

5.1.5: Rituals of Conversation and Interviews

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the five steps in any conversation.
2. Discuss employment interviewing.

You no doubt have participated in countless conversations throughout your life, and the process of how to conduct a conversation may seem so obvious that it needs no examination. Yet, all cultures have rituals of various kinds, and conversation is one of these universal rituals. A skilled business communicator knows when to speak, when to remain silent, and to always stop speaking before the audience stops listening. Further, understanding conversation provides a solid foundation for our next discussion on employment interviewing. Employment interviews follow similar ritual patterns and have their own set of expectations. Expectations may differ based on field, level, knowledge, and experience, but they generally follow the five steps of a basic conversation.



Figure 5.1.5.1: Conversations follow rules. Search Engine People Blog – [Conversation](#) – CC BY 2.0.

Conversation as a Ritual

Why discuss the ritual of conversation? Because it is one of the main ways we interact in the business environment, and it is ripe for misunderstandings. Our everyday familiarity with conversations often makes us blind to the subtle changes that take place during the course of a conversation. Examining it will allow you to consider its components, predict the next turn, anticipate an opening or closing, and make you a better conversationalist. Steven Beebe, Susan Beebe, and Mark Redmond offer us five stages of conversation that are adapted here for our discussion (Beebe, S., Beebe, S., and Redmond, M., 2002).

Initiation

The first stage of conversation is called initiation, and requires you to be open to interact. How you communicate openness is up to you; it may involve nonverbal signals like eye contact or body positions, such as smiling or even merely facing the other person and making eye contact. A casual reference to the weather, a light conversation about the weekend, or an in-depth conversation about how the financial markets are performing this morning requires a source to start the process: someone has to initiate the exchange. For some, this may produce a degree of anxiety. If status and hierarchical relationships are present, it may be a question of who speaks when according to cultural norms. The famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski called small talk “phatic communion,” (Malinowski, B., 1935) reinforcing the idea that there is a degree of ritual across cultures on how we initiate, engage, and conclude conversations.

Preview

The preview is an indication, verbal or nonverbal, of what the conversation is about, both in terms of content and in terms of the relationship. A word or two in the subject line of an e-mail may signal the topic, and the relationship between individuals, such as an employee-supervisor relationship, may be understood. A general reference to a topic may approach a topic indirectly, allowing the recipient to either pick up on the topic and to engage in the discussion or to redirect the conversation away from a topic they are not ready to talk about. People are naturally curious, and also seek certainty. A preview can serve to reduce uncertainty and signal intent.

Talking Point(s)

Joseph DeVito characterizes this step as getting down to business, reinforcing the goal orientation of the conversation (DeVito, J., 2003). In business communication, we often have a specific goal or series of points to address, but we cannot lose sight of the relationship messages within the discussion of content. You may signal to your conversation partner that there are three points to address, much like outlining an agenda at a meeting. This may sound formal at first, but if you listen to casual conversations you'll often find there is an inherent list or central point where the conversational partners arrive. By clearly articulating, either in written or oral form, the main points, you provide an outline or structure to the conversation.

Feedback

Similar to a preview step, this stage allows the conversational partners to clarify, restate, or discuss the points of the conversation to arrive a sense of mutual understanding. In some cultures the points and their feedback may recycle several times, which may sound repetitious to Western ears. In Western cultures we often get to the point rather quickly and once we've arrived at an understanding, we move quickly to the conclusion. Communication across cultures often requires additional cycles of statement and restatement to insure transmission of information as well as reinforcement of the relationship. Time may be money in some cultures, but time is also a representation of respect. Feedback is an opportunity to make sure the interaction was successful the first time. Failure to attend to this stage can lead to the need for additional interactions, reducing efficiency across time.

Closing

The acceptance of feedback on both sides of the conversation often signals the transition to the conclusion of the conversation. Closings are similar to the initiation step (Knapp, M. and Vangelisti, A., 2000), and often involve ritual norms (Malinowski, B., 1935). Verbal clues are sometimes present, but you may also notice the half step back as conversational partners create additional space in preparation to disengage.

