

ONE - TO - ONE MY TWO CENTS

We are all continually engaging in conversations of some sort. Whether we are debating politics over dinner or buying a loaf of bread, we are interacting with people all day long. Despite this obvious truth, many people approach the "one-to-one conversation" with no little trepidation. With the realization that this a different kind of conversation than many of us are used to, some people jump to the conclusion that either they cannot be themselves in this dialogue or that they are incapable of doing this kind of conversation "correctly," as if there were only one way.

We know what to say to a waiter or a colleague, and have clear expectations of what dialogue will develop when we place the bread on the conveyer belt. I'm not surprised then, that I have heard from some nervous council members, "Yes, I understand it's a different kind of conversation, so I need to know exactly what to say." If only it were that easy and a script could be handed out to those anxious one-to-one'ers. However, there are some general guidelines and tactical phrases that can help those just starting out.

The first time I was asked to attend a business cocktail party, I froze in fear wondering what I was going to say to all these strangers. A kind colleague pried me out of the corner to say, "Don't think of it so much as 'what can I say to them?' but 'what can I learn from another in this short time we have together?'". This subtle change in mindset very quickly forced me to stop thinking about myself and to ask them about themselves. Once they were talking, I was able to pick up points of interest and go from there. Taking myself and my own needs (and fears) out of the equation allowed me to focus on the other person totally, and despite a few stumbles, I was surprised at how easy it was to engage others in speaking about themselves. Once we change our frame of reference and remember that the focus of the one to ones are the other person, the task doesn't seem as daunting and we take the onus off of ourselves to do it just a certain way.

The "Public Relationship"

Part of the anxiety seems to revolve around the nature of the "public" relationship. Council members are reminded over and over not to get too personal, since we do not want to invade privacy and make people uncomfortable. But, perhaps more importantly, we want to draw from people values and observations that transcend most of our everyday personal conversations. Many people do not dialogue at this level often, so we set this time apart very intentionally and define it as a different kind of conversation.

Recently, I was asked what happens if you accidentally divulge something personal about yourself. This person

was so worried he would say the wrong thing, it was interfering with his ability to say anything! My first response was, "Relax!" I reminded him not to forget to the big picture. You are there to learn about the other, his/her needs and values. The pastoral council training has presented tried and true methods of how to do that. If you happen to divulge something personal about yourself, or something happens that, while innocuous, breaks one these guidelines, no buzzer will go off, no one will vote you off the council. We move on. The most important part is to remember why you are there and get back on track.

Ok, we have our mind-set and frames of references, still nervous? Here are some practical strategic phrases and guidelines to help you through. Remember, the only useful strategies are those that flow from you naturally, so you might want to practice some of these with family members or even your pets.

Some things to try:

- Use normal, everyday language - Try not to talk above or below people. Either one will make people feel uncomfortable. Also do not assume that everyone knows what you know, especially when it comes to parish life and the parish council. Be prepared to explain the process as you understand it.
- Use open-ended questions - "What" and "how" questions are more likely to encourage discussion than questions with a "yes" or "no" response. Asking "Do you like coming to our church?" automatically assumes a "yes" or "no" response. A simple rephrasing to "How do you feel about attending our Church?" or "Tell me what you think about our Church?" has much more potential of opening up genuine conversation.
- Body Language - Spend some time this week observing what the people around you are saying without opening their mouths. Notice how quickly we size people up based on their posture, a shrug, a sigh or the way they look at you when they talk. Some sociologists say that up to 75% of what we say is determined by all these subtle (and not so subtle) body cues. Not only is it valuable to take in how others are responding to you, but watching your own body language can help guide conversation. Leaning forward and looking people in the eye when they talk to you lets them know you are listening attentively and that you care about what they are saying. Nod along if you feel comfortable, and try to avoid crossing your arms in front of you as that often conveys a defensive posture. However you choose to present yourself, remember to be real to yourself and feel comfortable with your words and actions.

My Two Cents (continued)

- Focus and concentrate on what is being said - Attentive listening includes obvious things like not being distracted, but also includes the very difficult task of NOT thinking about your response while the other person is talking. Don't you hate when you notice people doing that to you!?! It compromises respectful dialogue, but you can also miss some valuable information, thinking about what comes next. You might also consider keeping the clock within eyesight or placing your watch on the table to avoid continual glances at your wrist while listening.
- Validate others' feelings - You are bound to come across people who want nothing more than to complain! Whether it is about the church or about other issues on their minds, there are always people who will take advantage of someone who is there to listen to them. While that need may be real and valid, remember of course, that you are there for a specific reason. I recall a psychotherapist fond of having her students continually rehearse the phrase, "They need someone other than me."

However, when a person is expressing feelings of confusion, pessimism, or anger, try to acknowledge their feelings. While you do not have the answers (nor is it your purpose to provide them) and you are certainly not there for free therapy, be careful not to quickly dismiss their feelings. You can ask a question or make a statement to make sure that you understand what is being said. It conveys to the person that you really hear them. Acknowledge them, rephrasing in your own words, then bring them back to task. For example, "Yeah, I hear what you're saying. The Church is not what it used to be. But you know, we have this great opportunity now to have a voice in the future. Tell me more about what you'd like to see happen in our church." In this way, you have affirmed that you understand what s/he is saying, and you have successfully redirected the conversation to something constructive without making the person feel awkward.

- One-to-One environment - Giving some thought to your environment can have a big influence over the quality of the dialogue for both you and your conversation partner. If you have control over the meeting space, consider placing your chair at an angle so you are neither directly across nor next to the person. A diagonal positioning has been shown to be the least threatening in most dialogue. If personal space is an issue for you, a coffee table between you will provide a sense of security and distance. If the other person appears intimidated, consider setting up a room with a number of free chairs and asking him/her to sit first, giving them control to determine the set up.

Some things to stay away from:

Nothing shuts down a potentially valuable conversation than some of these great dialogue "blockers."

- Moralizing / Giving Orders - Stay away from words like you "should" or you "better". People may feel they are being treated like children. In addition, while we want to invite people to active participation in the assembly and other activities, words like, "MUST" or beginning phrases with, "You know what you gotta do..." often makes people feel defensive and angry.
- Threatening - A very busy single mother recently told me she was resentful of the process when an over-enthusiastic council member said, "If YOU don't get involved now, our church will die". We presume the council member meant well, but threatening or guiltig someone into service simply produces resentment and feelings of being judged.
- Possessiveness - When we are highly invested in our communities, it's very easy to slip and say "my church". Remember that part of our goal is to build group consciousness, reminding others it is "our church," as well as "our council".
- Judging - While it is said we make our first impressions within 10 seconds of meeting someone, we must be careful not to let whatever impresses us shift us from our conversation. We are there to listen to what they are saying, and by using our first impressions to guide our questioning, people may feel, "Why bother. They have made up their mind already," and you will lose the opportunity to learn something new.
- Defensiveness - You will likely hear lots of complaints, valid or not, about the church and community. More likely than not, it will take every ounce of energy not to take a position or explain why things happen the way they do. Try to step back, accept the criticism and state you will take it back to the council. If it a serious misconception, you could always recommend they speak to someone or simply say, "These are issues I would really like the opportunity to address. Perhaps after our conversation (or another time) I can try and help set the record straight."

These suggestions are based on pretty straightforward logic and many are probably already in practice in your conversations, whether you have defined them as such or not. Giving them just a bit of conscious thought will help ease any lingering awkwardness. Coupled with good old fashioned common sense and a little practice, the one-to-one's will quickly become second nature.

• Ellen Rhatigan •