

# The Art of Conversation: Speaking and Silence

by

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We come into contact with our fellow human beings in a myriad of ways. The most common method available to us is the spoken word combined with the appropriate language of gestures. We greet one another, ask for the milk, ask for directions to the train station, express our happiness about a gift, express our unhappiness about a high tax bill, remind the little girl on her way to school to be careful, search out common knowledge or try to come to a decision through conversation, explain the functions on a new computer, or comfort the child who has fallen off her bicycle. It is always words, gestures, and mimicking that do this service for us and thereby essentially configure the way we live and interact with others.

In a certain way speech stands between thought and action. Words can bring thoughts to expression, inform, teach, explain, bring others to action, and prepare decisions. A single word can completely change the relationship to another person such as an encouraging or critical word, a word of acceptance or one of denial, a promise or a 'no' when considering the possibility of a future together. Conversation mediates between thoughts and actions and endows people's relationships to one another. Looking more to the position of the speaker, we can ask ourselves about his motives? What kind of impulse is behind a statement? What does one want to achieve with a contribution? What is driving the speaker to this formulation exclusively? Do my words convey what I mean? These are all questions which derive from motive. Looking closer at the one to whom the words are directed I ask myself about effect: comfort, instruction, injury, motivation to action, solution, and so forth. These are all effects that words can have. Speech is sensible only when it is directed to someone. If we observe how people converse with each other on a daily basis it will be clear to us that it is not only the speaker who is affecting the listener but also a mutual influence is present from the outset. The spoken contribution will change according to how the listening is done and how the position of being across from one another is perceived. This immediate, mutual influencing is especially important. When we look at other forms of communication we see that this aspect is partly or completely missing.

For example, with telephone calls the visual influence is missing. The voice on the other end is also not immediately perceived but electronically changed and reduced. In the same way, eye contact, gestures, and body language, in other words, the immediate perception of the speaker, is also completely missing. Everyone who knows this will do well to consider what they can and cannot talk about over the telephone. In place of a fresh perception of the other there often appears only what is imagined, and that can open up all kinds of doors to misunderstandings. It is less problematic if one is talking to very familiar persons. The telephone is good for exchanging information. But if we are trying to resolve conflict, we would be better off to choose a conversation in person.

The presence of the conversation partner also makes for the difference between personal conversation and something that is written, printed, or presented on a screen. These messages are less immediate, more anonymous and the partners are, in fact, separated. An inflation of the words by means of all these above-named media indirectly influences our daily communication. Often we see that there is a terrible lack of skill. While we are able to communicate with any part of the world at any time, it is increasingly difficult to find the path of person-to-person communication. In this age of computers which make it possible to communicate with others even in space, we are less and less successful in truly understanding others. The opportunities for conversation occur much more seldom in our hectic times. The entertainment among family and friends as it was in earlier times has given way to an entertainment industry. Increasingly we are losing heartfelt relationships to those surrounding us. Only when we consciously cultivate conversation skills and take steps to increase our abilities in that art will we be able to have real human encounters again.

### **Factors that play an important role in conversation**

Let us begin with the outer conditions required for conversation.

1. Where will the conversation take place? At a table so that everyone can see one another? In a small, large, dim, or bright room? On the ski lift? During a walk? While doing dishes in the kitchen? These are only a few examples. The location significantly influences the form and content of the conversation, making for different kinds and qualities of conversations.

2. The time: Does the conversation take place early in the morning, at lunch, in the afternoon, evening, or at night? Is it spring or winter? Or a hot summer's day? How long does it last? Five minutes, an hour, or an entire afternoon? The time aspect is a second factor to which we must pay attention if we wish to have a particular conversation. One must especially observe how the conversation partner talks in the conversation. Are the participants still attentive to the subject or have they become tired? When should one take a

break? What questions can be asked, when, and in what order? These are all questions concerning the time aspect.

3. Another factor is the subject of the conversation. Are we getting together for casual conversation? Must we reach a decision? Is it about the reporting of something that has happened? Is there going to be an examination? Or a test? Are we trying to find common knowledge or must we correct someone? All of these questions have to do with the subject and the goal, the motif of the conversation. Every conversational goal requires a different preparation and behavior. It is a disappointing experience to discover after an hours-long conversation that one person expected a decision to be made and the other was expecting merely an exchange of ideas.