There are times when a conversational partner introduces new information in the conclusion, which can start the process all over again. You may also note that if words like "in conclusion" or "oh—one more thing" are used, a set of expectations is now in force. A conclusion has been announced and the listener expects it. If the speaker continues to recycle at this point, the listener's listening skills are often not as keen as they were during the heat of the main engagement, and it may even produce frustration. People mentally shift to the next order of business and this transition must be negotiated successfully.

By mentioning a time, date, or place for future communication you can clearly signal that the conversation, although currently concluded, will continue later. In this way, you can often disengage successfully while demonstrating respect.

Employment Interviewing

We all join communities, teams, and groups across our lifetimes (McLean, S., 2005). We go from an unknown outsider to a new member and eventually a full member. Businesses and organizations are communities consisting of teams and groups, and if we decide to switch teams or communities, or if that decision is made for us with a reduction in force layoff, for example, we'll be back on the job market. In order to make the transition from a outsider to an insider, you'll have to pass a series of tests, both informal and formal. One of the most common tests is otherwise known as an employment interview. An employment interview is an exchange between a candidate and a prospective employer (or their representative). It is a formal process with several consistent elements that you can use to guide your preparation.

Employment interviews come in all shapes and sizes, and may not be limited to only one exchange but one interaction. A potential employee may very well be screened by a computer (as the résumé is scanned) and interviewed online or via the telephone before the applicant ever meets a representative or panel of representatives. The screening process may include formal tests that include personality tests, background investigations, and consultations with previous employers. Depending on the type of job you are seeking, you can anticipate answering questions, often more than once, to a series of people as you progress through a formal interview process. Just as you have the advantage of preparing for a speech with anticipation, you can apply the same research and public speaking skills to the employment interview.

The invitation to interview means you have been identified as a candidate who meets the minimum qualifications and demonstrate potential as a viable candidate. Your cover letter, résumé, or related application materials may demonstrate the connection between your preparation and the job duties, but now comes the moment where you will need to articulate those points out loud.

If we assume that you would like to be successful in your employment interviewing, then it makes sense to use the communication skills gained to date with the knowledge of interpersonal communication to maximize your performance. There is no one right or

wrong way to prepare and present at your interview, just as each audience is unique, but we can prepare and anticipate several common elements.

Preparation

The right frame of mind is an essential element for success in communication, oral or written. For many if not most, the employment interview is surrounded with mystery and a degree of fear and trepidation. Just as giving a speech may produce a certain measure of anxiety, you can expect that a job interview will make you nervous. Anticipate this normal response, and use your nervous energy to your benefit. To place your energies where they will be put to best use, the first step is preparation.

Would you prepare yourself before writing for publication or speaking in public? Of course. The same preparation applies to the employment interview. Briefly, the employment interview is a conversational exchange (even if it is in writing at first) where the participants try to learn more about each other. Both conversational partners will have goals in terms of content, and explicitly or implicitly across the conversational exchange will be relational messages. Attending to both points will strengthen your performance.

On the content side, if you have been invited for an interview, you can rest assured that you have met the basic qualifications the employer is looking for. Hopefully, this initiation signal means that the company or organization you have thoroughly researched is one you would consider as a potential employer. Perhaps you have involved colleagues and current employees of the organization in your research process and learned about several of the organization's attractive qualities as well as some of the challenges experienced by the people working there.

Businesses hire people to solve problems, so you will want to focus on how your talents, expertise, and experience can contribute to the organization's need to solve those problems. The more detailed your analysis of their current challenges, the better. You need to be prepared for standard questions about your education and background, but also see the opening in the conversation to discuss the job duties, the challenges inherent in the job, and the ways in which you believe you can meet these challenges. Take the opportunity to demonstrate the fact that you have "done your homework" in researching the company. Table 5.1.5.1 presents a checklist of what you should try to know before you consider yourself prepared for an interview.

