

CHAPTER 17

The Art of Small Talk

We all have what it takes to charm everyone around us—colleagues, strangers, friends, the boss. But having it and knowing how to work it is the difference between going through life in the shadows and commanding center stage wherever you happen to be.

So you weren't born with that essential ingredient of charm, the gift of gab. So what? Few are.

We've all struggled with that ancient fear of walking into a room full of complete strangers and having nothing to say. Instead of looking out at a sea of potential new friends and associates, we see terrifying obstacles to the wet bar. It happens at business meetings, conferences, PTA meetings, and in just about every forum where being social matters. That's why small talk is so important. That's also why, for those of us without a knack for small talk, situations such as these that can help us meet so many others are also the situations that make us feel the most naked and uneasy.

And in this area, technology hasn't helped one bit. Wallflowers see e-mail and instant messaging as a nifty escape hatch from having to interact with others. The truth is, however, that these new

modes of communication aren't particularly good for creating new relationships. The digital medium is all about speed and brevity. It may make communication efficient, but it's not effective when it comes to making friends.

Yet some are able to negotiate social situations with relative ease. How do they do it?

The answer, most people assume, is that the ability to make successful small talk is somehow innate, is something you're born with. While comforting, this assumption is entirely untrue. Conversation is an acquired skill. If you have the determination and the proper information, just like any other skill, it can be learned.

The problem is that so much of the information out there is flat-out wrong. I know too many CEOs who take pride in their terse, bottom-line behavior. They proudly assert their disinterest in "playing the game"; they revel in their inability to be anything but gruff.

But the fact is that small talk—the kind that happens between two people who don't know each other—is the most important talk we do. Language is the most direct and effective method for communicating our objectives. When playwrights and screenwriters develop characters for their work, the first thing they establish is motivation. What does the character want? What is he or she after? What are his or her desires? The answers dictate what that character will and won't say in dialogue. That exercise is not particular to the dramatic world; it's a reflection of how we humans are hardwired. We use words not only to articulate and make concrete our own deepest desires, but also to enlist others in quenching those desires.

About ten years ago, Thomas Harrell, a professor of applied psychology at Stanford University Graduate School of Business, set out to identify the traits of its most successful alumni. Studying a group of MBAs a decade after their graduation, he found that grade-point average had no bearing on success. The one trait

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that was common among the class's most accomplished graduates was "verbal fluency." Those that had built businesses and climbed the corporate ladder with amazing speed were those who could confidently make conversation with anyone in any situation. Investors, customers, and bosses posed no more of a threat than colleagues, secretaries, and friends. In front of an audience, at a dinner, or in a cab, these people knew how to talk.

As Harrell's study confirmed, the more successfully you use language, the faster you can get ahead in life.

So what should your objective be in making small talk? Good question. The goal is simple: Start a conversation, keep it going, create a bond, and leave with the other person thinking, "I dig that person," or whatever other generational variation of that phrase you want to use.

A lot has been said about how one should go about doing that. But in my opinion, the experts have gotten wrong the one thing that works the best. The first thing small-talk experts tend to do is place rules around what can and can't be said. They claim that when you first meet a person, you should avoid unpleasant, overly personal, and highly controversial issues.

Wrong! Don't listen to these people! Nothing has contributed more to the development of boring chitchatters everywhere. The notion that everyone can be everything to everybody at all times is completely off the mark. Personally, I'd rather be interested in what someone was saying, even if I disagreed, than be catatonic any day.

When it comes to making an impression, differentiation is the name of the game. Confound expectation. Shake it up. How? There's one guaranteed way to stand out in the professional world: Be yourself. I believe that vulnerability—yes, vulnerability—is one of the most underappreciated assets in business today.

Too many people confuse secrecy with importance. Business schools teach us to keep everything close to our vest. But the

world has changed. Power, today, comes from sharing information, not withholding it. More than ever, the lines demarcating the personal and the professional have blurred. We're an open-source society, and that calls for open-source behavior. And as a rule, not many secrets are worth the energy required to keep them secret.

