions also bring growth to the conversation, allowing people to add information about themselves and their experiences.

As you move through the conversation, do your best to make the other people involved feel comfortable. Allow people to bring their flavor to the conversation. Individuals might find some topics more comfortable than others, so permit topics to come and go as people feel comfortable. Let others offer up topics of conversation that are of interest to them. More than the conversation, in order to make others feel comfortable be aware of invading others' personal space. Be vigilant in making sure that you maintain a comfortable distance for the situation.

You find that as you move through a conversation, some topics will be more popular than others; in that there are just some topics upon which more people can converse. Proven conversation starters are key in this situation. With a set of proven conversation starters, appropriate for your audience, if you find that people are not joining in the conversation, you can steer it in such a way where more are apt to participate.

5. The Exit

You want to leave the conversation by making people feel relaxed and easy going, not upset or up tight. Some of the ways to exit a conversation would be to excuse yourself to attend to some business, go get something to eat, etc. If at any time a conversation turns in a direction that makes you uncomfortable, these way to extricate yourself will also be appropriate.

Developing Conversation Starters

Before you find yourself in a conversation situation, it is important to develop a list of conversation starters. These may change depending on the situation, so just developing one list, may not be enough. For example, when working with a group of teens who represent the 4-H organization, we stress the importance of developing lists for topics with younger 4-H members, their peer group,

and with adults. Below, you will see example conversation starters (open ended questions and statements) that have been developed for use with our teens.

Starters with Younger Members

- How long have you been in 4-H?
- Tell me about the projects that you take.
- Tell me about your 4-H club(s).
- Tell me about your school.
- What kinds of things do you enjoy when you're not doing 4-H?

Starters with Peers

- Tell me about the activities you do in 4-H.
- What classes do you take in school?
- Tell me about your county fair/round-up/etc.
- What is your county 4-H program like?
- What do you plan to do when school is out?

Starters with Adults

- Tell me about your job. How did you decide on that field/position?
- What got you involved in the 4-H program? How long have you been involved?
- What brought you to this event?

Reflection Questions

- What makes you nervous about starting conversations? What is exciting about starting conversations?
- What is the formula used to meet people? How can you implement the formula in your particular situation? Which steps of the formula might present the most challenge for you? Which might be the easiest?
- How can you develop conversation starters that are appropriate for your situation? What might be some starters that you can use?

References:

Peter Murphy. (2006). howtotalkwithconfidence.com. Received via email communication on July 13, 2006.