

THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF SMALL TALK

..... *Becoming*
*Fluent, Comfortable,
and Charming*
.....

CAROL A. FLEMING, PhD

Author of the Bestselling *It's the Way You Say It*

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CAROL A. FLEMING, PhD



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a BK Life book

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The best way to become good at small talk is not to
talk small at all.

—Keith Ferrazzi, *Never Eat Alone*

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How Do You Do?

HOW NICE TO MEET YOU!

My name is Carol Fleming.

I am a communication coach: I help people talk better.

Thank you for the opportunity to show you around the world of small talk.

I've got information, advice, stories, examples, surprises, and a bit of sass.

And you are . . . ?

I'm guessing you are a person who would like to get a lot more comfortable with starting the kind of social small talk that leads to good conversations. You see other people who are apparently at ease and fluent and you want to be like them. You probably have not had the opportunity to learn these skills—and they are learnable—much less practice them, and you are ready to get started.

Your motivation is really important to me because for this to work we need to change some attitudes and try some new behaviors. That's challenging for a lot of people. You might be thinking right now about what's in it for you and whether it's worth it to take this challenge. Give me a few minutes and if you like what you read, then take that leap with me.

There are three important things about small talk that strike me (and that I hope will strike you):

1. Small talk is a required aspect of relationship building (social and professional) and community building.
2. It is also a despised form of communication, regarded as superficial and unworthy of an intelligent person.

3. Furthermore, no one seems to regard it as a feature of human communication that can be studied, practiced, and improved.

No wonder we all have social anxiety!

In contrast, people do understand that public speaking, in all its various forms, is both important and scary *and* that they can overcome much of their discomfort by getting some help—classes, consultations, whatever. Most folks know that their voices can be improved, vocabulary increased, and speeches better organized.

But small talk is like the brown water that comes out of the tap when you first turn it on. Oh, yuck! Get the empty chatter over and get on with the good stuff!

Why can't we just talk about the good stuff?

Now we're getting to the heart of it. Why can't we, indeed?

Here's a clue why: Imagine I walk up to you, a complete stranger, and say, "Weren't the Warriors great last night?" Perhaps you'll agree with me and shake my hand and we'll be great buddies right away discussing the righteousness of Steph Curry's salary. Or, more likely, you just shake your head and wonder about that crazy lady who just accosted you.

Small talk is about getting permission to engage in verbal intercourse and have a consensual conversation on a topic of mutual interest.

Small talk is the verbal warm-up for the big talk.

True that, but its stand-alone utility also goes unrecognized. Small talk is ubiquitous and assumed—so much so that we don't even recognize it as a specific form of communication that has a crucial function all its own.

In focusing our attention on these unique characteristics, I'll use a number of similes to guide your thinking. Here's my first one: Small talk is like tofu—easily digestible, readily available, and utterly bland, taking on the flavor of whatever context

in which it is found, be it a Thanksgiving dinner, a professional conference, or a tractor pull. Chew on that for a while.

Here are few more points to chew on:

- There is no communication skill more important in the world than small talk.
- You love small talk. Yes, you do. There's just that one little bit with strangers that throws you off. I'll show you how to handle that.
- Social anxiety may have you in its clutches now, but you don't have to stay there. You've feared other things in your life and have overcome them. Remember swimming lessons?

This book is all about the many facets of small talk, the art form of conversation. I offer some guidelines that have helped my clients and that just might be exactly what you need to gain confidence and comfort in social situations. You'll soon meet people like Leo and Ben who were important teachers for me, and you'll find quite a few authors in the bibliography who taught me a thing or two. Or three. But remember, there are no rigid rules (usually), but there are courtesies, rituals, considerations, and the common sense that you probably already have.

So, let's start our exploration of the "brown water" (or tofu) of our communication repertoire. In Part 1: The Basics, we'll sharpen our focus on the problems you're facing with small talk, followed by some suggestions of things you can do at home that will make a huge difference in your social comfort when you are outside among people, especially strangers. Things like how to approach people and initiate small talk, followed by the skills of turning that chat into real conversation.

In Part 2: Becoming Even More Fluent, Comfortable, and Charming, we'll go over specific social applications, like how to introduce yourself and others, how to carry on small talk with more than one person, and, very importantly, how to make a graceful exit.

