

Small Talk - No Small Thing

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Abstract: *Small talk is very important for building rapport and creating new pathways for opportunities. Finding commonality with others, showing keen interest in others and making others feel good about themselves can enrich our personal and professional life. Remembering and using names of others, mastering the art of asking open-ended questions, genuinely appreciating others, listening to others attentively, showing appropriate body language and inferring body language of others are all vital for building connection. Using powerful language can convey our core strength. Making a graceful exit from the conversation is also necessary for leaving a lasting impression. Practicing small talk can garner big gains.*

Key Words: *small talk, rapport, commonality, listening, body language.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Our manner of working and communicating nowadays with our friends and colleagues through e-mails and mobile phones instead of direct communication, has created a vacuum of connection. We have become so much isolated in our own cubicle or lifestyle that we have lost the potential to connect. Poor social skills inhibit us from intermingling with others and cultivating friendships. But building network and rapport with people is vital to create new pathways and maximize new opportunities. Mastering the art of talking can guarantee making friends, improving networking skills, furthering a business relationship, creating cohesive teams, landing jobs and even getting dates.

2. Find Commonality :

Often, we mistakenly assume that we have nothing in common with another person and this acts as a bias against engaging in conversation. We focus on the differences in gender, status, generation, occupation, lifestyle, ethnicity etc. and create barriers. Actually we should be focusing on the fact that we are all more alike than we are different. Our talking, showing keen interest and listening be very richly rewarding and gratifying as we get to know so much about the other person as if we were slowly peeling an onion. Consciously and effectively employing certain actionable behavioral skills while engaging with our conversation partners can brighten their day. It makes them feel better about themselves and eventually they feel great about the kind of person we are. It will give us an enormous sense of empowerment, connection and understanding of others in personal as well as professional life.

During our adolescence, usually we are so big-mouthed, inexperienced, judgmental, selfish and self-concerned that we are in the habit of being judgmental, voicing our dissent, hurting the feelings of others by our insensitive comments, ignoring them and not giving them turn to speak out. Our lack of empathy causes emotional damage to others. But being self-aware and getting rid of these bad habits is vital for making stronger connections, communicating effectively, and even influencing others to take actions that we want them to take.

3. Feel Good Factor :

Small talk plays a major role in getting to the real, meaningful conversation. It acts as an icebreaker that sets the tone for having more cozy discussion, launching a good relationship. Those who are brilliant at small talk humanize relationships as they are able to make others feel included, esteemed and at ease. They can easily devise topics to discuss, commit people's names to memory and introduce them to others. They are able to put a stop to uncomfortable moments, fill up the pregnant pauses and also make others feel comfortable in their presence.

When I go to a social gathering or a business party, instead of waiting for someone to talk to me, it would be better to choose an "approachable person"[1] as my conversation partner and show interest in him. Being the first to smile while making eye contact and greeting another person, so that he is naturally inclined to smile back, is the dawn of communication. In the initial few seconds itself I should be able to demonstrate an interest in the other person. The best approach to make him comfortable enough to open up is to look at him sincerely and warmly and ask him, " *What's your name?*" with stress on the word *your*, rather than the word *name*, so that he feels special. Committing the other person's name to memory and addressing him by it is perhaps the foremost guideline for good conversation. So it is crucial to stay attentive during the introduction and repeat the name back in the greeting, "*Nice to meet you, Asadbek.*" If my mind gets diverted during the introduction and I mishear the name, instead of faking that I know his name, it

would be better to just confess and say, "*Excuse me, I'm not sure I got your name.*" Also, it is important to tell my name when I say hello by extending my hand, "Hi, Asadbek, Oprah Waugh. How are you?" and take the conversational plunge.

4. Honing the Skill of Asking Questions :

It is of immense help to master "the art of asking questions"[2] to enable our conversation partner to reveal information about himself. Appropriate open-ended questions should be asked so that they cannot be answered in a simple yes or no. Such questions can be answered by telling or describing something, explaining reasons why it was done and how it was done. Then following up with more questions is required so that the conversation ball keeps rolling. This cannot be done unless one is good at picking up the cues and conveying progression of thought by using the "feel/felt/found" [3] strategy which involves accepting the feelings expressed by the person, personally identifying with the concern and finally showing how your ideas have undergone a change.

