

## Conversation Management Tips for the Taciturn Investigative Interviewer



***“The love you take is equal to the love you make”*** Lennon-McCartney

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August 22, 2023

There I was, bobbing up and down in the surf off the Cancun coast, salt water in my mouth and sand in my trunks. It was a windy day, which made the waves enjoyable as long as you saw them coming. Otherwise, one would sneak up and send you head-over-heels into the froth, which would account for the sand in the shorts. I was pushed towards a group of fellow bathers and, upon hearing what I believed to be a Slavic accent, introduced us as Bruce and Diana from Vancouver, Canada. I asked them where they were from, and, expecting them to say Russia, I was shocked to be told they were actually from Seattle, Washington, USA. My silence allowed a slim, silver-haired fellow named Marko to introduce the group as his family, which I learned consisted of Taras, Denys and a boy named Joe. I told them we had flown in a few days earlier and were staying for a week. Marko, then, replied that they were staying for ten days. After a minute or two bouncing about in the breakers, I asked him about his accent, and he let me know that he and his family were originally from Ukraine and had emigrated 25 years earlier. He added that he worked for a great company in Seattle and he and his wife brought their family to a Mexican resort every winter. This year, they were accompanied by his brother Taras, as well as their son Denys and his son Joe. The group huddled near us and we shared stories of our previous Mexican experiences, comparing adventures on both coasts. I mentioned that I had recently traveled to Kyiv, Ukraine, on business and this led to being asked what I did for work. I explained that I had recently retired from the RCMP and currently

taught people how to conduct interviews. Marko added that he worked for a tech company located just outside Seattle and that they were affiliated with Microsoft. He said he loved the area aside from the traffic congestion and incessant rain. This was a perfect launching pad for me to bond further by airing similar views on the horrible traffic jams in Vancouver and my fears of developing webbed feet. After discussing a piece of watermelon that floated by, and a chunky brownish substance that we feared had come from a passing cruise ship, I mentioned I had recently been privileged to discuss Canadian interview models with the Ukraine police and anti-corruption units. We talked about Ukraine and Marko launched into a history of the country, explaining that they were a peaceful people who seemed to always be invaded by other countries. We chatted casually about the atrocities of World War II and the impact of the Soviet Union's takeover afterwards. Eventually, Marko and Taras talked about the current situation in Ukraine and how Putin should never have been allowed to move his troops into the Crimea and other parts of the country. I could tell that all except Joe, who was too young to be interested in politics, were becoming extremely passionate about the situation in their homeland. I listened intently as they described what was happening and how it made them feel. At times, Diana or I would let them know we were listening with empathy by saying phrases such as, "*That must be horrible*", or "*We are so lucky to be living in North America*". We all agreed to being blessed and moved back to talk of our impending sunburns and how much weight we would probably put on by the end of the holiday. After about an hour, this wonderful multi-generational family politely left us floating about as they had to go for lunch. For the remaining few days, Diana and I ran into Marko and his clan at many of the meals and exchanged happy remarks to each other. On the last day, he hugged me and told me to say hi for him the next time I was in Ukraine. I told him I would gladly do that.

### **The Lesson**

Upon reading about this aquatic meeting with our new friends, you might think I was a natural talker, the type of person who could meet anyone and small talk until the wee hours without running out of topics of conversation. You might even think I was an extrovert who became energized by interacting with strangers and sought them out for deep, meaningful discussion. If so, you'd be wrong. I am actually reserved around people I don't know and am often at a loss for words when attempting to talk about anything other than work. Generally, I am the type to go to a party and hide in a corner, hoping that nobody would have the gall to encroach on my armour of solitude. So, how was I able to have such a long and meaningful conversation with Marko and family, particularly when I was not lubricated with alcohol? Simple, I channeled the likes of Dr. Eric Shepherd and Dr. Andy Griffiths and donned the mask of Conversation Management. Let's dive deeper into this ocean by examining what conversation management is comprised of and how I intentionally used it to productively forage through my chance encounter with complete strangers.

### **Introductions**

As with many social settings, a conversation often starts with an introduction. It is the seed that eventually blossoms into the information flower. When people in a conversation know each other, a simple handshake or hello might suffice, but when talking to a stranger, the conversation would rarely develop past that point without the formality of an introduction. In a way, saying who you are is what Dr. Robert Cialdini coined as *reciprocity*, and this persuasion principle motivates the other person to, at least, mention his name. Giving even a tiny morsel of information about yourself is often enough to get a conversation started. It would usually take an extremely antisocial person to refrain from giving her name after you had said hello and mentioned yours.

## **Reciprocity**

If I wanted to generate more dialogue without having to work too hard, I would often continue with the reciprocity that had made an introduction fruitful. I would tell the other person more about myself and give information about my hometown. If appropriate, I would possibly delve into my occupation or tell a few humorous holiday stories. Once again, this would place the other person in an awkward social position should she decline to divulge similar personal information. Notice that it was not until after I had mentioned my job that Marko had been willing to tell me that he worked for a tech firm near Seattle. Using this principle, I was able to find out about his occupation without having to be gauche enough to ask a probing question such as, *"Where do you work?"*. As Roger Hodgson of Supertramp once sang, *"Give a little bit, oh give a little bit of your love to me. I'll give a little bit, I'll give a little bit of my love to you"*.

## **Be Likeable**

Smile with your eyes and let your entire being scream, *"I'm a nice person!"*. People like people who like them. From the instant you meet, exude genuine friendliness, and attract what you are.

## **Use Similarity**

If your conversation partner mentions a similarity between you and them, see it as an opportunity to build a bridge. We often feel at ease around people who are the same (hobbies, music, sports), and conversation runs freely on common turf. An example was when I had been able to relate to Marko's dislike of heavy traffic and rain. The discussion-anxiety was immediately reduced by this topic as we knew we would be on the same page.