Yes, now the clear water is starting to flow! This book offers a paint-by-numbers approach—explicit instructions on what to do and when to do it. For some of you, it will be a simple reminder of something you already know, but if your social anxiety has been getting the best of you lately, the steps are worth reviewing. For others, especially those of you who have undergone profound displacement and churn in their social lives, the basics are exactly what you desperately want to learn. They are the tools for fitting into friendships and social groups, shaping your future and building community. And was there ever a time when we needed to talk together more?

But besides the many useful tips, there is a larger fish I wish to fry with this book.

**To me, small talk is the sound of people
reaching out to each other.**

It's the sound of people looking for ways to find similarities, shared interests, goodwill, and the offering of friendship, not for any particular instrumental purpose, but because we need each other. We hunger for human contact. Small talk is a linguistic mechanism that allows Us (you and me) to transform Them (a stranger, a scary "other") into someone who is a part of our tribe, into an Us. In other words, the real job of small talk is to make it easier for Them to see you as an Us and for you to feel like an Us (more on this in Chapter 1). That's a pretty important job.

Last point: Like any good party (and conversation), this book has a smorgasbord of things to sample according to your taste. So grab a plate, pick some chapters, and enjoy!

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The Basics



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What Is Small Talk For?

DO YOU WANT NEW FRIENDS? START HERE.

You say small talk is a waste of time or a necessary evil. I say small talk is a very good thing indeed.

Let's define small talk as a light, pleasant, and safe verbal exchange that allows people the time and association to get a sense of each other before developing a deeper sense of relationship. When meeting new people, it consists of introductions, exchanges of personal information and interests, and searching for topics of mutual interest. With people already known to you, it involves the sharing of feelings, opinions, gossip, jokes, and observations.

Small talk implies aimlessness, where what is said is less important than the fact that we are actually saying something (anything!) to a particular person. Small talk has an important social-emotional role in life; it is universal, ubiquitous, and fundamental for knitting a society together.

Small talk is the language of relationship and friendship.

And you love small talk. (Oh, yes, you do!)

Do you doubt me? Take the following test:

Do you stop and chat as you pass a neighbor on the streets?

Do you "shoot the breeze" with the guys at the filling station?

Do you "dig the dirt" at the beauty parlor?

Do you “schmooze” with your old friends?

Do you “chew the fat” with your coworkers?

Do you “kill time” as you wait at the train station?

Do you “chill” with your buddies?

And you’re going to tell me that you hate doing all of those things? No, you are not. You just have never thought of these exchanges as being small talk, the heart and soul of the social communication flow that keeps you in touch with people and your community.

Human beings have a tendency to form Us/Them dichotomies and to favor the former. These conversations are comfortable for you because you perceive these people as being your tribe, your Us. We chat easily with “our folks.” We stiffen up with the “elsewhereians” whom we’re not so sure about.

You can read Robert Sapolsky’s book *Behave* for his thorough review of the research on this concept. In it he shows us how much “Us/Them-ing” is subconscious stuff with biological underpinnings. For example, before you are even one year old, you are marking distinctions between sexes and races. You are also noticing if the language spoken to you sounds different from that of your mother tongue. Of course, the learned component is well known to us all:

You’ve got to be taught to hate and fear
You’ve got to be taught from year to year,
It’s got to be drummed in your dear little ear,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.
You’ve got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skins are a different shade,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.

From *South Pacific* by Rodgers and Hammerstein

“Dear little ears” is the scary part here. Us/Them distinctions learned early are the hardest ones to overcome. And Sapolsky writes that we make these Us/Them decisions in a fraction of a second, decisions that dictate our attitude and behavior toward a new person. We’re talking about the mechanism of discrimination, aren’t we? By “discrimination” I mean simply that we can see a difference—but when does a difference make a difference? That’s another question.

From time to time, I call a friend from high school who has lived in a small town in eastern Washington all her life. Since high school, our lives have taken on dramatically different dimensions, which were never more clear than with the 2016 US presidential election.

ME: So, how you doing, Ellie?

ELLIE: Now, that’s a trick question! I ain’t dead yet,
how’s that? Ya got your Trump sign on your lawn?
(HAHAHA!)

ME: No, I don’t, but I know you do.

ELLIE: You got any Trump signs on your block?

ME: Nooo, don’t believe I do.

ELLIE: Yeah, but down there in San Francisco, you’ve got a lot
of . . . you’ve got a lot of them . . .

ME: Are you asking about people of color, Ellie?

ELLIE: Yeah!