4. Finally, we must heed attendant circumstances. Does the conversation occur at a busy train station or in the presence of construction noise? In a room where there are many other sense impressions (large windows), in comfortable easy chairs, on hard stools, while standing or walking? Again, these are factors that influence the form of the conversation and should be noted.

Together, all of these factors form the situation of the conversation: place, time, subject, and attendant circumstances.

Important additions to this are the conversational partners and their relationship(s) to one another. First of all, look at the number of persons: A two-person conversation has a completely different character than a conversation between five participants. There are people who express themselves very differently when with only one other person or when in a circle of eight or ten people than they do in a much larger group. Depending upon the homogeneous quality of the group, after a certain number of participants, there really needs to be a discussion leader. A potential conflict may require this even with only two participants. A group that works well together may manage without a discussion leader even with up to fifteen participants. In this case, each person feels equally responsible for leading the discussion. After a certain number (about twenty to twenty-five) the character of the discussion changes as often single representatives will speak for others. The larger the number of participants, the more organizational aspects must be considered such as taking turns to speak, lists of speakers, time constraints on each speaker, order of the speakers, and so forth.

The relationships of the participants to one another also decisively influences the course of the discussion. Have the participants known each other a long time and do they work well together? Or is it an ad hoc discussion in which the participants are meeting for the first time? In the first instance it can be expected that there will be a certain implicitness present because of the well-established relationships. Of course, the habitual nature of the

relationship may carry with it the danger that the course of the conversation will become stereotypical. Sometimes one knows the other too well, meaning that one has preconceived notions about the other person. Tension and expectation can enliven first-time conversations. On the other hand, it is easier to have misunderstandings because one has misjudged the other. Often there are statements whose only motive is to distinguish one's self in the eyes of the other.

Certainly everyone has experienced how the character of the conversation changes drastically when a certain person is not present. This shows how significant is the configuration of the discussion partners. We will return to this aspect later in another connection. The conversation itself is significantly determined by how things are spoken, how they are heard, and the subject of the conversation. Before we look closer at these elements, let us look from a certain viewpoint under the surface of conversation.

One often says that we exchange information during a conversation. However, that is a very superficial description of what actually happens. Pure presentation of information is only a small, superficial part of a conversation. If that were not so misunderstandings would occur much less often because they can only happen if one assigns a different meaning to a word than was meant by the speaker, or if one did not correctly hear what was said. Such misunderstandings are usually easy to clear up and put aside. However, the information level of conversation is only one level, the surface, so to say. The source of misunderstandings is usually to found somewhere else completely. In order to go deeper into the reality of the conversation, let us take a look at the following dialog:

Him: "What is that green stuff in the soup?"

Her: (irritated) "If you don't like it, cook yourself!"

Viewed from the standpoint of information there is absolutely no connection between the two statements. To the question of what was in the soup the woman answered that he should cook himself. The reality of the conversation is not present at this level. Behind the man's question the sentiment is hidden: "You can't even cook right. I'm unhappy with you; try a little harder for once!" The woman reacted to the reality of the communication with the remark that if he did not like it he could cook for himself. In order to come out the winner of this dialectic game the man could unexpectedly add: "I just wanted to know what the green stuff was in the soup. Aren't I allowed to ask questions anymore?" But in reality it was not a genuine question. It was not his interest in the soup that prompted him to ask but his dissatisfaction with the culinary talents of his partner. He pretended interest and thereby changed the dialectic level of the conversation.

Friedemann Schulz von Thun characterized this phenomenon beautifully when he said that one must really listen with four different ears. We hear the

practical, informational aspect with the first ear, the relationship of the speaker to us with the second, what the speaker is saying about him/herself with the third, and with the fourth we perceive an appeal or a challenge to us. Our example contained a question about what was green in the soup at the practical, informational level. But what was meant by the question occurs at the relationship level: “I think you are a bad cook.” What the speaker was saying about himself was: “I deserve a better meal.” And at the level of the appeal or challenge we can hear: “You need to be more concerned with my well-being.” We can more easily solve problems between us if we would directly communicate what we really wish to say instead of going through a detour of the apparently practical/informational level. Well-practiced partners will therefore pay attention that they openly formulate their true issues. Then they can be handled directly.

We can often observe in daily conversations how what is meant differs from what is said. For instance, “I was just asking a question” can sound like a strong antipathy to the other’s proffered suggestion. In reality, it is not a question at all but the expression of antipathy or doubt. Also the remark, “I agree completely, but . . .” often does not convey agreement but rather hesitancy. Since the real statement, that is, what is really meant, is hidden behind another statement, such conversations often have an emotionalizing effect and create tension.