## **Humour**

When an opportunity for humour presents itself, don't waste it. A laugh shared is often welcomed as a chance to burn off any adrenaline and tension caused by conversational anxiety. It allows everyone to release pent up energy that comes when people socialize. I was able to use it effectively by making funny comments about the items floating in the water. After some chuckles about the possible link between the brown chunks and a recent cruise ship docking, we were all more relaxed; disgusted, but relaxed. Keep in mind that what could be funny for you might not be for others. Be genuine, be sincere and be real. Faux-funnies are easily recognized.

## **Invitation to Educate You**

Many people love to talk about two topics: themselves and themselves. If they are reserved and not the type to brag, take another tack and ask them to teach you about who they are and what they do. Show genuine curiosity, even if you have to play dumb, and ask them to describe their role at work or why they like doing certain hobbies. Put them on a stage and let them sing. An example would be if I had said to Marko, *"Wow, I don't know anything about Seattle. I'm interested in what it's like to live there"*.

## **Active Listening**

Active listening involves much more than waiting for your turn to speak. If you are thinking about your next question, you are not truly listening. Real listening is an action that lets the speaker know you believe what he says is important to you and, as importantly, allows you to figure out his agenda, or what he

wishes to tell you and how he wishes to convey it. If you don't live up to both aspects, you'll fall short of your intended goal of obtaining as much information as possible.

Here are a few tips to reinforce that you are indeed listening:

- Don't show that you are in a rush to be somewhere else by looking at your watch or impatiently looking around as if for an escape route;
- Try to mimic the physical and verbal behaviour of the person with whom you're speaking;
- Use *minimal encouragers* such as head nods to show you are paying attention;
- Show your empathy by inserting phrases such as, "*That must have been horrible*";
- Maintain eye contact that is contextually-appropriate;
- Keep your body language and facial expressions appropriate for the conversation. If the other person is talking about something sad, perhaps a grin would not be the best choice;
- Try not to interrupt or talk over the other person. When in doubt, count to four and let the awkward silence draw more from her;
- Show interest by posing questions about what the other person has told you. Often, curiosity expresses that you find the conversation so engaging that you want to learn more;
- Periodically, summarize back what the other person had said. Remember that, whereas paraphrasing may be acceptable in a social milieu, it could be suggestive or leading in an investigative setting.

## Questioning

- Don't be afraid to launch more conversation by using "*Open Breadth Questions*" such as "*What happened then?*", or "*What happened after that?*", to draw out information that had not been already mentioned. At times, silence and hand gestures might be as effective at encouraging a person to add to the sequence of events already provided;
- Learn to excavate information that has been provided, by asking *Open Depth Questions* (those that ask for more information about what had already been mentioned) using a funnel approach that emphasizes the use of open questions, but allows for a progression to questions that are less open, and; therefore, less likely to produce as much detail;
- Make it a memory-friendly process by preceding the question with a cognitive link to what you want to excavate. For example, if you had been told, "*I had supper at the buffet last night*", you could encourage the production of more detail by saying, "*You mentioned you had supper at the buffet. Tell me about that*". You may also follow the cognitive link with a *Probing Question* that would begin with who, what, where, why or how, or a *Closed Question* that generally leads to a yes or no response, as long as you are prepared to follow it with an *Open Depth Question* that could begin with Tell, Explain, Describe or Show (T.E.D.S.);

Example of a questioning sequence:

You: *You mentioned Ukraine was devastated by the Russians. Are you able to forgive them for what happened?* [Closed Question]

Response: *No.*

You: *Tell me more about that.* [Open Depth]

Keep the conversation from going stale by changing the wording of your cognitive cues and follow-up question or prompt. There are many ways to convey the same idea and I encourage flexibility. Here are several ways to say, “*You mentioned*”, followed by the components of an *Open Depth Question* (T.E.D.S.):

- You told me, (insert what you had heard). Tell me about that.
- You said, (insert what you had heard). Help me understand what you meant by that.
- I heard you say that, (insert what you had heard). Describe him for me.
- I’m interested in what you said about (insert what you had heard). Unpack that for me.

### **Conclusion:**

When developing my interview skills, I was often told that you would only be successful if you had “*the gift of the gab*”. This always worried me, because I have always had trouble chatting with people I didn’t know, unless I had been primed with something stronger than grape juice. When I chose to stop drinking, one of my biggest fears was that I would forever be a wallflower; you know, that creepy guy who sits alone in the dark corner at every party, the poor fellow who just watched everyone quietly because he dreaded discussions. Well, I’m happy to say that I didn’t have to be that guy, I mean I still sit and creepily observe people, but I learned that having a conversation is less about me and more about how I make the other person feel. I am able to generate more discussion by paying attention to the other person, in effect making them believe that they, and what they say, are important to me. My role is like an orchestral conductor who, without blowing a horn, creates a rich symphony of sound by motivating the instrumentalists to play as if they were before a sold-out crowd at the Royal Albert Hall. How did I get over my initial fears? As with any other skill, I improved by trying, failing and learning from the mistakes. My floating meeting in Mexico could have been avoided as the waves may have created the circumstances, but they didn’t make me talk to my new friends. That decision was mine, and it helped me believe, and accept, that a conversation rarely blossoms when forced by one of the participants. It responds best to being nurtured with genuine compassion and empathy, where the interviewer has the emotional intelligence to realize that conversation flows fantastically when the other participant is given control of the process. Now, go out and chat with people you don’t know. You’ll see that they will guide you, if you choose to listen to what they say. I’d love to write more, but a guy just came into the coffee shop with his Boston Terrier, and I can’t miss this opportunity to see if he has any recommendations for dealing with the food allergies associated with the breed.