ME: The answer is, “Yes, we do.”

ELLIE: . . . and you . . . you talk to them, do you!?

ME: Yes, Ellie, I do.

In her words, tone, and context, Ellie was showing how clearly she saw the distinction between Us and Them.

I’ll quote now from the wonderful book by J. D. Vance, *Hillbilly Elegy*. The author, the hillbilly who made it to Yale, was back in his hometown of Middletown at a gas station.

As I realized how different I was from my classmates at Yale, I grew to appreciate how similar I was to the people back home. Most important, I became acutely aware of the inner conflict born of my recent success. On one of my first visits home after classes began, I stopped at a gas station . . . the woman at the nearest pump began a conversation, and I noticed that she wore a Yale T-shirt. “Did you go to Yale?” I asked. “No,” she replied, “but my nephew does. Do you?” I wasn’t sure what to say. It was stupid—her nephew went to school there, for Christ’s sake—but I was still uncomfortable admitting that I’d become an Ivy Leaguer . . .

I had to choose: Was I a Yale Law student, or was I a Middletown kid with hillbilly grandparents? If the former, I could exchange pleasantries and talk about New Haven’s beauty; if the latter, she occupied the other side of an invisible divide and could not be trusted.

.....

If you believe that prejudice based on any personal distinction is pernicious, then might I interest you in a mechanism for bridging the social gap, a tool available to everyone? It’s called small talk.

The small talker is on the front line of engaging with Them. It makes Them safe, it makes Them welcomed. This can be fun for you—and there are also lots of reasons why it may be scary, like finding yourself on the tightrope, in front of a crowd, without a net, extending friendship to a person who has not yet qualified as an Us.

But these divisions are not immutable; they can be changed in the twinkling of the eye. A person once regarded as a Them can easily become an Us. I argue that this is truly the Serious Business of Small Talk.

**This is what you want out of social conversation:
turning strangers into friends.**

It is you and I with our friendly overtures to erstwhile strangers who can move the dial to greater circles of comfort and friendship. The talk may be small, but the impact is big. You negotiate the beginning of all relationships through appropriate small talk.

THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF SMALL TALK

The serious business of small talk is:

- To bring people together
- To facilitate understanding and trust
- To find or confirm friendships
- To avoid conflict
- To expose you to different points of view

Got the picture? Small talk is your social future.

Now, how can you say you “just hate” this? What I think you actually hate is that teensy-weensy small percentage of situations where you must negotiate a stone-cold start with a stranger.

You feel okay when a Them is selling something or giving directions. This shared purpose clarifies and comforts. And you can be with old friends and not have anything in particular to talk about and that feels okay too.

But to act overtly friendly with total strangers with nothing to talk about, possibly being witnessed by other people—that’s what you hate. You hate that flood of anxiety, the feeling of foolishness, the fear of the phony, the awkwardness of making it all up on the spot. Your emotional centers are on high alert: “Watch out, there’s a Them!”

All of this Us/Them tension usually goes unacknowledged, as is the cognitive/emotional war going on inside your head. Your emotional brain is yelling, “Stranger-danger!” while your cognitive brain is trying to comply with the social expectation that you act as if you were already friends. And the cherry on top is that there is always the possibility of rejection!

I think that's the small talk you hate, and who can blame you? It is painful!

These stressful situations call for a mechanism, a tool, an attitude for moving through the discomfort of bridging this social gap. The rituals and pleasantries of small talk are designed to deal with just these ambiguities. It starts with a smile, a hello, and an outstretched hand. If you can do this, we can get started with all the rest.

**Small talk is a crucial social lubricant,
as valuable as wine or laughter.**

Small talk takes many forms. Remember the tofu analogy from the introduction? Its goal is to be easily digestible, readily available, and utterly bland, taking on the flavor of whatever context you're in. At one extreme is the simple exchange of acknowledgement between people: one person knocks, the other opens the door. To not acknowledge the knock would be felt as an affront (but maybe that's exactly what you want to communicate). The polite thing to do is to offer and acknowledge these greetings as a matter of course. It costs you nothing and engenders goodwill on your behalf. It's just common courtesy to get something verbal going when you come into contact with someone—even if it is totally banal.

**Small talk may not reveal your intellect,
but it does reveal your humanity.**

Here's something very interesting about small talk in an elevator. As a new person gets on, she may make the slightest of accidental eye contact with someone, and she may say, "Good day." The recipient will then acknowledge the greeting with a minimal response: "Hello." And that's it until the elevator stops.

