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Click to viewA whole lot more than just words passes between people who are talking, so a few simple conversational skills can help you recognize what's really being said and help you lead the discussion your way. Learn how to read body language and facial expressions, de-code euphemisms, ask sensitive questions, criticize constructively, get what you want in negotiations, cut off chatterboxes, and more with our top 10 conversation hacks. Photo by PhillipC.10. Feign sincerity with eye contact and repetition.When you're just not feelin' it but you've got to look like you are, the Wired How-to wiki suggests ways you can feign sincerity. In short, make eye contact, echo what the person is saying to you back to them, and nod in understanding (even if you're not).9. End a conversation with body language.When that chatty co-worker just won't go away, use some of manager Brendan Connelley's techniques. My favorite is simply standing up (or crossing your arms, or speeding up to a "fast walk") to indicate it's time for that person to go and you're busy. In more desperate situations, grab your cell phone and say, "oh sorry, I've got to take this." Photo by SiBorg.For when you can't avoid a discussion with a long-winded cohort, the Tricks of the Trade weblog…Read more8. Ask sensitive questions indirectly to skip awkwardness.When the info you need from someone is somewhat sensitive, check out journalist advice site MBToolbox's suggestions for asking delicate questions indirectly. Use the bluff ("the breakup must've been hard, huh?") or blame others ("so has anyone asked about your prison time?") or the indirect inquiry ("what year did you get divorced?") to broach sensitive topics with tight-lipped folks with more ease and less awkward silence.7. Use silence to win arguments and nail a negotiation.Lawyers and price hagglers know that a little silence can go a long way. When the other party offers a price, opt for a long pause to indicate hesitation, which might prompt them to go lower. In the case of arguments, prolonged silence may frustrate the other person—but it'll also make you look like the winner. (The evil winner, but the winner nonetheless.)6. Soften critiques with the sandwich method. When you need to critique someone—whether it's a co-worker's presentation or a spouse's choice of outfit—start with a compliment, then mention your critique, then end on a positive note. The "criticism hamburger" gets the message across but softens the blow.5. Say "no" gently—or say "yes, but...."When someone's asking you to do something you just don't want to—or don't have the time—there are ways to say "no" that are polite and respectful and won't burn any bridges. OnlineOrganizing.com offers 20 "scripts" for turning down a request, from "I'm in the middle of several projects right now" to "I'm not the right person for that job." (I've found that suggesting someone else or offering a tip on the best way to proceed also helps a whole lot.) Master of attention-firewalling Merlin Mann says you can partially commit by qualifying your "yes" with specific boundaries around what you'll do (that also imply what you won't).4. Ask questions well.When you need information, the people that have it need some reason to help you. Whether you're posting a question on a tech support forum or asking a colleague for help, here are some ways you can master the art of asking to get the answers you need.3. De-code office jargon.When the Pointy-Haired Boss says you're "not on the same page," what does he really mean? A section Read more Client want to "touch base"? Manager want to "get on the same page"? Corporate euphemisms translate into pretty strong words, and you'll navigate your career a whole lot better if you recognize the ones that mean "get off your ass." Career adviser Penelope Trunk offers a non-nonsense dictionary for parsing office-speak.2. "Pace and lead" an irate person.When you're dealing with someone who is absolutely freaking out—like a parent flipping out at the playground—use school administrator Bert Webb's "pace and lead" technique. Instead of remaining calm, match the other party's emotional intensity to show you're empathetic, then lead the complainant to a calmer level of discourse.1. Become a human lie detector.When you suspect someone isn't telling the whole truth, tune into their voice, eyes, and body language. Monster.com's Marty Nemko lists a few indicators that should trip your BS detector, like a sudden change in voice pitch, rate of speech, or "ums" and "ahs," a change in eye contact, and body position. Similarly, project manager Scott Berkun weighs in on how to detect bullshit. Perhaps the greatest human behavior and communication hack is an awareness of what makes people tick. If you can offer someone something they want, they'll give you what you want in return. What are your favorite conversational hacks and skills? Ever tried any of these techniques? Tell us about it in the comments. Have you ever wished that you had an ability to talk to strangers and have them instantly warm up to you?Think about the people you know who seem to bring out the best in you whenever you talk to them: You feel comfortable talking to them and could go on talking forever. They could be old friends or someone you just met, but the conversation just seems to flow smoothly and naturally.If you wish you had the natural ability to make conversation that the people you admire have, don't despair. Having meaningful conversations is something that can be learned, and with focus and practice, we can all become better at it.Here are five key things that will put us on the right track:Have you ever had someone talk endlessly about something that you didn't have the slightest interest in? It probably felt like they were having a conversation with themselves and you just happened to be there. These people seem to be oblivious to the idea that you may not share their interest.The best conversations begin with showing an interest in the other person, their world, and what they might be interested in. Most people love to talk about themselves. Ask them an open-ended question about something that you notice about them. If you can give them a sincere compliment or give them positive feedback, you've made a great start. Great conversationalists have a sincere interest in others, notice things about them, and use these things to start and fuel their conversations.2. Practice active listeningMost people are thinking about what they want to say next while someone else is speaking. Become aware of this during your conversations, and when you find your mind