Being up front with people confers respect; it pays them the compliment of candor. The issues we all care most about are the issues we all want to talk about most. Of course, this isn't a call to be confrontational or disrespectful. It's a call to be honest, open, and vulnerable enough to genuinely allow other people into your life so that they can be vulnerable in return.

How many negotiations would have ended better if both parties involved were simply honest and forthright about their needs? Even when there is disagreement, I've found people will respect you more for putting your cards on the table.

Whether at the negotiating table or at the dinner table, our penchant for inhibition creates a psychological barrier that separates us from those we'd like to know better. When we leave a formal, hesitant, and uncomfortable conversation where we've held back our true selves, we console ourselves by dismissing the encounter, or more often the person, by thinking, "We had nothing in common anyway."

But the truth is everyone has something in common with every other person. And you won't find those similarities if you don't open up and expose your interests and concerns, allowing others to do likewise.

This has some comforting implications.

Once you know heartfelt candor is more effective than canned quips in starting a meaningful conversation, the idea of "breaking the ice" becomes easy. Too many of us believe "breaking the ice" means coming up with a brilliant, witty, or extravagantly insightful remark. But few among us are Jay Leno or David Letterman. When you realize the best icebreaker is a few words from the

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heart, the act of starting a conversation becomes far less daunting.

Again and again I'm surprised by the power of the vulnerability principle in the art of making small talk. Recently I attended a Conference Board meeting, an annual gathering for executives in marketing and communications. As is the custom, participants gather for a dinner the night before the event.

That night, sitting around the table were the heads of marketing for companies like Wal-Mart, Cigna, Lockheed, Eli Lilly, eBay, and Nissan. All of them were people who managed significant marketing budgets. Their importance to my business is significant. This was an occasion that called for my being at my best.

Problem was, I left my best somewhere over Pittsburgh on the flight there. The soundtrack of my life that night was the "Blues." Hours before, I had received the final and definitive e-mail that confirmed my worst fears: I was single again. I had just experienced the end of a traumatic and emotionally draining breakup. I was in no mood to talk.

Sherry, the woman I was sitting beside, whom I had just met, had no idea I wasn't being myself. As the conversation raged on at the dinner table, I realized I was doing all the things I tell people never to do. I was hiding behind polite, inconsequential questions about nothing in particular.

Here we were, Sherry and I, looking at each other and talking, but really saying nothing. It was clear we both couldn't wait for the check.

At some point, I recognized how absurd I was behaving. I've always told people I believe that every conversation you have is an invitation to risk revealing the real you. What's the worst that can happen? They don't respond in kind. So what. They probably weren't worth knowing in the first place. But if the risk pays off, well, now you've just turned a potentially dull exchange into something interesting or even perhaps personally insightful—and more times than not, a real relationship is formed.

It was at that point that I just came out and said what I was feeling. “You know, Sherry, I’ve got to apologize. We don’t know each other very well, but I tend to be a whole lot more fun than I’m being this evening. It’s been a tough day. I just had a board meeting where my board members put me through the wringer. More important, I just suffered a pretty difficult breakup and it’s still got me down.” Just like that, the rabbit was out of the hat. A risky opening, a flash of vulnerability, a moment of truth, and the dynamics of our conversation changed instantly.

Sure, she could have felt uncomfortable with such a personal admission. Instead, it put her at ease. “Oh my, that’s no problem. Trust me, I understand. Everybody goes through it. Let me tell you about *my* divorce.”

We became engaged in ways we hadn’t expected. Sherry’s shoulders relaxed. Her face loosened. She opened up. I felt drawn into the conversation for the first time that night. She went on to tell me about her painful divorce and all the things she had gone through in the months after it. All of a sudden, the discussion went into the emotional ramifications of breakups and how challenging they can be. For both of us, it turned out to be a cathartic moment. More than that, Sherry gave me some wonderful advice.

What happened next surprised even me. Upon hearing our conversation, several normally buttoned-up members of the group stopped their conversation and were drawn to ours. The entire table bonded over the very common trials and tribulations of marriage and relationships: men, women, gay, straight, it didn’t matter. People who had been pensive and withdrawn were suddenly giving personal testimonies while the rest of us joined in supportive stories of our own. By evening’s end, we were laughing and talking intimately; it turned into one incredible dinner. Today, I really look forward to seeing my friends at this quarterly event. They are important people to me—yes, some of them have become customers, but more of them are real friends I feel I can count on.