Now, observe: If there has been such an exchange, these two people will also say something as one of them exits the elevator, even if they are complete strangers to each other.

Have a good one.

Take it easy.

Enjoy the rest of your day.

The door they knocked on ever so slightly was still open and needed closure. But if there hadn't been a "howdy" when one of them entered, there wouldn't have been a "so long!" when they exited. This is an example of the courtesies and rituals that characterize the first stages of chit-chat. It lays the foundation for further exchanges to ensue.

And this is why it is good practice to acknowledge people with some kind of greeting. A "hello" or "good day" will do. Even a nod and a grunt can register as an acceptable acknowledgment. Later on, you may find yourself nodding to each other going down the hall. You'll want that in your social pocket.

Oh yes! We ran into each other at the Fairmont, right?

Allow me to introduce myself. . .

This could be the beginning of a relationship that can be useful to you.

Speaking of usefulness, people can have strong motives in initial conversational exchanges. We cannot characterize all of them as aimless, since there is an exploratory exchange going on. As an example, let's go to a commercial convention to observe some of the conversations going on.

On the convention floor:

Hello! I'm Joe Bailey with Lucky You! cosmetics. I've brought some product samples if you're interested. Perhaps you can visit our booth so I can get to know you better.

Here, the greeting is the first face of networking, which is the social edge of marketing your business.

Now, at the bar:

Hey, baby! Can I buy you a drink? I'd like to get to know you better!

Now Joe is chatting up a woman. His intention is clear, and it's not cosmetics. Again, it's the early negotiating phase of relationship building. If this phase of social conversation has you stymied, believe me, the Internet is full of advice for you, usually from young men who have all kinds of tricks up their sleeves to achieve success.

Both examples qualify as a subset of small talk but with the degree of intent as the variable. It's the invisible X factor behind the banalities in these early conversations—the sort-of hidden agenda—that supplies much of the discomfort and uncertainty.

THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF GOSSIP

MOM: Thumper, what did your father tell you?

THUMPER: "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all."

Thumper's daddy probably also told him:

Great minds discuss ideas.

Average minds discuss events.

Small minds discuss people.

Well, sorry, Thumper. Small-minded or not, we are all constantly talking about other people. And for good reason—what is more interesting than other people?

According to social psychologist Nicholas Emler of the London School of Economics, more than 80 percent of our small talk is about other specific and named individuals. In fact, evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar suggests that the evolution of human language was powerfully motivated by the need to gossip as a primary function. That is because gossip allows you to learn

the lessons of your culture about what is acceptable and what is not, according to Daniel Menaker, the author of *A Good Talk: The Story and Skill of Conversation*. Gossip tells us:

That neighbor is in need of some help.

So-and-so is in line for a big promotion, but we're not supposed to know.

That piano teacher was reeking of alcohol on his last home visit.

It's why most of this kind of small talk has to do with status change: Who's going up? Who's on the way down? And who's got a new Tesla?

Okay, so we understand its social regulation purpose, but why is gossip so delicious?

It's because the sharing of secrets gives you a taste of intimacy. It bestows a sense of "kindred souls," without which there is scant access to the inner thoughts and feelings that make our lives (and the lives of others) comprehensible, even to ourselves.

Gossip supplies facts that personal observation cannot. It is a form of small talk in that the process is more important than the substance. The sense of intimacy is paramount, and the shared information is incidental.

When you share a secret, you are making an effort to build a bridge to another person—a Them—so that they start feeling like an Us.

Gossip is respectable, universal, essential, and fun. It is the stuff of community.

**If you can't say something good about someone,
sit right here by me.**

Remind me to put that on a pillow.

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How Do We Go About Changing?

FIRST, GO OUTSIDE

If you needed to learn a new speech sound to improve your clarity, I would direct your tongue to the right place and posture in your mouth to produce it correctly. Then I'd provide appropriate practice and carry-over activities to keep the sound securely in your articulation repertoire.

If you needed to learn how to give a concise, fluent oral report, I would direct your mind to identify the point of your remarks and the logical structure to introduce and support this idea.

If you needed to develop comfortable and engaging small talk, I would direct your feet to the sunny side of the street. I would get you out of your head and into the spaces where you find other people. For many of you, those other people are on the other side of a wall called social anxiety.

