

exercises in turning small talk
into dialogue that matters

Changing the Conversation



by lewis greer

Can We Talk?

Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States, was nicknamed Silent Cal because he



spoke so little, especially for a politician. Stories of his use of few words include a conversation with Herbert Hoover, who succeeded him as president.

How, Hoover wanted to know, had Coolidge been able to do as much and take as many meetings as Hoover and yet work three hours less per day?

His response: “In your meetings, Herbert, you probably talk back.”

In the world of tournament golf, if Seve Ballesteros was Silent Cal, then Lee Trevino was Chatty Cathy. The Merry Mex would talk to anyone within earshot about anything that came to mind. Sometimes words would flow from Trevino right up to his backswing, then begin again as soon as the ball was airborne.

Either one of those can make having a conversation challenging while you are on the course. Add to that different carts, golf balls going different directions, and limited time between shots, and real talk is rare. Off the course, sitting in the clubhouse after a round, conversations are much easier. Trying to get the ball in the hole doesn't interrupt us, and even the Seves will generally talk back. Silent Cal might not have enjoyed the post-round chat, but most of us do.

'That reminds me...'

After the game you go in for a cold beverage and to “settle the bets,” and the conversation begins,

usually with something about how someone played. But soon it changes.

Why?

Because people (and only people, out of all creation) think *discursively*. One phrase, one reference, one word, triggers a thought or memory in our minds that is somehow related but somehow different. The new conversation often begins with a phrase like, “That reminds me.”

This goes on naturally until a wide variety of topics have been touched on. Those might include golf, weather, course conditions, politics, sports, news-of-the-day, future games, and food. At private clubs, especially equity clubs, there is often talk of how the club is being run. Sometimes that talk is positive, sometimes not so much.

Rarely are topics raised that challenge those participating to think deeply or to maintain a conversation for any length of time. What we talk about simply isn't important enough to warrant extra thought, focus, or time. And that's OK.

But the truth is, we really do care what our friends think and how they are doing. And if we really care about the people we are spending hours with on the golf course and then more time with after the game, shouldn't we be using some of that time in deeper conversation?

'A mile wide and an inch deep'

The phrase “a mile wide and an inch deep” has been used to describe someone's knowledge of a topic, but it might just as well be

FOUR CONVERSATION CHANGERS

FROM GOSSIP TO TRUTH In Proverbs 26, we find this gem: “For lack of wood the fire goes out, and where there is no whisperer, contention quiets down.” Gossip goes behind people's backs, guessing at motives and casting judgment. As followers of Jesus, we should only trade in truth.

FROM TEMPORAL TO ETERNAL While current events are compelling, they dispel quickly and get swapped out for something different tomorrow. When we get caught up in the news of the day, we can lose sight of the distance of eternity. Jesus called on us to “store up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy nor thieves break in and steal.” This is good to keep in mind whenever we open our mouths to engage in conversation.

FROM SURFACE TO SUBSTANCE A recap of your round might be a good way to get the conversation going, but staying there is like talking weather with your neighbor—you've heard it all before. We want to look for openings to go deeper, to find out what a person thinks about questions of life and faith.

FROM ME TO OTHERS Sometimes the best reminder we can give ourselves is that we are not the most important person in the room (even if we have the most important message!). When we ask good questions and listen well, we build bridges that can lead to the conversations we're looking for.

used to describe most of the conversations we have.

So when I think about changing the conversation, I think about changing both of those. First, I think about helping the conversation get below the surface. Like a SCUBA diver, I want the conversation to go a little deeper. That is where the treasure is found.

Second, I want it to be more focused. I want that for the conversations that go on in my head when I'm trying to make a three-foot putt, and I want it for the conversations I have with my friends.

Real conversation is hard to find in the world of social media, but even online I occasionally see attempts by people to reach out and share something meaningful, whether that is a joy or a challenge. Words that count are like new rope that bind our friendships together. Throw-away words are more like dried glue that feels a little sticky but won't hold.

Let me make it clear that I don't try to change every part of every conversation—or even every conversation—in the ways I describe. What I try to do, and what we hope to do through Links Players, is ensure that the general conversation at our clubs goes deeper and means more than if we were not there.

