

# Entering and Exiting a Conversation with Someone New

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Whether you are looking to ask for directions, trying to start a new friendship, or make a business link, you are likely to encounter situations where you need to start a conversation with someone you don't know. Whether we like to admit it or not, starting a conversation with a stranger is something we all find at least a bit intimidating. We have a tendency to overthink what to say and how to say it, as well as a tendency to assume that the other person will not be interested in speaking to us, or will find us boring, forward or annoying.

Engaging new people in conversation is such an important skill, and yet it's not something that is ever really explicitly taught. Even in all my years of teaching social work, I don't think it is something that I ever set as a learning goal or even specifically evaluated for grades. Yet, many people have questions, and want practice and feedback, so they can feel that they have the skills and the confidence to engage in the very important conversations that are required for career and business success.

**Here are a few suggestions to get you started on networking journey.**

### *Entering a Conversation:*

- Arrive at a networking event early; this way the room will be less intimidating and many people are likely to be standing alone. It's somewhat less intimidating to approach an individual than a group and chances are this person is looking to network and feeling somewhat awkward about meeting new people too.
- Consider approaching individuals, or groups of 3 or more people, preferably groups of an uneven number. It's always easier to start a conversation with an individual person than with a group. Pairs whether as a whole or as part of a larger group are also harder to engage in conversation because they are likely focussed on one and other and 3 is indeed a crowd in this type of situation.
- Look for open people and open groups; people who are standing at an angle to the conversation are more open to inviting others in and groups in a 'u' formation are more likely to entertain new participants than groups in a closed circle.
- Choose a group of people who sound like they are having a good time. Approach slowly but with intent, stand in the periphery, near the open end of the group or near the person standing at an angle from the group. Either wait to be acknowledged or wait for an in. When acknowledged, step in and respond. If you are not acknowledged in a short period, assess whether there appears to be an opportunity for you to engage the group; perhaps laugh with them, ask a question, or comment appropriately on something that you heard them discussing, like the weather, a movie, a community event, a song, or a person you may both know. *Remember, people*

*at a networking event expect to network, so looking to engage with new people is something that is not only welcomed but expected.*

- Stay until the end of the event, and take your time exiting. Lots of great networking happens just before people part. Those people who stay behind and slowly collect their things are often even more open to conversations. These people often haven't achieved their networking goals and are looking to make a few more contacts before the end of the event. Apply the same suggestions as above in terms of approaching individuals first, and open groups of at least 3 second.
- Come prepared with some opening lines; nice shoes, great weather, looking so forward to this presentation, what time is it? Would you happen to have seen 'person x', can you tell me where the washroom is, all work in a pinch.

*If this still seems intimidating start here:*

- *Bring along a friend who is more comfortable starting conversations and tag along with this person. Be sure to maintain interest in the conversations that your contact starts and engage in the discussion as soon as you can.*
- *Ask an organizer to introduce you to someone to get you started. Ask that person to introduce you to some of his or her contacts.*
- *Don't stay in any one conversation too long. Build success upon success, by using the courage you gained from starting*

*successful conversation number 1 to help you start conversation number 2.*

- *Practice as often as you can when the stakes are not high; smile at people in the mall or park, start small-talk in a bank or grocery line up, engage in easy conversation with the person who takes your coffee order, say hello to work colleagues that you are less familiar with.*

### ***Help out others who find networking intimidating***

***When you see someone in your group's periphery, take a step back. Doing so helps to include another person who is in the group's periphery. You'll feel great knowing that you helped out a fellow timid networker and you'll make a new contact, and perhaps a new friend***

### ***Exiting a conversation***

Exiting a conversation can be just as difficult as starting one; especially if the conversation just peters off, or your new contact becomes engaged in a new conversation. It is important however that you exit as gracefully as you entered.

### ***Here are some things to think about***

Consider that networking conversations should be time limited and leave you and the other person wanting to connect again on another occasion.

- Take the lead to positively end the conversation. You might thank the other for the information that they shared, summarize what you

learned or found interesting about the exchange, or ask for permission to contact the person in a few days.

- Offer a handshake if appropriate.
- Ask for and offer a business card if appropriate.
- Wish the other person a good day, evening, conference (whatever the case may be).
- Consider introducing this new contact to one of your own contacts, if appropriate.
- Walk a good distance, suggestion is a quarter of the room, before approaching a new group and engaging a new contact.

There are a lot of great articles and videos out there about networking.

Take some time to do some research and find what fits for you.

Networking should, at least over time, become an exciting adventure.