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A NEWSLETTER BROUGHT TO YOU BY THORNBURG AND ANDREW SOBEL

Andrew Sobel

Advisor Insights is brought to you by Thornburg Investment Management. Each month, TIM shares insights from leading authority Andrew Sobel and author of *Clients for Life* and *Making Rain: The Secrets of Building Lifelong Client Loyalty* on how to build your client base and strengthen your long-term relationships.

19 Conversation Techniques

"When I go to meet with a man," wrote President Abraham Lincoln, "I spend one-third of my time thinking about what I am going to say, and two-thirds of my time thinking about what he is going to say." Lincoln certainly had a masterful understanding of human character, and an unusual knack for being able to influence others. His quip highlights a major problem with many highly educated professionals: Sometimes, we are so full of our own thoughts and ideas that we have trouble listening to and engaging the other person. The result is that we don't get the most out of our conversations. Here are 19 conversational techniques that will improve your ability to listen to and understand others:

1. Synthesizing: "So it seems like there are really three different issues going on here, which are..." Summarizing, which is what many people do, is boring and tedious to the other person. Synthesizing shows you are listening but goes further and adds value through big-picture thinking.

2. Active listening: Interjecting "OK, Uh huh, That's right, I see" to communicate that you are paying attention.

3. Non-verbal listening: Using your body and eyes to show you are completely focused on the other person. Avoid "tells" like looking at your watch, letting your eyes wander around the room, and so on.

4. Echoing: Repeating the last word spoken. Client: "So as a result, there's very high attrition." You: "Attrition." Client: "Yes, we think it's well above the industry average. In fact, last year we lost 20% of the sales force." You: "20%" Client: "Well, some of it was uncontrollable attrition like retirements, but..." *

5. Disclosure: "I know what you mean–two years ago I also missed a major family event due to a deadline at work..." Sharing your own experiences, in a non-condescending manner, can create a more intimate and meaningful dialog. If you are interested in the psychology of this, look up the "Johari Window," devised by Ingham and Luft . The idea is that mutual disclosure–not one person talking and the other simply listening–leads to empathy and understanding.

6. Open-ended questions: "What would it take to get alignment around this issue?" "What have your past experiences been with outside advisors?" There is some research which indicates that successful sales executives use more open-ended than closed-ended questions in the sales process.

7. Provocative questions: "Why?" "So what?" "Why are you in this business?" "Why do you think you need outside help?" Last year, I was referred to an expert on newsletter marketing. I called him to explore how I might expand the circulation of *Client Loyalty* (it's close to 3000 direct subscribers right now, and most of the articles are reprinted in other newsletters, giving them closer to 15,000 or 20,000 readers each month). His first question was, "So Andrew, why do you want more subscribers? Maybe you should have fewer." At first I was irritated, but then I realized that I had not completely thought through what my goals for the newsletter were. His provocative question made me think.

8. Provocative or "turn-around" answers: Client: "So what can you do for us?" You: "I don't know" Client: "The CEO is challenging our use of consultants" You: "I don't blame him."*

9. Questions about the meaning of words: Client: "This is a very dysfunctional organization." You: "What do you mean by 'dysfunctional'?"

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Client: "Basically, we want our relationship managers to up their game and stop playing politics." You: "What does 'playing politics' mean in your organization?" Don't assume you understand exactly what your client means when he or she uses certain terms!

10. Questions about the past: "How and when did this start?"

11. Questions about the present: "What are you doing now to fix this?"

12. Questions about the future: "If this project succeeds, what would things look like a year from now?"

13. Personal questions: "What are your own aspirations in the organization?" "Who have your mentors been?" Don't kid yourself–every client gains some personal value from working with us.

14. Questions about feelings: "How did you feel about that decision?" Usually, we ask about thoughts– "What do you think?" Asking about feelings can tap into a whole new aspect of the issue.

15. Use of humor: Appropriate jokes or quips, self-deprecation, "break the ice" humor, and so on.

> *"Sharing your own experiences, in a non-condescending manner, can create a more intimate and meaningful dialog."*

16. Not answering: "I don't know your company well enough to answer that. I can tell you what I'll be looking for, however"; "I don't know. Let me get back to you." Saying "I don't know" can build, not erode, trust.

17. Questions about the question: "Let me make sure I understand your question: Are you asking if it's a good idea or if it's feasible?" Or, "I'm curious about why you're asking me that..." (Note: be careful not to overuse this latter technique, which can come across as contrived or evasive if used too often or inappropriately).

18. Questions about what is missing: "Is there anything I haven't asked about that you think is relevant?

19. Letting the client answer provocative questions: You don't always have to have the answer! For example: You're presenting to a group of client executives. Someone asks the question, "So you've demonstrated that our costs are 20% over the benchmark. I just don't believe that." You look at the person attentively, let your eyes wander to the other meeting participants, and remain silent for 3-5 seconds. Given the opening (your silence), another executive in the audience may very well jump in: "Oh come on, we've known this for years. That's why our operating margins are so bad." All of a sudden, your clients are having a healthy debate among themselves, and metaphorically you're on the same side of the table. This has happened to me many, many times.

Try some of these techniques in your conversations with clients–or with anyone else that matters in your life. They may well help you to have deeper and more interesting discussions.

**Thanks to my friend Alan Weiss for numbers 4 and 8!*

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Andrew Sobel is a leading authority on client relationships and the skills and strategies required to earn enduring client loyalty. He is a consultant and educator to major services firms worldwide. He is the author of the business bestsellers Making Rain: The Secrets of Building Lifelong Client Loyalty (Wiley & Sons), and Clients for Life: How Great Professionals Develop Breakthrough Relationships (Simon & Schuster/Fireside). He can be reached at andrew@andrewsobel.com (Tel: 505.982.0211).