In our example we find another element which colors the statement in this way: the tone used to ask the question. Right away the woman hears in the tone what is really meant by the question. I use tone to color the practical/informational level of the conversation with my subjective undertone. A certain tone can turn a ‘yes’ into a ‘no.’ It is often small, filler words that communicate strong nuances in feeling. *Aha, so, but, even, and again* are words that, depending upon the tone, convey the most varied nuances. “Where have you put my shoes *again!*” is an example of how the tone and the usage of the word “again” can be imbued with accusation that calls forth an instinctive negative reaction from others.

That brings us to the meaningful level speech perception through the ear. Because we live in an age of silent, written language, we often pay too little attention to the musicality of speech. Oliver Sacks wrote in his book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* about the different effects of a televised speech by Ronald Reagan on one group of patients who had left-brain injuries and could therefore not comprehend the meaning of the words in the speech and another group who had right-brain injuries which allowed them to understand the meaning of the words but they were unable to differentiate between a male or female voice as well as the finer nuances of speech melody. While the one group who could only understand the word meanings followed the speech with serious facial expressions, the other group who could not understand the word meanings perceived the finest nuances of the voice and recognized the phraseology and theatricality of the entire speech. Sacks posed the question of which group had better understood the speech. There

are obviously different levels of understanding. Certainly one important and often misunderstood level is the coloration that occurs through the human voice. While we usually pay attention to the thought content with our intellectual awareness, the voice has more of an effect on our half-conscious life of feeling. Achieving basic competence in conversation must include tapping into this world of musicality in speech with all its various aspects and implications. One can then begin, when the situation allows, to hear a conversation in such a way that one consciously sifts out the meaning of the words and concentrates totally on the sound. This becomes obvious when one considers hearing conversation in a foreign language that one does not understand. One must put one's attention at a completely different level, one that is not less communicative than the intellectual level.

### **How do contributions to conversations happen?**

When we witness a lively conversation it seems perfectly evident that the individual contributions are expressed in a sensible word order. However, when we carefully observe ourselves in the situation, we notice that this sensible word order is not at all something to be taken for granted; yes, even a simple formulation is like a miracle. Before we make our contribution to a conversation we seldom know which words and in what order we will use. Very often we will not even know the exact configuration of what we wish to say until it comes into our consciousness while we are speaking. The content is developed in more detail as we begin to speak. Sometimes people are amazed themselves at what they have just spoken because they did not know what they were going to say until they said it. Heinrich von Kleists wrote a famous essay titled "The gradual completion of thought through speech." It is a fact that, as small children, we learn to think by speaking. If I wish to clarify a thought I must only try to formulate it in speech and it will become more clearly configured. We can achieve the same thing during conversation. Further, the way in which the other listens to me and asks questions usually helps me to better clarify my own thoughts, much better than silent contemplation.

We can observe further that it rarely happens that we always and easily reach a formulation. It depends upon the situation – my own state of mind, the way in which the other listens, and my own emotional reaction to what is being said – whether the words flow easily from my lips, are blocked, or, in the case of great agitation, explode from my mouth. Long-held anger, for instance, can end up as a powerful storm of words that may even amaze the speaker when he looks back upon it. On the other hand, a sarcastic, deliberate smile on the part of the listener can lead to stammering and, finally, silence. It really is a wonder how thought content is transformed into speech forms and how these, imbued with meaning, can be heard using our tools of speech.

My intention in speaking occurs just before I speak. A feeling arises in me and I give it spoken expression. I answer a question that is asked of me. Depending upon the situation and my state of mind, this intention is more or less imperative. A strong emotion that is called forth by a spoken contribution