Social anxiety is the fear and stress of being negatively judged and evaluated. It is the brick wall that has kept you from reaching out to others, and it will not fall down on its own. Only direct cognitive-behavioral efforts on your part can break down this wall by changing the brain and its habit patterns. For our purposes, the most effective therapy tool is small talk.

Small talk is the cure for social anxiety.

I know, I know, it's a catch-22!

People invest a lot of time in talking about their social anxiety problems. They tell me their tales of fear, shame, and failure while I wait for that part in our conversation where we discuss

what we're going to do to change the situation. I offer three approaches for achieving conversation comfort:

1. Baby steps. We creep up on this situation in behavioral itty-bits.
2. We go for the big attitude change that recasts the whole experience in a new and positive light.
3. Both 1 and 2.

You might be asking yourself, "Can I really do this?" Of course you can!

First of all, let's get you in the right frame of mind, the one that assumes, "Yes, I can do this." Think about people you know who are socially comfortable, who have the ease you admire. Visualize them as they talk and mix with others, then imagine yourself doing the same thing. If you can reimagine this scenario as you pass through various situations in a day, it becomes part of your consciousness and is easier to access when the time is right. What I'm asking you to do is invest some energy in remembering your goal, purpose, and commitment to the future.

Now, some tough love. Step back and take a look at the crowd you hang out with. How do they talk? What is their social behavior like? Is this what you want for your life?

It has been said that you are the average of the five people you spend the most time with. Your accent, vocabulary, and social behavior will reflect this group. Perhaps you want to think about adding some new friends, people who behave the way you would like to. Consider seeking out new contacts and extending your social reach by visiting social clubs, civic organizations, and activity and discussion groups. Passive exposure doesn't do the trick. You have probably already been exposed to all kinds of people and it hasn't made a dent in your social skill and polish. Purposeful and mindful interaction will.

At the same time, I urge you to consider your own value to others. Can you be helpful, supportive, and genuinely interested

in them? In order to earn the privilege of being with people you choose, you must have something of benefit to offer them. Here again, more energy from you is required. You need to be interested and interesting (more on this in Chapters 8 through 12).

Pay attention. Think about it. Keep seeing yourself being the person you'd like to be.

Comfortable small talk is a learn-by-doing activity.

You can start now by putting the spotlight of attention on yourself as an outgoing, genial person. But now you're asking, "How long is this going to take?"

I have two answers:

- It depends. Many factors come into play in the human learning of verbal skills.
- How much do you want this skill?

This one has a simple resolution. If you really want this, you can get it lickety-split. So can you see yourself as capable of developing these skills? And are you willing to make the effort to achieve fluency?

If you said yes, you are exactly the person I wrote this book for. If you said no, please give this book to someone who can say yes.

THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF SMALL TALK

I'll bet you didn't know that there has been a lively market in books and manuals about social conversation going back over 500 years. What is striking is how little the advice has changed over the centuries, suggesting there really are dos and don'ts we are each expected to follow with limited variation. We can even go back more than 2,000 years ago for basic rules of small talk by Cicero, the Roman orator and philosopher, from his treatise *On Duties*:

- Speak clearly.
- Speak easily but not too much, especially when others want their turn.
- Do not interrupt.
- Be courteous.
- Deal seriously with serious matters and gracefully with lighter ones.
- Never criticize people behind their backs.
- Stick to subjects of general interest.
- Do not talk about yourself.
- Above all, never lose your temper.

You can't argue with this list, can you? Now let's add the contribution of the great Dale Carnegie, king of the self-help book, from his *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936):

- Become genuinely interested in other people.
- Smile.
- Remember people's names.
- Be a good listener.
- Talk in terms of the other person's interests.
- Make the other person feel important—and do it sincerely.

That's pretty much it. So then you ask, "Okay, I know the rules. I'm done, right?" Hmm, probably not. If a list of desiderata were all it took to change behavior, there would be no overweight people. Clearly, behavior change involves a lot more than a bunch of rules to follow.

There is a sequence of steps that facilitate real communication behavior change:

1. Awareness of conversational style and identifying what needs to be changed
2. Discovering what's in it for you
3. Systematic habit replacement

These steps characterize most learning in communication skills. Let's apply them to social conversation.

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH YOUR CONVERSATIONAL STYLE

If you have a way of getting outside of yourself, you'd be wise to take it. That is because people do not have a clue about their personal impact on others.