going to a response, stop and try to force yourself to listen. This is not easy, especially if you are highly extroverted. You can practice by spending time with your partner or a friend and repeating back to them what they just said. This exercise helps create awareness of the amount of time we actually spend active listening to others.Think of the people that you are willing to open up to and share things with. What is it about them that makes you so comfortable disclosing things that you wouldn't normally with others?Likely they are good at making eye contact with you and making you feel like you are receiving their full and undivided attention. Pay attention to their expressions. Notice that they are with you not only in the tone of their words but in their expressions. Their faces light up when you are sharing something you are happy or excited about, and they take on a solemn, sad look when you are sharing bad news. You sense and feel that they are totally engrossed in what you are telling them.If emulating what they are doing seems unnatural to you, practice and push yourself to do so. Notice that people will start to react differently to you.We can get others to share more by showing an interest and asking open-ended questions to help them get deeper into the conversation. Good questions are asking someone how they think or feel about something that they are talking about. If you have talked to someone before, ask them about things that they volunteered in the conversation before. Likely, if they brought up something on their own, it is of interest and some importance to them. Ask yourself what other areas that are related to their interests that they would love to talk about.5. Consider Time and spaceNever start a conversation beyond exchanging quick pleasantries unless you have the time to hear the other person out. Places that are noisy with a lot of people around are not the best places to engage in great conversation. Good conversation requires a slow, relaxed pace and a pressure-free atmosphere free of distractions. Coffee shops are great for this purpose. Sports bars–not so much. Last Updated on July 20, 2021 You're standing behind the curtain, just about to make your way on stage to face the many faces half-shrouded in darkness in front of you. As you move towards the spotlight, your body starts to feel heavier with each step. A familiar thump echoes throughout your body – your heartbeat has gone off the charts.Don't worry, you're not the only one with glossophobia(also known as speech anxiety or the fear of speaking to large crowds). Sometimes, the anxiety happens long before you even stand on stage.Your body's defence mechanism responds by causing a part of your brain to release adrenaline into your blood – the same chemical that gets released as if you were being chased by a lion.Here's a step-by-step guide to help you overcome your fear of public speaking:1. Prepare yourself mentally and physicallyAccording to experts, we're built to display anxiety and to recognize it in others. If your body and mind are anxious, your audience will notice. Hence, it's important to prepare yourself before the big show so that you arrive on stage confident, collected and ready."Your outside world is a reflection of your inside world. What goes on in the inside, shows on the outside." – Bob ProctorExercising lightly before a presentation helps get your blood circulating and sends oxygen to the brain. Mental exercises, on the other hand, can help calm the mind and nerves. Here are some useful ways to calm your racing heart when you start to feel the butterflies in your stomach:Warming upIf you're nervous, chances are your body will feel the same way. Your body gets tense, your muscles feel tight or you're breaking in cold sweat. The audience will notice you are nervous.If you observe that this is exactly what is happening to you minutes before a speech, do a couple of stretches to loosen and relax your body. It's better to warm up before every speech as it helps to increase the functional potential of the body as a whole. Not only that, it increases muscle efficiency, improves reaction time and your movements.Here are some exercises to loosen up your body before show time: Neck and shoulder rolls – This helps relieve upper body muscle tension and pressure as the rolls focus on rotating the head and shoulders, loosening the muscle. Stress and anxiety can make us rigid within this area which can make you feel agitated, especially when standing. Arm stretches – We often use this part of our muscles during a speech or presentation through our hand gestures and movements. Stretching these muscles can reduce arm fatigue, loosen you up and improve your body language range. Waist twists – Place your hands on your hips and rotate your waist in a circular motion. This exercise focuses on loosening the abdominal and lower back regions which is essential as it can cause discomfort and pain, further amplifying any anxieties you may experience. Stay hydratedEver felt parched seconds before speaking? And then coming up on stage sounding raspy and scratchy in front of the audience? This happens because the adrenaline from stage fright causes your mouth to feel dried out.To prevent all that, it's essential we stay adequately hydrated before a speech. A sip of water will do the trick. However, do drink in moderation so that you won't need to go to the bathroom constantly.Try to avoid sugary beverages and caffeine, since it's a diuretic – meaning you'll feel thirstier. It will also amplify your anxiety which prevents you from speaking smoothly.MeditateMeditation is well-known as a powerful tool to calm the mind. ABC's Dan Harris, co-anchor of Nightline and Good Morning America weekend and author of the book titled10% Happier , recommends that meditation can help individuals to feel significantly calmer, faster.Meditation is like a workout for your mind. It gives you the strength and focus to filter out the negativity and distractions with words of encouragement, confidence and strength.Mindfulness meditation, in particular, is a popular method to calm yourself before going up on the big stage. The practice involves sitting comfortably, focusing on your breathing and then bringing your mind's attention to the present without drifting into concerns about the past or future – which likely includes floundering on stage.Here's a nice example of guided meditation before public speaking:2. Focus on your goalOne thing people with a fear of public speaking have in common is focusing too much on themselves and the possibility of failure.Do I look funny? What if I can't remember what to say? Do