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The message here is that we can go through life, particularly conferences and other professional gatherings, making shallow, run-of-the-mill conversation with strangers that remain strangers. Or we can put a little of ourselves, our real selves, on the line, give people a glimpse of our humanity, and create the opportunity for a deeper connection. We have a choice.

These days, I rarely blanch at the chance to introduce topics of conversation that some consider off-limits. Spirituality, romance, politics—these are some of the issues that make life worth living.

Of course, there are always fail-safe conversation starters suitable for every business function: How did you get started in your business? What do you enjoy most about your profession? Tell me about some of the challenges of your job? But safety—whether in conversation, business, or life—generally produces “safe” (read: boring) results.

The real winners—those with astounding careers, warm relationships, and unstoppable charisma—are those people who put it all out there and don’t waste a bunch of time and energy trying to be something (or someone) they’re not. Charm is simply a matter of being yourself. Your uniqueness is your power. We are all *born* with innate winning traits to be a masterful small talker.

The best way to become good at small talk is not to talk small at all. That’s the art; here is some of the science:

Learn the Power of Nonverbal Cues

You’re at a meeting when you turn to the person standing next to you. She turns to face you, and within a fraction of a second your mind makes a thousand computations. In that instant, you’re trying to figure out whether you should run, fight, or be friendly. What you’re doing, anthropologists say, is thinking like a caveman.

Deep in our genetic code, we are conditioned to be afraid of strangers. Will they eat us or feed us? That’s why we form first

impressions so quickly; we have to decide whether or not it is safe to approach.

You have about ten seconds before a person decides, subconsciously, whether they like you or not. In that short period of time we don't exchange a lot of words; our judgment is mostly based on nonverbal communication.

How do you get someone who doesn't know you to feel comfortable talking?

This is not the time to play hard-to-get, keep a distance, or play mysterious. These all-too-common reactions may work for the likes of Marlon Brando, but for the rest us, such poses register as "keep away!" in our prehistoric minds. Instead, we should take the initiative in creating the impression we want to give. People are wowed by social decisiveness when it's offered with compassion and warmth. How another person perceives you is determined by a number of things you do before you utter your first word.

- First, give the person a hearty smile. It says, "I'm approachable."
- Maintain a good balance of eye contact. If you maintain an unblinking stare 100 percent of the time, that qualifies as leering. That's plain scary. If you keep eye contact less than 70 percent of the time, you'll seem disinterested and rude. Somewhere in between is the balance you're looking for.
- Unfold your arms and relax. Crossing your arms can make you appear defensive or closed. It also signals tension. Relax! People will pick up on your body language and react accordingly.
- Nod your head and lean in, but without invading the other person's space. You just want to show that you're engaged and interested.

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- Learn to touch people. Touching is a powerful act. Most people convey their friendly intentions by shaking hands; some go further by shaking with two hands. My favorite way to break through the distance between me and the person I'm trying to establish a bond with is to touch the other person's elbow. It conveys just the right amount of intimacy, and as such, is a favorite of politicians. It's not too close to the chest, which we protect, but it's slightly more personal than a hand.

Be Sincere

Whether you spend five seconds or five hours with a new contact or acquaintance, make the time count. In Los Angeles, where I live, eye darters are a party staple. They're constantly looking to and fro in an attempt to ferret out the most important person in the room. Frankly, it's a disgusting habit, and one that's sure to put off those around you.

The surest way to become special in others' eyes is to make *them* feel special. The correlate, of course, is equally true: Make people feel insignificant and your significance to them shall certainly diminish.

Develop Conversational Currency

When meeting someone new, be prepared to have something to say. Keep up with current events. Cultivate some niche interest. A single narrow specialty (cooking, golf, stamps) for which you have passion will have surprising expansive powers.