Table 5.1.5.1: Interview Preparation Checklist

What to Know	Examples
Type of Interview	Will it be a behavioral interview, where the employer watches what you do in a given situation? Will you be asked technical questions or given a work sample? Or will you be interviewed over lunch or coffee, where your table manners and social skills will be assessed?
Type of Dress	Office attire varies by industry, so stop by the workplace and observe what workers are wearing if you can. If this isn't possible, call and ask the human resources office what to wear—they will appreciate your wish to be prepared.
Company or Organization	Do a thorough exploration of the company's Web site. If it doesn't have one, look for business listings in the community online and in the phone directory. Contact the local chamber of commerce. At your library, you may have access to subscription sites such as Hoover's Online (www.hoovers.com).
Job	Carefully read the ad you answered that got you the interview, and memorize what it says about the job and the qualifications the employer is seeking. Use the Internet to find sample job descriptions for your target job title. Make a written list of the job tasks and annotate the list with your skills, knowledge, and other attributes that will enable you to perform the job tasks with excellence.

What to Know	Examples
Employer's Needs	Check for any items in the news in the past couple of years involving the company name. If it is a small company, the local town newspaper will be your best source. In addition, look for any advertisements the company has placed, as these can give a good indication of the company's goals.

Performance

You may want to know how to prepare for an employment interview, and we're going to take it for granted that you have researched the company, market, and even individuals in your effort to learn more about the opportunity. From this solid base of preparation, you need to begin to prepare your responses. Would you like some of the test questions before the test? Luckily for you, employment interviews involve a degree of uniformity across their many representations. Here are eleven common questions you are likely to be asked in an employment interview (McLean, S., 2005):

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Have you ever done this type of work before?
3. Why should we hire you?
4. What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?
5. Give me an example of a time when you worked under pressure.
6. Tell me about a time you encountered (X) type of problem at work. How did you solve the problem?
7. Why did you leave your last job?
8. How has your education and/or experience prepared you for this job?
9. Why do you want to work here?
10. What are your long-range goals? Where do you see yourself three years from now?
11. Do you have any questions?

When you are asked a question in the interview, look for its purpose as well as its literal meaning. "Tell me about yourself" may sound like an invitation for you to share your text message win in last year's competition, but it is not. The employer is looking for someone who can address their needs. Telling the interviewer about yourself is an opportunity for you make a positive professional impression. Consider what experience you can highlight that aligns well with the job duties and match your response to their needs.

In the same way, responses about your strengths are not an opening to brag, and your weakness not an invitation to confess. If your weakness is a tendency towards perfectionism, and the job you are applying for involves a detail orientation, you can highlight how your weaknesses may serve you well in the position.

Consider using the "because" response whenever you can. A "because" response involves the restatement of the question followed by a statement of how and where you gained education or experience in that area. For example, if you are asked about handling difficult customers, you could answer that you have significant experience in that area because you've served as a customer service representative with X company for X years. You may be able to articulate how you were able to turn an encounter with a frustrated customer into a long-term relationship that benefited both the customer and the organization. Your specific example, and use of a "because" response, can increase the likelihood that the interviewer or audience will recall the specific information you provide.

You may be invited to participate in a conference call, and be told to expect it will last around twenty minutes. The telephone carries your voice and your words, but doesn't carry your nonverbal gestures. If you remember to speak directly into the telephone, look up and smile, your voice will come through clearly and you will sound competent and pleasant. Whatever you do, don't take the call on a cell phone with an iffy connection—your interviewers are guaranteed to be unfavorably impressed if you keep breaking up during the call. Use the phone to your advantage by preparing responses on note cards or on your computer screen before the call. When the interviewers ask you questions, keep track of the time, limiting each response to about a minute. If you know that a twenty-minute call is scheduled for a certain time, you can anticipate that your phone may ring may be a minute or two late, as interviews are often scheduled in a series while the committee is all together at one time. Even if you only have one interview, your interviewers will have a schedule and your sensitivity to it can help improve your performance.

You can also anticipate that the last few minutes will be set aside for you to ask your questions. This is your opportunity to learn more about the problems or challenges that the position will be addressing, allowing you a final opportunity to reinforce a positive message with the audience. Keep your questions simple, your attitude positive, and communicate your interest.

