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Chit Chat, Small Talk & Relationship Building

By William Hagan & Angela Rice

While some summer jobs involve mostly filing documents and inputting data into a computer, it didn't take us long to realize that our internship would not relegate us to a back office. In this summer internship we are expected to connect with team members and clients. We've admitted we all enjoy having relationships where we can collaborate, be candid and open, and know that the people we are working with will support us. The only way to get to this type of deep and meaningful relationships though is by starting with chitchat and small talk.

Starting the Conversation

The first step toward building new relationships with co-workers and friendships is engaging in conversations. Chitchat and small talk open the door. No small talk means no new friends.

Approaching new people can be stressful and often awakens our fear of rejection. But what is the worst that can happen? The worst-case scenario is that someone doesn't want to talk to you.

While this might bruise your ego slightly, there are actually many reasons why the conversation may not have worked out, many of which are completely unrelated to you. The person you approached might be having a bad day, be running late or simply isn't very good at small talk.

On the other hand, the best-case scenario is that your small talk produces a useful contact or a new friendship. The benefits clearly outweigh the risks, so we agreed to chitchat more.

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If the idea of chitchat leaves you feeling uneasy or anxious it's okay! Chitchat and small talk aren't small at all and people have many questions regarding it. Where do I start? How do I get him or her to talk to me? How do I get other people to want to talk to me? How can I have a meaningful conversation with someone I don't know?

Ask a question, make a comment, and then ask another question. **Initiate.**

Then you may wonder: what questions do I ask? That depends on what is going on around you. Look at your immediate surroundings and make a comment:

“The weather is great for this time of year!”

“Does this elevator/bus/train always get so full?”

“That's a really cool jacket. It goes great with the color of your eyes.”

“What is new in your world?”

Where does the conversation go next? That depends. Do you want to keep talking and make a connection with the person? If so, ask another question, make a comment to follow up on their answer to the previous question.

Are you interested?

Now this is where you have to look in the mirror for a moment. Do you have enough interests to connect in a meaningful way with the people you want to build relationships with?

Ask questions about subjects you want to talk about. If you would like to talk about your job, sports team, or hobby, ask about the other person's job, sports team or hobbies.

When starting a conversation be mindful of the other person's mood. If the person has a friendly smile on their face, they will likely be willing to engage. On the other hand, if the person looks sad or intensely focused, he or she may not be interested in talking to you at the moment. Some people are habitually busy or angry – they do not understand the importance of creating space for small talk.

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While you are aware of others' outward appearance and body language, be aware of your own as well. It may not be obvious to someone else that he or she is looking tired, sad, mopey, or disinterested. Think about how other people see you so that you are approachable and communicate with energy and interest.

Notice trends you see in your small talk so you can be better prepared for future conversations. Brainstorm good conversation starters and your answers to questions you will likely be asked. Then you will be more at ease in new social situations.

Do you have enough interests to be interesting to others?

What do the people you want to connect with find interesting?

Topics of Conversation

Intelligent, sophisticated people have many interests. They are not one-dimensional. Here are some interests that can become fodder for conversation:

- Foods they like to cook, places they like to eat – what do you like to eat and where? What are your favorite restaurants?
- Their pets – Do you have pets?
- Places they have traveled and places they want to visit – have you been anywhere interesting? Where do you want to go on your next vacation?
- Family traditions – What is your favorite family tradition? What holidays are approaching – how will you celebrate them?
- What are your hobbies? Gardening, shopping, collecting, cars, shoes, reading or other hobbies? Meditation, yoga, tennis, running, sports?
- Investing, real estate, saving money
- Helping others, doing charitable or volunteer work – How do you give back to your community?
- Art, painting, music – How do you express your creativity?

...being knowledgeable about a variety of subjects makes a person more fun, more interesting.

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What are your interests?

Where can you find people with interests similar to yours?

Do you have at least three different interests that you can talk about? If not, it is time to broaden your horizons.

“Wow I noticed you are very good at...” or “I love the way you put that outfit together – where do you shop?” or “How long did it take you to build that – it is such a creative project!” These are recent examples we’ve heard used to start a conversation with someone new.

If you don’t know how to start a conversation, starting it with a sincere compliment is one of the best ways to go, because who doesn’t like being complimented? It starts the conversation on a positive note. Sometimes we worry too much about what we are going to say next after we’ve asked the starter question, but in reality our next step is to listen.

Be Ready to Listen

Listening is a vital part of building relationships – but you knew that already, right? If you zone out, you will likely miss vital information that you should know about the other person that would be helpful in carrying on the conversation.

Be an active listener - focus on the person, do not interrupt, after a key point nod your head to indicate you are following what is being said, and when the speaker is finished talking, summarize what was said. Make eye contact. Directly look in the person’s eyes while you are talking with each other.

Use facial expressions that match the content of what is being said. And smile when you introduce yourself and say good-bye. If you are too tense and your facial expression is tight you will send the wrong signal. Video tape yourself to see what facial expressions you may be using unconsciously.

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What's Next?

If you give one-word answers when someone asks you a question and you don't ask a question back, the conversation ends. It goes something like this:

“Hi, I like your jacket, what a great color!”

“Oh, thank you.”

Ball dropped.

Instead say, “Oh thank you...do you...? or, “you'll never guess where I got it...” or, “hey if you like this one you should see the one I got for my birthday...” or... SOMETHING! Ask a question back. Keep the ball rolling.

You may feel fretful or overly self-conscious before chit chatting becomes natural. It is easy to make excuses to avoid starting a conversation, but the people who feel the fear and strike up a conversation anyway are the people who become successful at creating the meaningful small talk that leads to fulfilling relationships. Are you ready to push yourself through your fear and learn to master small talk and relationship building?

We have a challenge for you: Start conversations with ten new people in the next week using these ideas. No one can talk for you. The only person who can lead you to be better at building new relationships is you, and small talk is vital to relationship building. Find out what big things can result from a little bit of small talk!

Then share with us what you observed. Our next white paper will focus on what not to do in conversation so if you have some observations about that, please share them with us at info@TheProfessionalDevelopmentGroup.com.

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