After business school, I indulged my passion for food and took a few months off taking courses at Le Cordon Bleu Culinary School in London. Back then, I thought it was a frivolous expenditure of my time. But my knowledge and passion for cooking that came from that experience has come into play time and again

in casual conversations. Even people who aren't that interested in food enjoy hearing my funny and sometimes embarrassing stories about learning my way around a French kitchen in London. What you talk about is ultimately less important than how. It's edifying and interesting to hear someone talk about something they have a great interest in. Which means you can also talk about other people's passions. My COO, James Clark, for example, climbed Mt. Everest while performing his duties virtually for all but the week he was summiting. The astounding stories he has told me about the experience are now excellent conversation fodder.

Just remember not to monopolize the conversation or go into long-winded stories. Share your passion, but don't preach it.

Adjust Your Johari Window

The Johari Window is a model, invented by two American psychologists, that provides insight into how much people reveal of themselves. Some people are introverted, revealing little; they keep their window relatively closed. Other people are extroverted, revealing a great deal and keeping their windows open. These tendencies also fluctuate in different environments. In new and strange situations, with people we are unfamiliar with, our window remains small; we reveal little and expect others to do the same. If, on the other hand, the climate is safe and trusting with others that are similar to us, we share more of ourselves. Our windows open wider.

Successful communication depends, according to the model, on the degree to which we can align ourselves and our windows to match those we interact with.

Greg Seal, one of my earliest mentors who recruited me to Deloitte, brought this idea to my attention, and I'm forever grateful. As a brash, outspoken young guy, my window was wide open. Whether I was trying to sell consulting services to a shy CEO of an

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engineering company or working with that company's rowdy sales staff, my brash, outspoken style remained constant. Back then it wasn't clear to me why, for instance, the sales staff came out of meeting with me jazzed and the CEO couldn't wait for me to leave his office. When Greg introduced the idea of the Johari Window, and the need to adjust how open or closed that window was depending on with whom you were speaking, it made perfect sense. Greg remained true to himself no matter whom he spoke with, but he delivered his message in a tone and style that fit that person best.

Every person's Johari Window can be more or less open depending on the circumstances. And different professions—from those that demand a lot of interpersonal skills, like sales, to those that, like engineering, are essentially solitary—吸引 people whose windows share similar tendencies. A computer programmer's window, for example, generally never opens wide unless he or she is around peers. A strong marketing person's window, on the other hand, tends to be open regardless of the environment.

The key is knowing that in conducting small talk, we should be aware of the different styles at play and adapt to the person we're talking with. I know I can be gregarious and fun and outspoken when meeting with the FerrazziGreenlight Training & Development staff. In a meeting with my loyalty-management strategy consultants, who are much more analytical, I ratchet down the excitement and focus on being more deliberate and precise. If we address someone with the wrong style, the window may close shut with nothing revealed. No connection is made.

Throughout my day, I come into contact with hundreds of different people, each with their own distinct communication style. The concept of the Johari Window has helped me become conscious of my need to adapt my conversational approach to each person I want to connect with.

One helpful technique I use is to try and envision myself as a mirror to the person with whom I'm speaking. What's the cadence of their speech? How loudly do they talk? What's their body language? By adjusting your behavior to mirror the person you are talking to, he'll automatically feel more comfortable. This doesn't mean, of course, that you should be disingenuous. Rather, it shows that you're particularly sensitive to other people's emotional temperaments. You're just tweaking your style to ensure that the windows remain wide open.

Make a Graceful Exit

How do you conclude a conversation? During meetings and social gatherings, I'm often quite blunt. I'll mention something meaningful that was said in the course of our conversation and say, "There are so many wonderful people here tonight; I'd feel remiss if I didn't at least try and get to know a few more of them. Would you excuse me for a second?" People generally understand, and appreciate the honesty. There's also always the drink option. I'll say: "I'm going to get another drink. Would you like one?" If they say no, I don't have an obligation to come back. If they say yes, I'll be sure to enter into another conversation on my way to the bar. When I return with a drink, I'll say, "I just ran into some people you should meet. Come on over."

Until We Meet Again

In order to establish a lasting connection, small talk needs to end on an invitation to continue the relationship. Be complementary and establish a verbal agreement to meet again, even if it's not business. "You really seem to know your wines. I've enjoyed tapping your wisdom; we should get together sometime to talk about wine. We can both bring one of our more interesting bottles."