or a perception so completely fills the speaker that she/he thinks little about the other person or about the logical continuance of the conversation. It is very different when, during a delicate, information-oriented conversation, I must weigh every word in order not to injure the listener on the one hand and on the other hand to be factual and to the point. Depending upon the degree of awareness about the intention, we can speak of a speaker-oriented, a partner-oriented, or a subject-oriented contribution. In the first case I live mainly in an I-consciousness, in the second case in a you-consciousness, and in the third case in an it-consciousness. These emphases actually constantly alternate during the course of a conversation. Depending upon the theme of the conversation, one or the other of these aspects will be in play. When someone tells about his vacation, then it is naturally speaker-oriented. It sometimes happens that the listener will take on a speaker-oriented role and at the first opportunity will tell of his/her own experiences on vacation, thus blocking the report of the first speaker. Everyone knows of someone in his circle of acquaintances who will always, sooner or later, turn the conversation to himself, relegating the others to listeners. I can only be of help to someone in need if I speak with a partner-oriented attitude. A conversation based on informing or making a decision must be mainly determined by a subject-oriented attitude. However, all the other aspects must always be present in the background. For example, if the partner-oriented attitude is missing during a subject-oriented conversation, one can go around in circles for hours because one has not noticed that the partner has long ago stopped paying attention or perhaps, because of hurt feelings, constantly interrupts. One must alternately direct one's attention to the three aspects of "I," "you," and "it" in order to give the necessary contribution, appropriate to the situation, which will lead the conversation further. It is especially important that I am always aware of how my contribution will affect the other. To achieve that I must educate myself in the school of listening.

### **What effect does my contribution have?**

I can best answer that question by turning it around: What effect does the other's contribution have on me? The most basic effects on the listener are usually not clearly apparent to the speaker. That is, the effects on breath and the larynx. With every word that we speak a mimicking movement of the larynx is created in the listener. This involuntary mimicking activity goes so far that something spoken in a hoarse voice will create a weakened hoarseness in the other. If someone speaks short of breath and asthmatic, the same is involuntarily carried over to the listener, and he or she has trouble breathing. Tone, melody, accentuation, the way in which speech is configured in the stream of breath, all of these things are immediately and involuntarily transferred to the listener. Therefore it becomes clear how speaking directly affects the well-being of the other and what an elementary social process is conversation. If I pay attention to how the speaker influences my breath and larynx, I will become aware of the effect of my own speech on others.

Through my voice I have an effect on the half-conscious feeling state of my conversation partner that is completely independent from the content of my speech with which I call forth sympathy, antipathy, or indifference. There are people who can speak only in a whining tone; other voices sound basically accusatory, cautionary, know-it-all, encouraging, agreeable, flattering, anxious, harsh, and so forth, and they all create corresponding reactions. There are voices that are so irritating to the listener that he has already formed an opposition before he has even completely understood the meaning of what is being said – simply because of the provocative voice. Again, we should become aware of this dynamic. Perhaps we could even ask a good friend sometime about any one-sided effects of our own voice. Everyone knows how sensitively one reacts to corrective criticism or critical remarks about one's voice. After all, the voice is a piece of one's self. For that reason it can be of great significance to try to overcome the limits through speech exercises or perhaps by consciously remaining silent in certain situations.

A third area of influence that is independent of speech content is the emotional charge of words. Words are not only conveyors of meaning; often they carry their own emotional value. Certain words can have an effect that is nothing short of magical. In Paris during the French Revolution it could cost one's head if one greeted another with the old "monsieur" instead of the new "citoyen." To this day the word "Führer" still makes one think of Hitler. For similar reasons the use of the word "race" can evoke emotions. Every society has such emotionally charged words. As soon as an intense experience is connected to a word, that word, for that society, has a certain magical effect. In some cases it may evoke laughter and in other cases hate and enmity. For productive conversation it is advisable to consciously avoid using such words and replace them with other similar words that are not charged with emotion. In this way one avoids "a train wreck" because one's conversation partner has been gripped by emotion.

Having examined the effects on the listener that are not dependent upon the content of the words spoken, let us look at what promotes conversation and what inhibits it. Basically, one can say that expressions of will and feeling call forth other conversation contributions and therefore promote conversation, even though it can be inharmonious. Questions have a similar effect, however, only when they are real questions. Many things that are put forth in the form of questions are, in reality, not questions at all but either statements or retorts. Questions about a certain subject or about others feed the flow of conversation. Judgments, warnings, and extensive self-revelations inhibit conversation. We can differentiate between questions that evoke a single response (purely informational questions such as: "What is the population of St. Petersburg?") and those that open up a path to knowledge that can be traversed together ("Can we do anything about this situation?" or, "What will the year 2012 bring to us?" or, "How can I get out of this dead end?"). Questions about the well-being of the conversation partner that come from real concern and not just social convention can lead to long and deep

conversations. They can become questions of destiny, yes, even questions of redemption. Those people who have grasped the essence of the question will become the best promoters of conversation. The participants will have a sensitive reaction only if they notice that the question is not genuine or perhaps even has a condescending character.

