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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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The Art of Chat ▶ 01/31/08

Marilyn, heir apparent to the division director, told me she went to the break room earlier that day to get a drink. A few people stood together chatting. She skirted them and got out as fast as she could so they wouldn't engage her. Then with a sigh of disgust she said, "If I'm going to be division director I've got to learn to chat. But, uh! I hate it!"

Having coached dozens of highly analytical experts who felt incompetent at chatting, I assured her it's a learned skill—and not all that hard to learn!

To chat successfully you first have to adopt one attitude above all others: curiosity.

Marilyn was skeptical when she heard this. I asked if she worried that her curiosity might feel invasive to others or that she simply wouldn't know what to ask. "Both," she said with a weary smile.

"Let's take the first one first," I said. "I'm going to guess you're less worried about their feeling invaded than you are about feeling as if you're the invader. You aren't comfortable when people inquire about you so you imagine that's how others feel, too. Am I close?"

When she said yes, I asked her to picture those people in the break room. Did she think they were all feeling invaded by each other? She laughed and agreed they seemed to be enjoying themselves.

"I'm sure they were," I said. "It's important to understand that your particular aversion is particularly yours. It's not universal. It's like an allergy. It flares up and affects you but other people aren't affected by it at all." She related to this and told me her husband suffers from a cat allergy but that she loves cats and misses having them. "Perfect," I said. "Then understand that when you chat, your allergy might flare up. But you can tolerate it. And if you get in there and do it, you'll actually build up immunity."

Then we moved to her second concern: that she wouldn't be able to think of anything to ask. I started again at the foundation of all chat: curiosity.



Most people work to find commonality in their chat. Did you grow up in the Midwest? Me, too! Did you see that movie this weekend? Me, too! Do you have kids? Me, too! The “Me, too!” moment gets us started on a subject we can chat about safely. That’s not bad. It gets things moving.

The problem is if I grew up in a city and you grew up on the plains, or you liked the movie and I hated it, or your kids are toddlers and mine are in college, then our commonality is weak and the chat will collapse.

What I find effective is to be curious about our *differences*. For example: “Oh, you grew up on the plains? What was that like?” “Sounds like you liked the movie. What did you like about it?” “Wow, your kids are so little. How are you doing with work and parenting?”

In each case, I listen for something that is not familiar to me and I become an inquisitive learner. I get curious. And I do this *before I state my position or situation*. I focus on you. Then almost everything that comes out of your mouth is interesting because I don’t fully understand your idea or opinion yet. Our differences are the ground on which we’ll build a bridge to come together.

Marilyn liked that idea. So I asked her to do that sort of chat with me. She quickly discovered that the more she withheld her own opinions and thoughts, the more likely I was to offer up my own. She lit up. “If I’m willing to conduct the interview, the other person will do the work!”

“Sometimes,” I agreed. “But you have to be willing to reciprocate when the table turns.” Hearing that, her face fell so fast that I laughed. “You won’t switch roles in every interchange but you have to be willing to be in either role. That’s courtesy. If you’re only willing to be the interviewer, over time people will experience you as distant and guarded. It’s like ducking out of the break room before anyone can engage you.” She reluctantly agreed.

Marilyn learned that chat is like a tennis warm-up: the point isn’t to win or dominate; it’s to just keep the ball going. Chat is a social contract where we agree to hit whatever ball the other person sends our way. When someone asks a question, replying with a terse one- or two-word answer violates the spirit of the game. You have to respond with an entire idea or a little example. This doesn’t mean it’s okay to hog the ball and make long, uninterrupted speeches. That’s its own violation of the game. Answer at a moderate length.

So I turned the tables and interviewed her for a while. She wasn’t half bad. After a while I asked how she felt. She rolled her eyes and sighed, “Exhausted!”



I assured her that was natural. "You're doing something that's unfamiliar. You don't have any endurance for it yet. Expect to be tired at first. That's all the more reason to get in there and build up your stamina."

If you struggle with this social nicety called chat, remember the following four ideas:

- 1 Chatting is not intrusive. Your discomfort is a mere allergy. Tolerate it. Build up your immunity by exposing yourself to it.
- 2 Be curious. Listen for differences. Cast yourself as the inquisitive learner.
- 3 When the other person inquires about you, keep the ball going back and forth. Don't be brief. They're interested. Respond with details at a moderate length.
- 4 Be willing to be tired. Like any other skill, it takes effort, especially at first. But don't avoid it just because it's unfamiliar. You'll get better over time.

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