

How to Start a Conversation with Anyone and Know What to Say

by Craig Shillam

You may be the top person in your field, but are you good at starting and carrying on a conversation? You could be, and this skill can be a very good asset to you...



We've all been there. You want to have a conversation with someone but you don't know what to say. Maybe it's that successful business person who you would like to meet, or that gorgeous woman you see every day at lunch, or any one of a number of people that come across your path in any given year. As many of us spend more and more time working or in front of a computer screen these days, we must not forget that when the opportunity presents itself to engage in a conversation with one of those real live persons, It would be in our best interest to be as sharp as possible.

A Conversation Made Easy

Why do we want to talk about having a conversation with people? It is because all of our (yours, mine, everybody's) success depends upon other people. We need friends, customers, business partners, teachers, mentors, and we need to be able to have a conversation with them and relate to them to the best of our abilities.

Many years ago I had a conversation with a very successful salesman that told me about the technique he used when he was talking to people for the first time. With his simple technique he was basically gathering information about the person, to see if that person might be a potential customer. This technique is so easy. I don't know if he invented it or not, but I have used this to help myself have good, productive conversations with hundreds of people for over twenty years, and **it's gold**.

Starting the conversation should be the easy part. “Hi,” “How’s it going?,” “What’s up?,” “How about this weather?,” “Hello,” all come to mind. *Easy right?* Not for everybody. Remember to look people in the eye, smile, and show good posture. These seem so simple, but I can tell you that a lot of people (even successful people!) do not do these basic things when having a conversation. But I really don’t want to talk about saying hi to someone, I am going to assume that you can handle that. It’s what happens after saying hi that we want to talk about now. Let’s talk about form.

“F.O.R.M” a Great Conversation

F = Family; O = Occupation; R = Recreation; M = Message

Let’s assume that you want to have a conversation with some potentially interesting human being, and you may or may not know anything about the person. After you have said that fabulous opening line “hi”, and you’ve got a satisfactory response, go ahead and start your conversation with the person, using FORM as your guideline. Think F is for family. Ask about their family. “Are you married?” “Do you have kids, brothers, sisters?” Take it wherever it you want it to go. All you are doing is taking an interest in this person. You aren’t trying to sell them anything, or get something from them (at least not yet.) You are simply gathering information. You’re being an interesting person mainly because you are asking questions about the person they like to discuss above anyone else – *themselves!* You are also being a good listener.

After you feel you’ve got enough information about the person’s family, remember “O” is for occupation. The next step in the conversation would be to go ahead and ask them about their occupation. Ask them “What kind of work do you do?” “Where do you work?” “How long have you been doing that?” “Do you like it?” You get the idea. You are already knee deep in a full fledged conversation, and by this time you can probably tell if you can or want to relate to this person, or if you even like this person. Maybe this is as far as you want to take the conversation. It’s up to you, right?

Moving things right along, remember “R” is for recreation. “Do you have any hobbies, play sports, do you travel, do you like cars?” Just sincerely ask the questions and please, make sure you listen to the answer. Most of us have two ears and one mouth, and we would do well to listen twice as much as we talk in almost every conversation we have.

Remember too, that the person who is asking the questions is in control of the conversation. By using FORM, you are not only helping yourself in the art of conversation, but you are also controlling the conversation at the same time. And hey, you might be meeting an extremely interesting person at the same time! You never know...

At anytime during this conversation, if you find you don’t relate to the person, or you don’t like the person, or for any reason you want to end the discourse, hit the eject button and move on. “Well it was great talking with you, have a nice day.” Done. Over. You are busy and you have paces to go and things to do.

Up until this point you have just been gathering information and getting to know someone. By the time you have gotten this far, you probably have at least a little rapport with the person. Now you can either leave it right there or move to the next step...

Last but not least, "M" is for the message. The message could be anything you want it to be. If you have gotten this far and you are getting a good vibe and are liking the person, go to the message. "What room in your house would this painting look the best in?" "Is your company hiring right now?" "I'd like to talk more, can we get together for lunch sometime soon?" Whatever your message is, whatever you need to know, just ask or just tell them, this is your message.

A Conversation – Simple – Easy – Straight Forward

That's pretty much it. It's simple, easy, and straight forward. So if you are not comfortable or confident in your ability to carry on a conversation, use this as a guide. FORM. Family, Occupation, Recreation, Message. Anyone can get a decent conversation going using this method.

As time has gone by, I have found myself using form, but usually not in the same subject order. I start a conversation with occupation most of the time, then recreation, then family. It really doesn't matter, this is supposed to be a guide to help you until you feel more comfortable talking with people. What really matters is that we are not paralyzed at the thought of having a conversation with someone (someone who may be of great help to you, you never know) by not knowing what to say. You are simply showing an interest, and taking it from there at your discretion. People will really surprise you. Sometimes the most humble and unassuming guy will have quite a story to tell. Some people will tell you their whole life story after you have asked them just one question! Other people will leave you shaking your head. That's part of the beauty of being able to have a meaningful conversation with people, you just never know!!! If you feel you need a little help in the conversation department, try FORM. It's fun, it's easy, and you are in control. That's a nice place to be.

F.O.R.M. a Great Conversation Today!