Gentle feedback from a loving friend is best, of course. Lacking that option—as many do—if you really want to find out how you behave in a real-time conversation, a recording will tell you a lot. Understanding that the particular situation and individuals involved will direct the interaction to some extent, you still can learn some useful information if you just eavesdrop on yourself. As you listen, I'd recommend asking yourself the following questions:

Is there an easy back-and-forth or is somebody hogging the conversation?

Do you hear yourself interrupting very much?

Is your voice easy or hard to hear? Soft? Fast?

Are you talking about yourself, the other person, or some other topic?

Do you sound harsh or unpleasant in any way? Sarcastic? Know-it-all?

Do you raise your voice and override someone's attempt to join in?

Do you answer in monosyllables?

Do you hear a lot of “uh-huh,” “yeah,” or other empty language when you could have offered substantive content?

Do you catch yourself using generalities when you should use specifics?

Do you laugh like a donkey?

Now, do I really believe you will do this? No, I do not. I have had one—ONE—person who actually took on the challenge and even wrote me a report on what she learned about herself. It is such a curious thing: We all look at ourselves in mirrors multiple times a day. But listen to ourselves? Not so much. We evolved alongside standing bodies of water, so we had a way of seeing ourselves reflectively from early in our evolution. We developed with our visual image available to us. But hearing ourselves? Not until the middle of the twentieth century did we have tape recording devices available to the average person.

So maybe you won't make a recording of yourself to play back and analyze. It's still a good practice to consider the questions above as you converse with others to see if anything stands out to you that you can easily change.

What's in It for You?

Ask me to predict your success in changing your communication behavior and I'll ask, “How badly do you want it? As long as you continue to keep your goal and your commitment to the future a lively presence in your mind, you will fuel your drive to change.

Nothing beats motivation—unless it's persistence!

Habit Replacement

In this corner, weighing 800 pounds, the reigning champion of your social life: *Your. Own. Social. Habits!* And in this corner,

wearing yellow trunks, the 115-pound contender: *Your. Speech. Improvement. Goals!*

If you're going to do this thing, you've got to get real. Habits do not go down easy. Blink and they're all over you. Lose your focus and you're done. You know this is true because you've gone through it so many times.

And to habit, let's add anxiety. Anxiety will make you do what you have always done before. Count on it. The blooming, buzzing confusion of a new social gathering will absorb you and naturally bring out all your old habits. But if you're aware of what's happening, you can fight it. You can connect with the new habits you want to focus on and find an opportunity to try them. Your motivation and focus will come into play—slowly and perhaps poorly at first—but persistence will always win. A quote attributed to Calvin Coolidge says:

Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.

The Secret of It All

Want to know a secret shortcut? If you can change your *attitude* toward other people, it will have a major impact on your communication *behavior* and, subsequently, your impact on others. Here I will borrow from the foreword to Leil Lowndes's book *How to Talk to Anyone*:

There are two kinds of people in this life:

Those who walk into a room and say, "Well, here I am!"

And those who walk in and say, "Ahh, there you are."

To the degree that you are being self-conscious, you are not investing in the other person in the conversation (more on this in Chapter 10). Conversely, the more you are open to what the other human being is saying, the less your attention is captured by your own ego.

There it is. That's the secret. Be willing to

**Admire your conversation partner and
feel them open to you.**

This is the easy way to charm. People are warmed and flattered by the attention and admiration of a listener. And while we're in the neighborhood, it is also the secret to comfortable public speaking.

Were I to counsel you in preparing a speech, I would have you invest your time in thorough knowledge of your audience and how to meet their interests and needs. You don't have this identified audience in a small-talk situation, especially with strangers. But it's still a knowable audience, isn't it? That's the point of the conversation in the first place.

.....

Social communication learning is laid down behaviorally and can only be modified through behavior, otherwise known as systematic and mindful practice. Your biggest enemy here will be you: clinging to your old habits and trying to understand the issue with an intellectual approach. As a matter of fact, your whole being—that 800-pound gorilla we were talking about—will fight the habit changes that you think you want. This is true of all communication change, by the way. We have an emotional immune system that panics when we feel uncertain and vulnerable, the same feelings that arise when we are trying something new.

Don't let that 800-pound bully throw sand in your face! Let's work it out! Are you ready?

Why Is Talkin' About Nothin' So Darned Hard?

LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

So far you have learned that:

- Small talk is a light, pleasant, aimless verbal exchange that allows people the time and association to develop a sense of relationship. What is said is less important than the fact that we are actually saying anything to some particular person.
- There is no communication skill more important in the world than small talk.
- You love small talk. Yes, you do, as well you should. It is the music of our voices sounding in friendship.
- Small talk is the best cure for social anxiety. It is the one tool designed to turn scary “others” (Them) into friendly associates (Us).
- Shining the bright flashlight of your benign interest on others is the secret to transforming your self-consciousness into regard and respect for others.
- Your level of motivation and your persistence are the best predictors of your ability to challenge and change your communication habits.

You have also learned that what sounds so easy turns out not to be so. Let me count the ways!

Small talk usually begins with the impulse to congregate and engage in verbal behavior followed by a search for a topic to justify the talking that is already under way. Note that the impulse to chat does not begin with matters of the intellect but with a need for interpersonal connection. Indeed, the need for “belongingness” is right up there after physiological and safety needs in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.

**The camaraderie is first, the topics are second.
That is the curious business of small talk.**

The communication values honed in intellectual demands, such as public speaking, debate, drama, or negotiation are of only slight pertinence in such social-emotional situations. All language—and especially small talk—is subconscious, habit-driven, and spontaneous. You have to make it up as you go while playing cooperatively with others who are also making it up.

You are literally out of your element:

Treating strangers as if they were friends,
with no reason to talk about anything,
while you are expected to be fluent and engaged, and
dealing with loads of ambiguities, and
a lack of personal experience, and
layers of familial, pedagogical, and cultural training that
have estranged you from your primordial communica-
tive ability,
just when you need to consciously increase the trust-
making signals that are processed subconsciously.

It takes a lot of energy and intention to turn a scary Them into a trustworthy Us, doesn’t it? I know you are much more fluent and secure in discussing something known and familiar to you, with people who are known and familiar to you. But you cannot just jump into a substantive topic of your choice with a stranger,

can you? And what makes you think that this new person even wants to talk to you? Answering these questions is the work of small talk.

**It's clear that this small talk business
is not small stuff at all.**

Your rational mind is trying to deal with an irrational situation on several levels. I don't believe that the complexity of this cognitive challenge is sufficiently recognized and appreciated.

Plus, the following elements further complicate the social conversation: the *aegis* that sets the tone, your *personal background* of social exposure, and your *social nature*.

The *aegis* sets the expectation of what behavior and conversation are appropriate within its confines. For example, a wedding requires certain behaviors and conversation that differ from a political rally, a football game, or a medical conference. The savvy individual needs to be sensitive to these unspoken expectations and behave accordingly. I once saw a young man who had begun his training at a financial institution go to a party at the home of his manager. The fellow got observably drunk. Not cool. Financial institutions tend to value sober, responsible behavior (at least in public). This fellow appeared to be guided by frat party social conventions.

Then there's your *personal background*. How many of you are still operating in the world in which you were raised? It is likely that you don't live in the town where you were born; you may not even speak the language of your childhood. You may be living a life undreamed of by your parents. Many of you have propelled yourself into a career world or social community through your own intelligence and efforts (and luck), creating a lot of distance between the world of your past and your current status. Everything that you learned about social communication is now most likely obsolete, inappropriate, and inadequate. And so, inevitably questions arise:

Should I stand when I'm introduced?

Can I eat this with my fingers or do I have to use a fork?

Is it okay to just walk up and introduce myself to someone?

Don't you wait for the woman to stick out her hand to shake hands?

When I meet the company president, is it more polite to make eye contact or to look down and bow my head?

What if my cell phone rings?

We used to have consistent and reliable answers to these sorts of questions. Nowadays, not so much.

Our natural degree of *sociability* and, especially, how we handle rejection, real or apparent, can also hold us back.

Maybe you're thinking:

I'm an introvert. I really prefer to be alone. It's not that I can't talk to people; I can and do. It's just that I honestly prefer to be by myself. You have no idea how much is going on inside my own skull!

And we don't, of course.

You may meet an unsmiling face and cold shoulder and too quickly read "rejection" when these seemingly negative social indicators may have nothing to do with you. This person may have just realized he can't find his car keys, or that his girlfriend is having way too much fun with another man, and you think it's all about you. Are you getting a little lesson about your ego here? You should.

