

Talk Tools to Help You Converse and Connect

Turn the conversational focus from “I” to “You.”

Submitted by Sam Horn, Author of POP!, Tongue Fu! and Got Your Attention?

A longtime friend of BNI, Sam Horn is an expert at conversation—which is essential to great networking. Sam mentioned BNI in her book Pop!, and Ivan is excited to personally recommend her new book Got Your Attention? Here she shares her best advice for becoming an intriguing conversationalist so you develop meaningful relationships.

“Maybe everybody in the whole world is scared of each other.” – author John Steinbeck

An engineer told me, “When I was a kid, I couldn’t wait to grow up because I thought confidence came with the territory. I thought once I got to be an adult I would never again worry what to talk about or be scared to meet people. Boy, was I wrong. Where can I get a confidence pill?”

I said, “The way to get a confidence pill is to approach people like a caring journalist. Journalists aren’t scared to meet anyone, because they know how to bypass chit-chat and genuinely engage people. They ask intriguing, open-ended questions, listen intently to what’s being said and ask follow-up questions that get to the heart of the matter.”

He said, “Sounds great, but how can I do that?”

Here are the four “talk tools” I gave him on how to get past platitudes (which make us a bore, snore or chore) and create meaningful conversations and connections.

Replace standard openers with questions that cut to the core of what people care about. No more, “What do you do?” Instead try, “What’s something coming up you’re excited about?” or “What do you do when you’re not working?”

Ask for advice. Magazine founder Malcolm Forbes said, “The way to a man’s heart is through his opinion.” The way to anyone’s heart is through their advice. Asking, “What do you suggest I do?” gives people an opportunity to be an expert. Instead of swapping petty small talk, you’re on your way to a pro-active, productive exchange.

Use the two magic words: “Tell me.” Many people start conversations with closed questions that relegate the other person to grunting a one-word response. For example, “Did you enjoy the BNI meeting?” “Yeah.” “How was school today?” “Fine.” That’s hard work. “Tell me” transforms a surface conversation into a substantive conversation. Saying, “Tell me about the BNI meeting” or “Tell me about your day at school” will prompt the other person to give details, and details are the hook and hinge to a deeper discussion.

Turn back more conversations than you take back. Every time someone finishes talking, we have a choice. We either take back the conversation or turn back the conversation. People who consistently take back conversations with “I” statements can come across as self-centered. For example, “Who’s the new president of the local BNI chapter?”

“Judy Gray.” “Oh, I know Judy. I’ll always remember the time ...”

Sigh. “I” statements keep the attention focused on us and pull the conversational rug out from underneath the other person.

Instead, turn back the conversation with a “You” question.

“Oh, Judy is the president. Have you had a chance to work with her personally?”

“You” questions keep the attention focused on the other person. People will feel you’re genuinely interested in getting to know them ... because you are.

A gruff workshop participant told me, “These techniques feel contrived.”

I told him, “I’m glad you brought this up because it gives me an opportunity to clarify that these tips are not meant to be formulaic, manipulative, paint-by-number tactics. They are simply ‘talk tools’ that can help us co-create mutually-meaningful interactions. It would be wonderful if meeting people comfortably and confidently came naturally, yet many of us still find it awkward, even as adults.

These approaches can help you acquire the skill of being an intriguing conversationalist. Because it is a skill, just like playing the piano. When you learn to play the piano, you start by learning scales. After practicing, you get to the point where you know the keys so well, you don’t even have to think about scales and where to put your fingers, you just make beautiful music.

The same is true with learning to make conversational music. Once you learn the keys of a) intriguing openers, b) asking for advice, c) ‘Tell me’ and d) ‘Turn back,’ you won’t even think about them anymore; they’ll be part of who you are and how you show up.”

I witnessed a classic demonstration of these “talk tools” in action at a business mixer. A group of us were gathered around a former naval aviator who was telling stories about taking off and landing on an aircraft carrier. He animatedly described getting catapulted off the ship, going from 0-150 mph in three seconds, and what it was like having a bolter landing, where you miss the catch wires and have to throttle up to full power to come back around for another approach.

When the aviator finished, two people spoke up simultaneously. One took back the conversation by saying, "Oh, I'm a pilot too." The other said, "You really loved it, didn't you? Tell me what you miss most." Guess which person the aviator turned to?

Gloria Steinem said, "Far too many people are looking for the right person, instead of trying to be the right person." These talk tools can help you be a person who can confidently go anywhere, anytime and meet anyone, because you'll know how to initiate intriguing, mutually-rewarding conversations that turn strangers into friends.