I want people at my club to know that it is both OK and safe to talk about important things, and then encourage them to do just that. My dream is that one day talk of spiritual well-being will be right up there with talk of the speed of the greens. We're probably not good at measuring either of those, but talking helps our understanding grow.



Here are a few creative ways we've found to change the conversation from golf to life and faith.

Offer a mulligan. When a playing companion hits a bad shot, you can toss them another ball and say, "Here, hit another one. Grace is a good thing, and you need a little bit right now." From there, you can pick up a conversation about where your belief in grace comes from.

Recognize a struggle. Almost every golfer expresses frustration somewhere during a round. You can say, "I can tell that shot really got you upset. How do you process stuff like that off the course?" You might find you're able to move the conversation to the peace Christ has given you to in your life (be honest about your struggles).

Discover favorites. Ask your partner how often they play (this is an easy opener for every golfer). From here you can move to asking them what other activities they like to do, and whether they're involved with a church in town. If they're not, they'll probably tell you why and you can go from there!

'You've changed the conversation'

I first heard the line of "changing the conversation" in a story told by Links Players president Jeffrey Cranford to several of our Fellowship leaders in Arizona. He said that after many Links Fellowship meetings over a two- or three-year period, the folks that met at a club in Coachella Valley held an Easter sunrise service on the grounds. More than 1,000 people attended, with Jeffrey teaching, and by all accounts it was a moving experience.

A few days after it was over, one of the members approached Jeffrey and said, "You've changed the conversation at the club."

The phrase struck a chord in me, and I began to retell the story again

and again. One of those occasions happened to be in a session where a small group was discussing the question of what we do in the clubs we serve. Everyone in the group agreed that "changing the conversation" describes what we are about at Links Players.

Changing the conversation wasn't the goal of that sunrise service, but it was a benefit. Perhaps without the service people would still have talked about Easter, but that wouldn't have changed the conversation in the same way.

It's also helpful to recognize that changing the conversation is not a new idea. Look at how the "first Easter" opened the door to talk about bigger things.

In the book of Luke (chapter

24), there is an account of two men walking along the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the first day of the week after Jesus had been crucified and buried. Luke noted “they were talking with each other about all these things that had happened,” and while they were talking, Jesus himself joined them.

He said to them, “What is this conversation that you are holding with each other as you walk?” That caused them to stop, and one of them asked him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?”

To which Jesus replied, “What things?”

A lively conversation ensued, ending with the realization by the two men that they had been walking and talking with Jesus himself, now risen from the dead. No doubt that changed a lot of conversations over the next few days!

The why and how of changing the conversation

Some Links Players have asked me why we want to change the conversation at all, and even more have asked me how to go about doing that. Those are both good questions.

The *why* is important. Many people who belong to golf clubs would never enter a church, except for a wedding or funeral; they would never think of attending an outreach event. But all of them talk, and engaging them in an ongoing conversation (invite them to play 18 with you) can open their hearts and minds.

As for the how, the simplest way to change any conversation at any

time is to ask a question. It is what Jesus did with the men on the road to Emmaus. He didn’t start out by saying, “Hey guys, it’s me, Jesus!” He asked them a question and let them talk.

It was Silent Cal Coolidge who said, “It takes a great man to be a good listener.” Ironically, that guy knew what he was talking about!

Too often I’ve started with an answer, a guaranteed way to make a conversation short and shallow. Thank goodness I’m no longer young and in possession of all knowledge, because it is now more natural for me to ask questions and listen to the responses.

One that I’ve been using lately is, “Do you have any advice on how to forgive yourself?” It’s a fascinating topic, and of course it introduces the idea of forgiveness.

If you prefer a golf-related start, ask someone if they’d rather play golf alone or with someone else. When they tell you, ask them why. This can introduce

the idea of fellowship, of the value of spending time with others, and of being made to be in community.

Ask someone what their favorite topic is to talk about, and then have them tell you about that and why they love it. Listen, and keep asking questions as you do. That conversation will last and may even be the basis for future conversations.

The secret

If there is a secret to changing the conversation, it is this: care about people and be willing to guide the conversation so they can talk about the things they care about.

Many of those things are going to have depth, and all of them will afford opportunities for you to introduce a spiritual element. You cannot be the resurrected Jesus, but if they can catch a glimpse of Jesus in you, that might just go beyond changing the conversation to changing a life forever.

And that’s a conversation worth having.)



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