Perhaps you deal with painful self-consciousness by trying to look as if you were preoccupied or otherwise trying to manage your public impression—you know, just in case anybody is looking at you. For this I prescribe the 18/40/60 rule as formulated by my friend Dr. Dan Amen, a psychiatrist. Brace yourself:

When you're 18, you worry about what everybody is thinking of you; when you're 40, you don't give a darn what anybody thinks of you; when you're 60, you realize nobody's been thinking about you at all.

I can remember a time when I was feeling particularly socially unresponsive myself. I can't remember what was going on in my life, but I do remember there was a gentleman sitting beside me trying to engage me in conversation. I gave him the most minimal of responses. There was nothing about the man that was objectionable; I just didn't want to talk. Toward the end of the evening, this man said to me, "Yes, ma'am, I think you're probably like one of my best friends who's a real quiet feller. A wonderful man, he prefers just to watch people and observe what's going on. He's just not one for a whole lot of chat. He has a lot of depth to him, and you're probably just like that."

Now that one came out of left field and caught me right between the eyes. I managed to muster some kind of response and thanked him for his kindness, and I've never forgotten the lesson in graciousness he gave me.

Other people really have a lot better things to do than negatively critique you. But self-consciousness will blind you to those other possibilities. It prevents you from accessing your natural sociability and goodwill. I use the image of a flashlight when I talk about being self-conscious: it's like aiming your flashlight straight into your own eyes. It makes you preoccupied with yourself and unable to look out over the glare to focus on others.

Instead, how about aiming that flashlight of your attention at other people? It will take the focus off of you (and your self-consciousness) and onto your talking partner, providing benevolent warmth and opportunities to engage. If that sounds like something you want, that's what this book is about.

Once you've identified the role these three elements play—the aegis, your background, and your inherent sociability—you're in

a better position to make them subject to rational attention. Then you can bring forth your consciousness, intelligence, and information gathering to help you deal with them instead of running away. Simply paying attention is a good start. There is so much to be gained by observing other people and their social behavior. This is how all children get started, after all.

Small Talk 101

ON STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

Some folks get mightily confused with the style and pacing of small talk. Perhaps some similes or images will suggest the unique characteristics of small talk style in America. (Who knew it was so complicated?)

I have already likened small talk to tofu in its ubiquity and flexibility. The following similes require that you have had some exposure to a freeway on-ramp, jazz music, an automobile, and tennis. I hope that these images lead to a greater appreciation of the style of social conversation.

Small talk is like the on-ramp to the conversation freeway.

When you enter a fast-moving freeway, you do so by means of an on-ramp that allows your car to get up to speed in a protected and safe way as you merge with other cars. You are not expected to be able to negotiate ongoing freeway speeds right from the get-go, nor do we think you should be able to discuss a very deep and interesting topic the minute you begin interacting with a stranger.

By thinking “on-ramp,” you legitimize the open-ended period of introduction—the aimless pleasantries and ritualized exchanges of small talk—as you search for topics that will engage you both. What looks like empty chit-chat is actually subtle social exploration.

Small talk is like jazz, not Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

During small talk is not the time to plant your feet and hold forth in a prepared manner. You need to be light and agile, ready

to respond to any new idea or sidebar that pops up in the course of conversation. You should say nothing that takes more than a minute to say during the introductory period and be willing to let go of your topic to fully commit to whatever the other person is saying. Listen for both content and emotion. Be present to the shifts and ebbing of the other person's contributions—this is how you discover what you have in common.

Notice the jazzy fluidity of Sarah, Erin, and Jacob's conversation:

SARAH: We just came from the Hall of Flowers out in the park. What gorgeous orchids they had. Have you ever been out there?

ERIN: I'm not sure. Hon, is that the one beside the Arboretum?

JACOB: No, I think she means the one in the big glass building.

ESTHER: Oh, that's the one that is like the one we saw in England, right?

SARAH: Oh, when were you in England? We're going next week. Then we're driving up to the Edinburgh Festival.

JACOB: We were just talking about that! We've been wanting to go for a long time. How much time are you allowing for the drive?

See how they ended up someplace they didn't anticipate? They started chatting about the local Hall of Flowers and ended up at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. That's the fun of small talk.

Small talk is like the ignition in a car.

You love the thrill of travel. Maybe a leisurely Sunday drive is your happy place, or maybe you're the high-speed thrill-a-minute type. Either way, you are not going anywhere until you actually start your cold car and get it out of the garage. The same goes for good conversation. Someone has to get the motor going before you can go anywhere at any pace.

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