The following group exercise should help bring the three different effects of emotional expression, question, and judgment into experience: One reacts to a given suggestion in a threefold manner: First, through pure expressions of feeling from enthusiastic agreement all the way to complete disgust. One carries on with this as intensely and as long as possible so that the full effect can be perceived. One should not shy away from overly dramatic expressions since this exercise is more readily implemented with a sense of play. After that, one takes the same suggestion and formulates it into genuine questions and, finally, one goes round the circle many times to gather statements and judgments. By experiencing these isolated elements one can become aware of their effects on conversation. After this exercise one can know when emotion during a conversation is allowable (for instance, because it is freeing instead of hiding it behind a brisk, no-nonsense attitude), which phases call for questions, and which ones for judgmental activity.

We have worked through the fundamentals of how we can go from a spontaneous, half-conscious or unconscious attitude during conversation to an attitude of conscious listening and speaking.

### **Going from unconscious to conscious listening and speaking**

My normal everyday consciousness is usually geared toward what the other person says. That is, my normal hearing is sense-oriented. Once I have grasped the meaning I do not need to listen further. The usual interruptions and talking over happens because of the fact that I am only grasping for the meaning and am oriented to the “what” of what is being said. We find this especially during discussions. While someone is still talking the other person is already thinking about their counterpoint. The participants do not talk to each other but against each other. In the end there are always winners and losers.

A kind of listening that is even more me-oriented occurs when I allow certain words to trigger my mind to wander. This behavior is called associative. During half-conscious listening one catches words or images and then gives one’s mind over to its own inner images while listening with only half an ear. These inner images mirror the configuration of one’s own life of the mind-soul. They are drawn like a magnet to the thoughts that have the strongest emotional character. For example, if one has planned a trip for the next day, one must constantly contend with the above-described circumstances. The half-conscious and unconscious excitement about the coming event works like a magnet on all other experiences. Even if one tries the diversionary tactic of reading a captivating book, one’s thoughts often will stray back to the coming trip, triggered by a word or an image from the

text that leads one associatively back to the emotional center with uncanny aim. The order of the images has no logical connection but rather is determined by their relationship to feelings.

Our everyday consciousness is egocentric. We feel at the center of events and the world around us is on the periphery. Of course, we must develop this center-consciousness in order to even get to the point of consciousness of self. But we must recognize that this attitude will definitely not open up a way to the other person nor make us receptive to perceiving the subject of the conversation. Both these activities require a willful decision to overcome egocentricity. This decision can be made relative to listening, for instance. If I have, at an earlier time, through associative listening, allowed myself to become woven into my own images of feeling, then it is progress for me if I listen in a sense-oriented fashion; in other words, if I orient my listening to the “what” of what is being said. By banning the entire world of tone and melody to my unconscious, I may find myself in another situation of one-sidedness. I must also overcome sense-oriented listening. If I practice taking in the world of sound; progressing from merely “what” to the more expressive “how,” I am making progress in the quality of listening and, at the same time, overcoming being trapped within one’s self.

### **What discoveries can I make in the realm of sound?**

The realm of sound opens me to the nuances of feeling that have been described previously. Intellectual understanding can be expanded into experiential understanding of what one’s conversation partner really means. Active listening reveals to me the discrepancy between what is said and what is meant. I can become aware of my own reactions of feeling to the voice of the other person. This is important so that I might not spontaneously react from my feelings but may set them aside. If I concentrate more on the voice of the speaker I can also hear his momentary state of mind. I can perceive a shaky, uncertain voice, one that is pathetically soft, ingenuous, or carefree, and I can realize that there is much more behind what is actually said.

Systematic training of one’s listening skills can advance to diagnostic abilities. Besides the state of being of the speaker and the nuances of his/her speech through tone, I could have a deeply moving experience. Everyone has his own voice just as he has his own face. If I am successful in really grasping what is unique in a voice, then I momentarily meet the essence of the other person through such an experience. I have given up completely my everyday egocentric consciousness in that I have become one with the other person. Such listening is possible only if I give up my own self for a short time and slip into the other person through his voice. This process can be compared to a conscious falling asleep. I must be able to completely forget myself in this moment just as occurs naturally during sleep. Rudolf Steiner actually described the rhythm between hearing and understanding as one of sleeping and waking. During active listening I completely connect myself with the voice of the other person and lose, for a time, my egocentric

consciousness. I awaken to myself with the result of this short sleep experience which is understanding. Hearing and understanding are related to each other just as sleeping and waking. A small child learns to speak and understand through hearing. Adults often skip over real hearing and therefore do not reach any real understanding. This is the highest form of listening that exists. I must be careful to never completely separate the thought content from the speech form. It is a characteristic of language that it is capable of melting together form and content. Through enhanced listening I can perceive the spoken thoughts as well as the essence of the speaker.