Learn to Listen

As William James pointed out, “The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated.”

You should be governed by the idea that one should seek first to understand, then to be understood. We’re often so worried about what we’re going to say next that we don’t hear what’s being said to us now.

There are few ways to signal to your listener that you are interested and listening actively. Take the initiative and be the first person to say hello. This demonstrates confidence and immediately shows your interest in the other person. When the conversation starts, don’t interrupt. Show empathy and understanding by nodding your head and involving your whole body in engaging the person you’re talking with. Ask questions that demonstrate (sincerely) you believe the other person’s opinion is particularly worth seeking out. Focus on their triumphs. Laugh at their jokes. And always, always, remember the other person’s name. Nothing is sweeter to someone’s ears than their own name. At the moment of introduction, I visually attach a person’s name to their face. Seconds later, I’ll repeat the person’s name to make sure I got it, and then again periodically throughout the conversation.

If All Else Fails, Five Words That Never Do

“You’re wonderful. Tell me more.”

CONNECTORS’ HALL OF FAME PROFILE

Dale Carnegie (1888–1955)

“Learning to ‘small talk’ is vital.”

The late professor Thomas Harrell of Stanford’s Graduate School of Business loved researching the traits of alumni. His chief finding, as

you now know, is that successful graduates are social, communicative, and outgoing. "Getting-along skills," more than anything else, determined who got ahead.

And that's why the legacy of Dale Carnegie—the first person to *sell* small talk as a corporate skill—remains intact, nearly seven decades after the 1936 release of his bestseller *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

For Carnegie, too, small talk became a means for self-advancement.

Born in 1888, the son of a Missouri pig farmer who struggled all his life, Carnegie grew up ashamed of being poor. The feeling never quite wore off, and, as a young man, he contemplated suicide. When he was twenty-four, and struggling for subsistence in New York City, Carnegie offered to teach night classes in public speaking at the 125th Street YMCA. Fewer than ten students attended his first class. For weeks, Carnegie shared with his students the skills he'd learned as a standout high school debater and as a student at Missouri State Teachers College. He taught people how to shirk shyness, boost self-confidence, and ease worry, using ideas that amount, then and now, to common sense. Remember people's names. Be a good listener. Don't criticize, condemn, or complain.

After his first several classes, Carnegie ran out of stories to tell. So he asked his students to stand up and talk about their own experiences—and offered feedback on their performances. It was then that he realized that as students overcame their fear of taking the floor, and became more comfortable talking openly about themselves, their self-confidence rose accordingly.

In Carnegie's classes, businessmen, salesmen, and other professionals found a place devoted to affordable, commonsensical self-improvement. By 1916, Carnegie's course was so successful that he needed to train, for the first time, official "Dale Carnegie Course" instructors. By 1920, Carnegie had published *Public Speaking*, an official text that he used to launch Carnegie courses in Boston, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

And it's possible none of it would've happened had not Carnegie encouraged his initial classes to open up and to share

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their stories. It's no wonder Carnegie never failed to stress listening as a crucial networking skill. In an age when computers and e-mail take the personal touch out of doing business, Carnegie's home-spun logic remains as relevant as ever. People, after all, are still people, and who couldn't use a reminder of lessons like:

- "Become genuinely interested in other people."
- "Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves."
- "Let the other person do a great deal of the talking."
- "Smile."
- "Talk in terms of the other person's interests."
- "Give honest and sincere appreciation."

Though he successfully applied the fundamentals of smart small-talking to his own life, Carnegie was reluctant—at first—to share his secrets in book form. The course cost \$75, and Carnegie wasn't keen on giving away its content. But Leon Shimkin, an editor at Simon & Schuster, was a passionate graduate of Carnegie's classes. Shimkin finally convinced Carnegie, to the benefit of us all, to write a book. "Perhaps by practicing the very sort of flattery and persistence that Mr. Carnegie himself advocated and admired—Mr. Shimkin won him over," wrote Edwin McDowell in the *New York Times* in 1986.

For Shimkin, and millions more like him, Carnegie emboldened us with the belief that we can learn to get along better with other people—and achieve great success—no matter who we are or how poor we were.