Talking about appearances, accessories, clothing, team apparel, jewelry and even lapel pins can provide opportunities for small talk. For instance, while standing in a queue, if I notice that someone is wearing a Lions' Club lapel pin on his suit, it could provide me an opportunity to ask him about it and converse with him as I also happen to be a member of the Lions' Club. Office and home decorations, some photograph displayed on the wall or some trophy can also provide small talk opportunities. The locale of an event can furnish a lot of particulars. Practice the skill of small talk, let your conversation partner talk freely and gradually you become small talk savvy.

5. Appreciate Genuinely :

One of the simplest ways to initiate or carry on conversation is to genuinely praise the other person for whatever is admirable about either his/her appearance, possessions, or behavior. This appreciation of his finer traits makes the other person feel so special, an immediate connection is made and rapport is enhanced. Instead of just appreciating someone for wearing a good-looking tie, one can turn it into a flattering remark, "That's a great tie with a very unusual design! I love it when men make bold fashion statements with their ties!" Instead of admiring someone's sweater, flatter the person by elaborating, "I like your sweater. Its shade is actually enhancing your complexion". Instead of saying, "Your home is lovely!" try saying, "Lovely home, the photos on the walls add to the its warmth and personalize it so much! Celebrating positive behavior of kids instead of focusing on what wrong they are doing furthers communication with them and deepens your bond with them. Telling somebody that it is a pleasure to work with him because of his optimistic outlook can make him feel so good. The only thing to be kept in mind is that the praise should be sincere and not a feigned one.

6. Power of Words :

Words are the true window to our souls. We are what we say. Let the words you select bespeak the strength within. It is important to use forceful language rather than a passive one to convey your core strength during a conversation. Selecting proper words and putting yourself in the driver's seat is important rather than sounding timid, apologetic and dubious. By offering to *try* to do something, you are acknowledging that wholehearted effort is missing. Instead of asking, "When will that be ready?" ask, "Will you please have that ready for me by Wednesday?" Instead of saying, "I'll have to inquire about it from someone . . .", try saying, "I shall be happy to revert to you after talking to our Accounts Head". Instead of lowering expectation by using the word "if" and saying, "If I can find out . . .", say confidently, "I will look into this and revert to you". Rather than demeaning yourself by saying, "I'm only the . . .", say, "My responsibilities are focused on New Product Development, I shall check with our Procurement Department regarding your order and get back to you". When you say, "I'll try to do it by this Friday", you seem unsure. Instead, sound dependable by saying, "I will get back to you not later than this Friday". Tell people clearly what you will do, not what you expect to do. Also, instead of projecting yourself as very busy and saying in a commanding tone, 'You'll have to call me up in the evening. I am busy right now', it is better to say, "You can call me in the evening. That would better time for me".

7. Exit Gracefully :

Artfully exiting conversation while leaving the other person's ego intact is a skill which needs to be acquired. Business parties or industry meetings are meant for meeting people and it is important to muster courage to depart courteously from a conversation and get involved in another in order to accomplish your goals. Before leaving a conversation partner, it is important to say to him how wonderful it has been to talk with him but then do tell him honestly that you need to get to another client before she departs. Or you could just state your agenda of wanting to move about and saying hello to everyone at the gathering. And don't forget to thank him for sharing his expertise. Let him know that your need to move on to your next destination has nothing to do with the quality of time spent together with each other. An authentic and "graceful exit"[3] actually enhances your relationship.

8. Have an Agenda :

Business parties and social engagements provide a platform to forward goals. Do have an agenda and verbalize it to accomplish your goals. The agenda could be finding a potential client or a new employment for yourself. Do not hesitate to ask for assistance or referral in case you are on the lookout for a new job or a prospective client. Your conversation partner might be able to lead to someone who can assist you. For instance, if some aspect of a project you are working on is bothering you, ask him if he knows someone there in the party who works in such projects. You can then approach the concerned person or you can politely thank him and graciously exit the conversation in search of someone who can be of help to you.

Some of the ways of asking for social and business referrals are :

- Could you suggest anyone who requires a _____? I would value the referral.
- Can you recommend anyone with whom I could talk about _____?
- Do you know someone here who can to assist me with _____?

Show Appreciation While Parting

End a conversation on a positive, personalized note by smilingly thanking your conversation partner for his time, expertise and let him know how talking to him has been so delightful. Your appreciation is important for feeling great about having met each other.

Some Ways to Show Appreciation

- It was nice to meet you and hear about -----.
- I've thoroughly enjoyed talking to you about your new business.
- I appreciate your willingness to share your expertise.
- Thank you for the delightful conversation.
- I'm so glad you introduced me to the subject of _____. It's very interesting.
- It's been wonderful to meet someone who is involved in _____.
- It was so nice of you to introduce me to _____. Thanks.
- I appreciate your effort to include me in the conversation. It's hard being new, and you made it easier for me.