According to Steiner there are essentially four senses active here: the sense of hearing; the sense of speech, which grasps what is heard as an expression of something internal; the sense of thought, perceiving unfamiliar thoughts; and finally, connected to all of these activities, the recognition of another ego through the "I-sense." Of course there are other intermediary senses active, such as the sense of sight and the sense of one's own movement for mime and gesture. But mainly it is these four senses that come into use during conversation and determine whether the conversation achieves a superficial or deeper level of understanding. Careful training of these senses especially promotes conversational and social competence.

The highest form of speech consists in forming one's own contributions out of simultaneous perception of content, expression, and I-encounter. Such a contribution is the fruit of individual initiative, and at the same time, it overcomes all autistic egocentricity. If I try to serve only the content with my contribution, I lose the warmth of encounter, and if I concentrate only on my relationship to my conversation partner with my contributions, then I lose the content.

### **Levels of conversation**

There is a certain order of levels of conversational forms that all have their places at the appropriate times. During spontaneous, everyday conversation, drinking coffee with someone, visiting relatives, or celebrating holidays, the warmth of feeling and an ego-oriented form of speaking and listening are naturally what is commonly in use. For organized discussions for the purpose of decision-making or those whose purpose is to spread knowledge, it is expected that the participants all make an effort to promote progress in the discussion. This is subject-centered conversation; it is important that feeling-accented and egocentric behavior be minimized. Arguments, airing of thoughts, and explanations often do not serve clarity but are expressions of will and feeling. Proving another wrong, opinions, and arguments are used to gain victory for one's own will or sympathy. One is then not serving the conversation but rather using rhetorical and dialectic elements to push something through. That is how the power-trip principal works.

When one summarizes the qualities of the forms of conversation one can also say that associative conversation tends to warmth without light.

Organized conversation tends to light without warmth. The ideal conversation combines light with warmth. That must have been what Goethe had in mind when he wrote the following dialog between the Golden King and the Snake: “What is more glorious than gold?” asked the King. “Light,” replied the Snake. “What is more quickening than light?” he asked. “Conversation,” he answered.

Light is an expression of wisdom. During conversation the light of wisdom connects to the lively, human encounter if the individuals are willing to sacrifice their preconceived notions and opinions in favor of coming to a quickening experience by taking in higher thoughts. This can lead not only to new knowledge (light) but also to a new encounter of being (warmth) with the other person(s). Associative conversation is normally ego-oriented, and organized conversation is usually it- or subject-oriented. The truly quickening form leads either from ‘I’ to ‘it’ by way of ‘you’ or from ‘I’ to ‘you’ by way of ‘it.’

### **Conversation as an organism of time**

Every conversation takes place in time and therefore has a beginning, a middle, and an end. This time factor shows itself especially clearly in a conversation that begins with the suggestion of an individual and leads to a mutual decision at the end. The initiative of the individual stands at the beginning and at the end we have the common decision from the community. Ideally this conversation would progress from ‘I’ to ‘we.’

Conversations for the purpose of decision making can be made or broken depending upon whether something does or does not happen at the right time. One can experience that someone says something that is met with not even an echo. The same thing said at a later time could be the solution. Bringing the right words at the right time is doubtless what makes one a master of conversation.

How do I know when it is time? First I must become familiar with the general rules of conversation. One could describe the first phase as gathering the basis for judgment. Here one sees that, as far as possible, all the viewpoints, concerns, facts, and opinions are heard. The more extensively this takes place, the more secure is the basis. A second phase which develops organically out of the first is that of reaching a consensus judgment or conclusion. The prerequisite for this is that from the knowledge gained during the first phase, the appropriate weighing and considering occurs. The conclusion of this phase is marked by achievement of a common viewpoint.