At the same time as you are being interviewed, know that you too are interviewing the prospective employer. If you have done your homework you may already know what the organization is all about, but you may still be unsure whether it is the right fit for you. Listen and learn from what is said as well as what is not said, and you will add to your knowledge base for wise decision making in the future.

Above all, be honest, positive, and brief. You may have heard that the world is small and it is true. As you develop professionally, you will come to see how fields, organizations, and companies are interconnected in ways that you cannot anticipate. Your name and reputation are yours to protect and promote.

Postperformance

You completed your research of the organization, interviewed a couple of employees, learned more about the position, were on time for the interview (virtual or in person), wore neat and professional clothes, and demonstrated professionalism in your brief, informative responses. Congratulations are in order, but so is more work on your part.

Remember that feedback is part of the communication process: follow up promptly with a thank-you note or e-mail, expressing your appreciation for the interviewer's time and interest. You may also indicate that you will call or e-mail next week to see if they have any further questions for you. (Naturally, if you say you will do this, make sure you follow through!) In the event that you have decided the position is not right for you, the employer will appreciate your notifying them without delay. Do this tactfully, keeping in mind that communication occurs between individuals and organizations in ways you cannot predict.

After you have communicated with your interviewer or committee, move on. Candidates sometimes become quite fixated on one position or job and fail to keep their options open. The best person does not always get the job, and the prepared business communicator knows that networking and research is a never-ending, ongoing process. Look over the horizon at the next challenge and begin your research process again. It may be hard work, but getting a job is your job. Budget time and plan on the effort it will take to make the next contact, get the next interview, and continue to explore alternate paths to your goal.

You may receive a letter, note, or voice mail explaining that another candidate's combination of experience and education better matched the job description. If this happens, it is only natural for you to feel disappointed. It is also only natural to want to know why you were not chosen, but be aware that for legal reasons most rejection notifications do not go into detail about why one candidate was hired and another was not. Contacting the company with a request for an explanation can be counterproductive, as it may be interpreted as a "sore loser" response. If there is any possibility that they will keep your name on file for future opportunities, you want to preserve your positive relationship.

Although you feel disappointed, don't focus on the loss or all the hard work you've produced. Instead, focus your energies where they will serve you best. Review the process and learn from the experience, knowing that each audience is unique and even the most prepared candidate may not have been the right "fit." Stay positive and connect with people who support you. Prepare, practice, and perform. Know that you as a person are far more than just a list of job duties. Focus on your skill sets: if they need improvement, consider additional education that will enhance your knowledge and skills. Seek out local resources and keep networking. Have your professional interview attire clean and ready, and focus on what you can control—your preparation and performance.

Key Takeaway

Conversations have universal aspects we can predict and improve. We can use the dynamics of the ritual of conversation to learn to prepare for employment interviews and evaluations, both common contexts of communication in the work environment. Employment interviews involve preparation, performance, and feedback.

Exercises

1. How does the employment interview serve both interviewer and interviewee? Explain and present your thoughts to the class.
2. Identify a company that you might be interested in working for. Use the resources described in this section to research information about the company, the kinds of jobs it hires people to do, and the needs and goals of the organization. Share your findings with your classmates.
3. Find a job announcement of a position that might interest you after you graduate or reach your professional goal. Write a brief statement of what experience and education you currently have that applies to the position and note what you currently lack.
4. What are the common tasks and duties of a job you find interesting? Create a survey, identify people who hold a similar position, and interview them (via e-mail or in person). Compare your results with your classmates.

5. What has been your employment interview experience to date? Write a brief statement and provide examples.
6. What employment-related resources are available on your campus or in your community? Investigate and share your findings.
7. Prepare for a job that you would like to do by finding a job announcement, preparing sample responses, and enlisting a friend or colleague in playing the role of a mock interviewer. Limit your interview to fifteen minutes and record it (audio or audio/visual) and post it in class. If your instructor indicates this exercise will be an in-class exercise or assessment, dress the part and be completely prepared. Use this exercise to prepare you for the moment when you will be required to perform and when you want the job.

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