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Bottom Line

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PERSONAL

One Step Ahead

There are safe ways to invest in municipal bonds—despite the chill in tax-exempt securities following the Orange County, California bankruptcy, we hear from bond expert James Lynch. *Strategy:* Stick with AA *general-obligation* munis sold by states and cities...or *prerefunded* munis backed by the federal government. *Important:* Check with your broker to be sure the AA bonds are derivative-free. *Avoid:* Municipal bond mutual funds whose portfolios have communities invested in derivatives. Call the fund to determine its exposure.

James Lynch is editor of *Lynch Municipal Bond Advisory*, a newsletter that tracks the performance of municipal bonds, Box 20476, New York 10025. 212-663-5552. Monthly. \$250/yr.

A very attractive adjustable-rate mortgage now is the "10/1" loan, we hear from bank-rate specialist Keith Gumbinger. It offers a fixed rate—now about 8.85%—that's about one-half a percentage point lower than a 30-year fixed rate. After 10 years, it converts to a one-year adjustable rate. It's a good deal because over 10 years you're likely to move or refinance at a lower rate. The 10/1 is also better than the current one-year adjustable-rate loan—about 6.57%. That rate will rise by two percentage points in 1996, even if interest rates remain flat.

Keith Gumbinger is a vice president at HSH Associates, a mortgage-data service, 1200 Rte. 23, Butler, New Jersey 07405.

Foil car-phone number bandits by turning off the unit when driving near airports, bridges and tunnels, we hear from telecommunications expert Neil Sachnoff. *Problem:* Thieves pirate phone numbers with electronic scanners in areas where traffic moves slowly. The owner is not responsible for false charges, but working out the bill can be a hassle. See if your company will add a free line-protection feature.

Neil Sachnoff is president of TeleCom Clinic, a telecommunications research firm, 355 South End Ave., New York 10280.

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Larry King's Secrets of Good Conversation How to talk to Anyone Anytime Anywhere



Making conversation with someone you've just met doesn't have to be awkward or difficult. Whether you're in a professional or social setting, the key is to ask engaging questions...pay attention to what the other person is saying...and respond to what's being said to keep the conversation going.

Over the course of my 37-year career as an interviewer, I've had the chance to observe many great conversationalists. I've also developed my own techniques to keep conversations going.

THE BASICS

•**Break the ice with a warm topic.** Open with a cliché—and don't worry that it might sound dull. Clichés are terrific conversation starters because they are subjects to which everyone can relate.

You can't go wrong if you pick topics like the weather, movies or any subject that interests most people. Other good universal topics include sports, pets and children.

Example: Dolly Parton was a guest on my TV show recently, and I knew she was a little nervous. She has homes in both California and Nashville, so shortly before we went on the air, I asked her about the difference in weather between the two places.

That question launched us into a fascinating discussion about the effect of weather on quality of life and why different people prefer different parts of the country. That one simple question established an immediate

conversational bond and helped us move smoothly onto other topics.

•**If you're shy, say so.** Nothing beats honesty when you're trying to break the ice. If you're feeling awkward, use it to advance the conversation. Telling someone you've just met that you're shy is disarming and creates empathy.

Example I: I experienced the power of this principle in 1957 when I began as a radio disc jockey. I told my listeners, *This is my first day, and I'm nervous. If anything goes wrong, please forgive me.* Being honest allowed me to be more comfortable. I knew that if I started a record in the wrong place or played the wrong commercial, my listeners would probably understand.

Example II: In a social setting, there's nothing wrong with admitting to someone you've just met that big parties are overwhelming. Letting the other person know you're human creates a strong connection.

If you're nervous when interviewing for a job, remember that the other person is probably uneasy, too. No one is completely comfortable when meeting someone for the first time.

•**Pick up the pace by asking open-ended questions.** These types of questions prompt discussion because they can't be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. Since

Bottom Line/Personal interviewed Larry King, the country's best-known interviewer of celebrities. The host of CNN-TV's nightly *Larry King Live*, he also writes a weekly newspaper column and is author of several books, most recently *How to Talk to Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere: The Secrets of Good Conversation*. Crown Publishers, Inc., 201 E. 50 St., New York 10022. 800-733-3000. \$20.

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answers will be longer, you'll have an opportunity to notice other things that are being said to keep the conversation going.

My favorite open-ended questions:

Why? If someone tells you he/she is in sales, ask, *Why did you choose that?* People love to expound on choices they've made.

What do you think? Ask people what their impressions are of any big event in the news.

What if...? Hypothetical questions perk up people because they ask for opinions—and people love to share their points of view. The *what-if* technique works especially well when speaking to several people. It's a fun way to get many people to open up and talk about what's really important to them.

• **Show sincere interest.** When someone else is speaking, most people spend that time planning what they themselves are going to say next. This is not only impolite, it can cause you to miss important information.

Listening is just as important to good conversation as talking—maybe even more important. I never met a good conversationalist who wasn't also a good listener...and I've never learned much while I was talking.

Solution: Instead of rehearsing your next clever line while the other person is speaking, focus on your genuine response to what he is saying. Challenge yourself to come up with questions about the points the person has raised.

Listening is also a way to show respect for others.

Strategy: Let the other person know that you are paying attention to what he is saying by making eye contact frequently. This is harder to do than most people realize. When there are people moving all about, it's easy to let your eyes drift around the room. But doing that gives the impression that you're looking for someone more interesting to talk to—or that what is being said isn't holding your interest.

On the other hand, staring relentlessly into someone's eyes will also make him uncomfortable. It's fine to take your eyes off the person briefly when it's your turn to talk.

• **Develop a broad outlook.** All the best talkers—from Oprah Winfrey to Los Angeles Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda—have this characteristic in common. They don't just talk about themselves. In fact, they rarely use the word *I* in conversation. They know a little bit

about a lot of subjects, and they're curious about everything. *Strategies:*

Make a point of expanding your awareness beyond just your personal concerns.

Get to know people of many different ages and backgrounds. Find out what they think, and carefully consider their questions.

Read a variety of opinions about a wide range of issues. Challenge yourself to think about things in new ways.

You'll become more interesting to others—and you'll find them more interesting as well.

• **Don't judge others in advance.** Whenever I start an interview, I suspend judgment about the person across from me. Coming to conclusions about people before you've even spoken to them—either because of what you've heard or the way they look—shuts down your curiosity and prevents you from learning something new.

Conversation is always surprising, but you have to put aside your expectations in order to be surprised.

Example: When I was preparing to interview G. Gordon Liddy in 1981, I was sure that I wouldn't like him based on everything I had read about him. Before we met, however, I reminded myself to suspend judgment, and I prepared to be as open-minded with him as I would be with any guest. As it turned out, I actually liked him. I don't agree with anything he stands for, but he's funny, off the wall and very interesting. I wouldn't have been able to appreciate this about him had I not forced myself to be open.

• **End a conversation gracefully.** Breaking away from a conversation is often more difficult than starting one. After bonding with someone, most people hesitate to interrupt when they need to move on because they feel it will hurt the other person's feelings.

The fact is that there will come a point in any conversation when you have to end it—either to see other people or simply because you have run out of things to say.

Making such a move doesn't have to be hard. You just need a great excuse.

Examples:

The food is so delicious, I'm going back for seconds.

I've got to say "hello" to the host.

The key to leaving a great impression when ending a conversation is to make the excuse in a polite, friendly and unapologetic way...and then leave. ■