Conversations for the purpose of sharing or gaining knowledge can be concluded at this point. However, if a decision or resolution is needed, then a decision phase must follow in which the conclusions of this common viewpoint must be drawn, with the final conclusion being a mutually agreed upon decision. It is advisable in every case to divide these two phases with a break. Already with this loose division one can differentiate between that which is timely and that which is not. Those who are pushing for a decision

during the first phase, when the object is creating the basis for judgment, are just as untimely as those who wish to bring in more parameters during the decision phase. Decisions are often hindered by bringing up arguments that have long since been heard, and repeating them causes the conversation to go around in circles. Making a decision involves nothing more than drawing the proper conclusions based upon what has been presented and making the mutual decision binding on the individuals. The conclusion or decision ushers the knowledge into the realm of the will. However, within the last phase one must also recognize the correct point in time. Just as in individual decision-making, it is recommended that, on the one hand, there is a wide enough basis for judgment so that one does not make blind decisions. On the other hand, there is clearly a moment when one can sense that if a decision is not made now, then the opportunity has passed and it is too late. In certain constellations one can sense the time is ripe for a decision and all the elements have come together. It requires presence of mind to really grasp this moment and courage to actually come to a decision.

One can describe the organism of time in a decision-making process in still another way, as a dramatic process. Drama has to do with polar opposite forces. The same is true of conversations whose purpose is to reach a decision. For example, the person who makes a suggestion naturally has the tendency to want to speed up the process whereas the others, in opposition to this, will ask for explanations and voice reservations; in other words, they will have a retarding effect. After the conversation has gone on for a period of time and the person who made the suggestion selflessly steps back, another process is usually put in motion that, again, leads to polarization. But now it is not an I-we opposition but rather a we-you opposition. The questioning escalates to the point that there are vehement supporters and vehement detractors.

With that the crisis or the turning point is characterized during a dramatic progression. Again, it would be counterproductive to try to force a decision at this point. There would be winners and losers, one group would shut out the other group, and the decision would be a sham. Those who have a feel for timeliness would realize that a creative pause was needed. This break could be used for individual discussions to consider alternatives, to clear up misunderstandings, to heal injured feelings, and with renewed vigor, to finally come to a conclusion in the plenum. A real decision must go through this critical point, in individual as well as group decision-making. Whether the crisis is more subject-oriented or person-oriented depends upon the conversational climate and the previous formation of the basis for judgment. However, in any case, it is most important that one recognizes when a break is needed, when every further word will only strengthen the blockade or increase the likelihood of hurt feelings. The more people have honed their listening abilities, the more likely it is that the crisis will be avoided or overcome and the process be brought to a satisfying conclusion.

Here I would like to point out an especially effective exercise for developing the periphery of consciousness and at the same time widening

one's perceptual horizon when it comes to progression of time and constellations of conversations. It is quite simple but only really effective if it is transformed into ability.

One imagines that one feels pressure to say something to the other person. This forms the basis for the exercise. Then one decides (where the situation allows, of course) to not say anything. This is certainly not easy to do in the beginning, but it shows one how strongly one is influenced by one's own desire to make a contribution. By the same measure one is no longer open to taking in what is being said by the other person. The more one is filled with the desire to speak, the less one is able to listen. It is as if someone is calling and the line is busy. If one consequently carries out this exercise one will become increasingly independent from this emotional 'busy signal' and will therefore increase the ability to devote attention to the other person. This exercise also helps build an active space of silence which makes it possible to become attentive to the actual constellations. One increases one's sensitivity to what is needed at the moment, for example, who should be encouraged to speak at this moment. It is not one's own contribution that is important but that which is right at the particular moment to promote the progression of the conversation. The further one progresses with this exercise, the more one's own effectiveness during a conversation is increased. Those who speak without thoughtful preparation will usually not be so attentively listened to as those who give a timely contribution after a long silence.

Of course, this exercise is aimed only at those people and those situations where one actually will and can say something. Those people who like to hide behind others and who must muster courage to speak at all, they should, first of all, practice risking a courageous foray into the discussion. One can also do this in the form of exercises. Before a discussion one decides to say something at least three times. Naturally, such possibilities are always dependent upon an appropriate discussion climate and the tolerance with which the others listen.

### **The four elements of a conversation**

The progression of a conversation is configured in a four-fold way. How we recognize and learn to handle these formative elements determines whether new possibilities will be opened to us to effectively promote the conversation.

First, a conversation lives from its content, the material. Talk is exchanged about a certain subject. I can view a conversation from these aspects: adequate material is present, some material is missing, or one is drowning in the abundance of subject matter. Naturally, these aspects change during the course of the conversation. There are phases during which new contributions and new initiatives overcome stagnation. Other phases, such as the decision phases, require a limiting so that one can come to a good ending. Usually it goes from abundance to limitation. At the beginning overflowing abundance is welcome, but then one strives for deepening.