I look stupid? Will people listen to me? Does anyone care about what I'm talking about?'Instead of thinking this way, shift your attention to your one true purpose – contributing something of value to your audience. Decide on the progress you'd like your audience to make after your presentation. Notice their movements and expressions to adapt your speech to ensure that they are having a good time to leave the room as better people.If your own focus isn't beneficial and what it should be when you're speaking, then shift it to what does. This is also key to establishing trust during your presentation as the audience can clearly see that you have their interests at heart.3. Convert negativity to positivityThere are two sides constantly battling inside of us – one is filled with strength and courage while the other is doubt and insecurities. Which one will you feed?'What if I mess up this speech? What if I'm not funny enough? What if I forget what to say?'It's no wonder why many of us are uncomfortable giving a presentation. All we do is bring ourselves down before we got a chance to prove ourselves. This is also known as a self-fulfilling prophecy – a belief that comes true because we are acting as if it already is. If you think you're incompetent, then it will eventually become true.Motivational coaches tout that positive mantras and affirmations tend to boost your confidents for the moments that matter most. Say to yourself: "I'll ace this speech and I can do it!"Take advantage of your adrenaline rush to encourage positive outcome rather than thinking of the negative 'what ifs'.Here's a video of Psychologist Kelly McGonigal who encourages her audience to turn stress into something positive as well as provide methods on how to cope with it:4. Understand your contentKnowing your content at your fingertips helps reduce your anxiety because there is one less thing to worry about. One way to get there is to practice numerous times before your actual speech. However, memorizing your script word-for-word is not encouraged. You can end up freezing should you forget something. You'll also risk sounding unnatural and less approachable."No amount of reading or memorizing will make you successful in life. It is the understanding and the application of wise thought that counts." – Bob ProctorMany people unconsciously make the mistake of reading from their slides or memorizing their script word-for-word without understanding their content – a definite way to stress themselves out.Understanding your speech flow and content makes it easier for you to convert ideas and concepts into your own words which you can then clearly explain to others in a conversational manner. Designing your slides to include text prompts is also an easy hack to ensure you get to quickly recall your flow when your mind goes blank.One way to understand is to memorize the over-arching concepts or ideas in your pitch. It helps you speak more naturally and let your personality shine through. It's almost like taking your audience on a journey with a few key milestones.5. Practice makes perfectLike most people, many of us are not naturally attuned to public speaking. Rarely do individuals walk up to a large audience and present flawlessly without any research and preparation.In fact, some of the top presenters make it look easy during showtime because they have spent countless hours behind-the-scenes in deep practice. Even great speakers like the late John F. Kennedy would spend months preparing his speech beforehand.Public speaking, like any other skill, requires practice – whether it be practicing your speech countless of times in front of a mirror or making notes. As the saying goes, practice makes perfect!6. Be authenticThere's nothing wrong with feeling stressed before going up to speak in front of an audience.Many people fear public speaking because they fear others will judge them for showing their true, vulnerable self. However, vulnerability can sometimes help you come across as more authentic and relatable as a speaker. Drop the pretence of trying to act or speak like someone else and you'll find that it's worth the risk. You become more genuine, flexible and spontaneous, which makes it easier to handle unpredictable situations – whether it's getting tough questions from the crowd or experiencing an unexpected technical difficulty.To find out your authentic style of speaking is easy. Just pick a topic or issue you are passionate about and discuss this like you normally would with a close family or friend. It is like having a conversation with someone in a personal one-to-one setting. A great way to do this on stage is to select a random audience member(with a hopefully calming face) and speak to a single person at a time during your speech. You'll find that it's easier trying to connect to one person at a time than a whole room.With that said, being comfortable enough to be yourself in front of others may take a little time and some experience, depending how comfortable you are with being yourself in front of others. But once you embrace it, stage fright will not be as intimidating as you initially thought.Presenters like Barack Obama are a prime example of a genuine and passionate speaker:7. Post speech evaluationLast but not the least, if you've done public speaking and have been scarred from a bad experience, try seeing it as a lesson learned to improve yourself as a speaker.Don't beat yourself up after a presentationWe are the hardest on ourselves and it's good to be. But when you finish delivering your speech or presentation, give yourself some recognition and a pat on the back.You managed to finish whatever you had to do and did not give up. You did not let your fears and insecurities get to you. Take a little more pride in your work and believe in yourself.Improve your next speechAs mentioned before, practice does make perfect. If you want to improve your public speaking skills, try asking someone to film you during a speech or presentation. Afterwards, watch and observe what you can do to improve yourself next time.Here are some questions you can ask yourself after every speech: How did I do? Are there any areas for improvement? Did I sound or look stressed? Did I stumble on my words? Why? Was I saying "um" too often? How was the flow of the speech? Write everything you observed down and keep practicing and improving. In time, you'll be able to better manage your fears of public speaking and appear more confident when it counts.If you want even more tips about public speaking or delivering a great presentation, check out these articles too:

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