

# **STYBEL PEABODY & ASSOCIATES, INC.**



Maryanne Peabody and Dr. Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. Its mission is to partner with clients to pass the leadership baton while reinforcing its demonstrating its values to stakeholders. For more information, contact [peabody@stybelpeabody.com](mailto:peabody@stybelpeabody.com)

## **How to Boost Your Reputation and Career:**

### **Be Known as a Conversationalist.**

There is a distinction to be made between communication and conversation. Communication is transmitting information in one direction. Examples would include confirming dates, inviting people to a meeting, wishing a colleague a happy vacation, and such. Emails and texts are inexpensive and convenient ways to communicate.

Conversation, on the other hand, is about exchanging ideas with an attitude of respect. Email and texts are inappropriate media tools for conversation. (Stybel Peabody, 2020).

David Brooks is an American conservative political and cultural commentator who writes for *The New York Times*. He has also been a commentator on National Public Radio and the PBS Newshour.

*How to Know a Person* is Brook's latest book. His interest in the skills of conversation is in line with what we see as the need to distinguish yourself at work in the age of artificial intelligence.

### **Are You a Conversationalist?**

Brook writes:

“The purpose of this book is to help us become more skilled at the art of seeing others and making them feel seen, heard, and understood. When I started researching this subject, I had no clue what this skill consisted of. But I did know that exceptional people in many fields had taught themselves versions of this skill.”

The skill he refers to is “conversationalism.” Brooks has chosen a good word. “Empathy” is the ability to understand the feelings of others and is part of being a good conversationalist. A good conversationalist leads people on a mutual expedition toward understanding.

### **Are You Showing Others that You Are Paying Attention?**

We were working with a manager and suggesting that he smile at the start of 1:1 meetings with direct reports. His response was, “That is not being genuine. I am not happy. I have nothing to smile about.”

We responded that he could change the name of “smiling” to “showing teeth.” Smiling may signal your internal emotional status. But “smiling” or “showing teeth”

also is an external communications device to signal to others that they are welcome and you appreciate their presence.

Multitasking assumes we can pay attention to others “in degrees.” For example, our client was simultaneously meeting with us while texting a customer. One of our colleagues told us that when she was in the hospital, her father sat next to her bed and read the newspaper. We have seen mothers play with their children while reading emails.

Conversation is a binary concept. You are engaged or you are not engaged. People know when you are fully engaged. Some suggestions for showing you are engaged: lean forward towards the speaker, look directly into their eyes, and nod your head when appropriate.

We recommend that you take out your mobile phone at the beginning of a business meeting and show the other person you are shutting it off. This sends a symbolic message: “You are the most important item on my agenda right now.”

#### "Loud Listening"

Good conversationalists are “loud listeners.” You will hear them saying, “aha,” “aah,” and “mmmmm.” Such verbalizations do not imply agreement; they convey that you take the speaker seriously.

When you say, “Let me summarize in my words what I heard you say,” you are explicitly not agreeing with the content. You are summarizing what you heard and inviting the speaker to correct you if you misheard. You are explicitly telling the speaker that what was said was so important you want to translate the ideas into your own words.

#### Be a Mirror

There are specialized cells in the cerebral cortex of brains known as mirror neurons. The brain vicariously mirrors the actions of the organism it is observing. You can see this dramatically with infants mirroring the facial movements of mothers. Mirror neurons are the basic neurological foundations of empathy.

Great conversationalists like to mirror their guests. For example, if you are having dinner with another person and she orders a vodka martini, you would order the same drink. And if she orders sparkling water, you order the same.

Mimic the other person's posture. You do the same if the speaker crosses her right leg over her left leg. Speakers are so deep into themselves they ignore what you are doing with your body. But an inner voice tells the speaker, "I can relate to this person."

Smile when the speaker smiles. Frown when the other person frowns. Good conversationalists can even mimic the speed with which the other person vocalizes words.

Brooks relates an interesting research conclusion that underscores the importance of mirroring facial expressions. Patients with facial Botox injections are often less able to furrow their brows. This simple physical limitation also makes them less able to perceive another person's worry.

### **Look for the 'Gem'**

People may enter a meeting with you because of disagreement. The "gem statement" is a core value all parties can agree upon even though they may disagree. They may want to focus on what divides them. A conversationalist focuses on what unites them.

For example, "I appreciate that you and Janice have a profound disagreement over balancing cost versus responding to the dangers posed by cybersecurity. I also appreciate that you both are committed to ensuring that we do nothing to damage customer trust."

Amid vocal contention, ignoring the gem uniting conflicting parties is easy. The conversationalist is constantly looking for the gem.

### **Summary**

We have discussed behavioral techniques you can employ at work to be perceived as a conversationalist. Conversation is not the same as communication.

Having a reputation as a conversationalist is a good career strategy. Your company does not lack talent who know how to forcefully present their ideas

while discounting contradictory ideas. How many colleagues are perceived as conversationists?

Artificial Intelligence will increasingly make it easy to obtain information and present information. Being perceived as having good working knowledge puts you on a path to being replaced by AI. If you have a reputation for being a smart conversationalist, your career is likely to have more longevity.

### **References**

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Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc. partners with companies to pass the leadership baton while demonstrating its values to stakeholders.

Core services revolve around retained search limited to Board Directors, CEOs, CFOs, and COOs; relationship management coaching at this level; and C-Suite Outplacement.

The firm runs two monthly podcasts: (1) “Seat at the Table,” a case-oriented forum limited to invited Board Directors, and (2) “CHRO Forum,” a case-oriented forum limited to invited Chief Human Resource Officers.

Since 2011, *Psychology Today* has published Stybel Peabody’s perspectives on leadership and career management. There are nearly 700,000 downloads.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/platform-success>

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