A second element is the tempo. Here, also, we should always try to find the happy medium between too fast and too slow. Pauses for thought between

contributions can work wonders. But there are also phases where abundantly flowing contributions are enlivening.

The dynamic of the conversation is a third element. Without sufficient tension no conversation can really get into gear. Dialog is the original principle of drama. Once again, there can be too much or too little. Towards a midpoint the tension increases, and a relaxation of tension must follow which again gathers into a new tension toward the end. Questions, objections, and arguments are tension-creating elements. Answers, explanations, and laughter release tension.

A fourth and last element has to do with the direction that is determined by the motive for the conversation. One can doggedly and systematically move toward the goal of the conversation (knowledge or decision) without tolerating any deviations. Or, at the other extreme, one can constantly allow the conversation to get off course and therefore never reach a goal. The middle ground must be found at this level between moving in a straight line and getting lost in things that are off the subject. When is it necessary to take stock of where one is and have an exchange about how to proceed? Which side paths should be allowed because they may bring the conversation a step further once it is back on track?

We have now identified eight essential functions in a conversation which must be differentiated and grasped:

The material: limit or renew

The tempo: speed up or slow down

The tension: raise or lower

The directional goal: strengthen or sometimes let go

It is recommended that one review conversations with these functions in mind. This will give one the necessary feeling for appropriately exercising these functions during actual conversations. One can also decide beforehand to set a goal of practice one or another of these functions.

### **Conversation is a circle**

One can now easily observe that in a conversation circle the integral functions so bond to certain persons that they are practically cemented into roles. There are the ready talkers who give their spontaneous contributions on every subject whether or not anyone is listening. There are also those who consistently call for limiting and strive for deepening. There is the pragmatic one who tries to speed up the process and finally get on with it rather than having endless discussion. There is the thoughtful retardant who urges sleeping over things once again. There is the provocateur or the argumentative spirit as well as the intermediary who always strives to smooth the way. We all recognize the one who knows exactly what was said and is constantly trying to get everyone to abide by what was agreed upon and who likes to direct our attention to the protocol. There is also the one whose spontaneous, bright ideas throw all agreed-upon rules right out the window.

There are a few other roles besides that usually appear in opposing pairs such as the idealist and the realist, the optimist and the pessimist, and so forth.

These roles clearly tend to one-sidedness if they are not merely being played by the participants. The ideal would be when everyone is aware of when and what function he should fulfill in order to serve the progression of the discussion just as in an orchestra in which everyone must play his part in order for the whole to succeed. This ability is present as potential in everyone even though usually one tendency is dominant which can lead to one-sidedness.

It is very destructive, however, if someone limits himself to his role and equally so if the other participants limit someone to that role. Certainly it can be that the same person in another discussion will take on another function because of the different constellation. If people are limited to their particular role behaviors, then one reaches a conversation mechanism in which it can be predicted exactly who will react to whom and how. A discussion circle can then only progress when something is discovered in the others which leads them out of their roles. There is nothing so inhibiting to conversation as a fixated expectation of the others. Nothing promotes conversation more than when encounters are sought by overcoming egocentric stances and encouraging active listening. When one has participated in a discussion circle for awhile, one knows about one's own one-sidedness and will be increasingly thankful when the various one-sided aspects of the other participants also come to the forefront. One will realize more and more that, through these one-sided aspects, forces come into expression that are important to the whole. Everyone has the basic requirements of these forces but not everyone is equally capable of expressing them.

Here one can call to mind the cosmic image of the zodiac where twelve different forces are working and yet are connected as a whole by the Sun which determines the days and seasons. We can see a terrestrial image of this in the painting of *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci in which the twelve different characteristic gestures are all completely oriented to the figure in the middle. They show themselves not only as character types but also as individuals who can develop through their relationship to Christ. Conversational and social competence are bound to the prerequisite that within every person there lie possibilities for development. One does not show him/herself to be a master in this by striving to always show one's self in a better light thus putting the others in shadow. One recognizes the master in that through his/her devotional ability (the art of listening) the others are brought to expression. Therefore the best exercise for those who can formulate well is to sometimes consciously remain silent. The power of speech will then move into a silent space which will allow the others to open up and contribute. The old saying can now be understood in a new light: Speech is silver, silence is golden.