Leave a lasting impression by smiling and sealing the conversation with a handshake. Do it, even if it requires you to get up and walk up to the person you have to bid adieu. It will go a long way in building rapport and cultivating relationship. Once you have interacted with somebody with whom you would like to take the relationship forward, the best way to exit is to extend an invitation to him and ask him to meet again:

- Can we arrange to meet later?
- May I call you when you get back?
- I'd enjoy spending some time with you.
- Can I phone you to set up a convenient time?
- Would you like to join me for a cup of coffee?

9. Tips to Hone Small Talk Skills :

Some of the tips business professionals can make use of to enhance their small talk skills are:

- Put your best foot forward and say hello enthusiastically!
- Introduce yourself and also introduce newcomers to your conversation partner or partners.
- Smile radiantly and shake hands when you meet someone.
- Go the extra mile to remember names, and use them often while talking to people.
- Maintain eye contact while conversing so that people feel listened to.
- Get somebody to reveal their purpose of attending the event.
- Show an interest in every person.
- Listen attentively for cues that can keep the conversation ball rolling.
- Make people feel special so that they enjoy talking to you.
- Play the conversation game. Apprise more about yourself when asked so as to let others learn more about you.
- Avoid querying by asking close-ended questions.

- Be aware of body language and don't seem nervous or ill-at ease.
- Be prepared before the event to talk about at least three topics with ease.
- Show zeal to know your conversation partner's viewpoint too.
- Halt conversation monopolists in their tracks by digressing the conversation to some other related topic.
- Be ready with exit lines because you have to make the most of the opportunity to socialize and interact with others.
- Don't vanish from conversations without shaking hands and bidding goodbye.

10. Find the Connection :

To “connect” or “relate” implies finding commonality with the other person. You can start scouting for these connections the instant you involve a stranger in small talk, unveil some information about yourself and ask questions to him. His response to your comment or answer to your question will provide you further information for small talk.

Connectors

- You look absolutely relaxed. I wish I could also feel the same way as you do!
- That is a stylish pair of shoes!
- I appreciate your elegant choice of jewelry!
- What's your experience with this company?
- I've never been to any of such events earlier.
- How did you come to know about this event?

If you have been listening actively, it should not be hard to make a follow-up comment and then follow it up with a revelation. Let's see how this works:

You: How often do you go to watch a movie?

Her: About every weekend.

You: Really? I used to be able to do that!

Such a self-disclosure keeps the connection going. Then further questions can be asked, "How are you able to find so much time?"

Dating Wisdom

While dating, it is important to make your date feel attractive and interesting so that he or she feels good about himself or herself. And you need to make it noticeable visually that you are taking pleasure in the chit chat. Focus should be your date instead of worrying about what he or she might be thinking of you. Instead of going on and on about yourself, it is important to listen intensely to your date. The moment your eyes start wandering around in the room, you send the message that you are getting bored. And if you are able to take no notice of all the beautiful distractions so long as you are talking, but when she takes her turn to talk, you start glimpsing at the attractive women passing by, it is bound to make her feel hurt and offended.

Thus dating is a wonderful time to listen to somebody else's tales and find out if at all there is something worth going after the individual sitting across from you. Listen actively to your date and that too with empathy. You may even carefully narrate a few of your own experiences at an apt time—but make sure you do not strangulate the chat with preponderance. Put aside your demands for some other time later in the relationship. It is good to be placid because don't have to have it all in one date. Instead of trying to uncover everything about your date in this one meeting and then deciding at once whether or not you wish to meet again, it would be better to somewhat bond first. And you cannot bond if your cell phone is on! So turn off your cell phone.

Practice Chatting

Practice how to “chat” as it helps you to connect easily with people, make new friends and rekindle old endearments. The more you practice, the easier it becomes. Deliberately put yourself in situations where you are compelled to talk to others. Practice first with your family and friends and when you gain confidence, march on to the other people you happen to meet frequently. Doesn't matter even if you have to fake it for a while but continue practicing diligently till it becomes second nature. You will become an expert.

Small talk can prove to be a big deal for its intrinsic value for building rapport, which can garner big gains. Thus small talk is no small thing. Its value as a personal and professional cord that links people is inestimable. What is of utmost importance is that the focus should be on the conversation partner and not on one's own self because "it is not all about me".[4]

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