

Better small talk for you and your team.

This book will help you improve your small talk skills or help your team/ colleagues in their small talk.

Small talk has a big purpose in social interaction and team development, so it's worth understanding.

Helping your team improve their small talk skills and willingness to engage in discussion helps your team develop, engage more closely, improve productivity, and makes you a better leader.

This book may not make you "*love small talk*", but it will help you feel more comfortable and skilled at joining in and achieve your objective for doing so.

You may like to work through the book, jump to a specific section or go straight to the one page guide at the end.

### **What made you pick up a book on small talk?**

Understanding how you feel about the subject will help you get more from the time you take reading it.

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## What is small talk

Small talk is conversation where people talk without getting into a deep or complicated conversation. It's "small" as they talk about 'unimportant' things. It can help fill silence and allow people to feel more comfortable and friendly with each other. In that way it's a conversational lubricant so you can move onto "big talk". **This means small talk has a big purpose**

It has also been called "*Phatic communion*" (to maintain social relations rather than exchange meaning). In other words, it's about social bonding more than 'just' communication, which is why it's important.



## Phatic Communion

Social bonding, not just communication

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## **All conversations are about two things**

Most conversations are mixtures of words and behaviour (useful ideas and delivery).

Speaking communicates information or ideas. The meaning (semantic content) is what those words mean.

The social context affects if the words are acceptable or not. Many introverts don't like strong egotistical behaviour and are aware of their "internal processing gap" when it's filled by others.

On a second level speaking is social behaviour. Maybe filling a gap, taking over, being known as/ for something. It could be acknowledging, nurturing, caring, encouraging. The social behaviour relies on your tone, your body language, the setting (and your words).

"Big talk" (doesn't exist, but I liked the idea) is more about semantic content. It's an information exchange.

"Small talk" is more social behaviour than semantic content, it's more of an emotion exchange. However this exchange can make the following "big talk" more acceptable. This provides the importance for small talk

**Learning point – Consider how you come across, not just the words you use. If your aim is to appear a certain way, your actions need to support that.**

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## Why does a small thing create so much angst?


Many people don't like small talk. You're far from the only one. It's not an "*introvert thing*", many ambiverts and 20% of extroverts don't like it either.

It's easy to assume everybody around us is good at small talk and feel badly as a result. Many people feel the same as you and you are more effective at it than you believe.

That doesn't take away from the fact that many people hate it, dislike it, or any negative phrase you care to add.

70% of introverts  
20% of extroverts

Don't like small  
talk.



"It's cringey", "pointless", "drains me",  
"inauthentic", "makes me anxious",  
"I'm no good at it", "They'll see through me"

**Each of these reasons are valid, but you can deal with them and become more effective at small talk.**

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### **It's inauthentic and makes me shudder**

Many people say small talk is vacuous and inauthentic. There's a perception that people are saying things to pass the time and make things up to impress others. If you feel like this, you may like to read [page 12](#).

Somebody making stuff up for effect isn't helpful in any conversation, small or big. Maybe it's those people who need avoiding (or challenging) rather than small talk itself.

### **Small talk – it's OK till it's not.**

For some it's not about liking or disliking small talk; it's about suddenly being unable to carry on the discussion and wanting an emergency button to take you away.

*"I was chatting with a group of people, a bit about work and a bit about TV shows; you know the typical work event "small talk".*

*It was OK, despite small talk not being my favourite thing. Then after 5 minutes I felt like I was hit by an invisible hammer. Suddenly I needed to get out of the conversation, be on my own. I felt like I couldn't breathe, and my heart was racing. I made a silly excuse and left.*

*This isn't the first time, sometimes I'm OK for much longer and other times for only a couple of minutes. It's not the people or subject, it's just this sudden urge to get out of the small talk."*

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Have you found there's a variable amount time you can chat for? Sometimes it's easy to chat for a while and other times the sinking feeling happens sooner? You may like to read ["Escaping from the conversation" \(page 18\)](#).

### **Listening to this rubbish makes me cringe**

Some people think it's nonsense with no purpose.

On holiday a few years ago, I was under a waterfall with water cascading over me. It was a lovely feeling I won't forget. It was vastly different when my shower at home wasn't working properly, horribly hot water cascading over me. But I needed I needed this horrible cascade of unpleasantness to get clean.

Have you spent time in a discussion with one (or more) people, where seemingly meaningless words are cascading over you, yet you can't get out?

*"My personal hate about small talk is when it feels like I'm surrounded by words, laughter, and emotion, they're flying all around me and I can't get out.*

*Nonsense words and a tide of unpleasantness rising up around me. In my head I want to shout, 'what's the point', 'why are you coming out with this inane nonsense' and 'just shut up'. Yet I 'know' I need to stand in this cascade of rubbish."*

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There are times when it feels as if we must be there but can't work out why. "The why" is normally because it will (or should) lead to a deeper conversation about something far more important to the people talking. Understanding what you want and how you might move the conversation on can help.

If the conversation isn't heading anywhere relevant after a few minutes, try asking a business related question so it moves towards the thing you want to discuss. If it's still going nowhere, don't feel bad about leaving the conversation ([read "Escaping the conversation" page 18](#))

### **Small talk makes me anxious**

This is true for many introverts. It might be about:

- getting stuck in a conversation ([see p18](#))
- getting drained of "people energy" ([see p9](#))
- fear of not having "the right" answer quickly enough ([see p9](#))

**TIP: Practice, preparation, a positive mental attitude, curiosity and a having rational reason for joining in help.**



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## **The connection between small talk and introversion.**

Many people who dislike small talk are introverted. Two important points about introversion can help explain this.

1. **People energy.** Most introverts are de-energised spending time with people, where being in a group of people energises most extroverts. There's scientific evidence it's about dopamine sensitivity, but let's leave that for another day.
2. **Internal processing.** Most introverts "*think to talk*" and extroverts "*talk to think*". Introverts try to give a complete, accurate and well-structured answer. This may lead to a small gap in the conversation, some introverts are sensitive about this as they've been made to feel bad about it.

This means introverts may not want to lose energy in a discussion they feel awkward about being in. Add a dislike of "irrelevant" discussion and there's an inbuilt dislike.

Knowing you can manage conversations for short periods, that others suffer too, focusing on examples of good conversations you've had, and mentally preparing make it possible to thrive, not just survive.

**TIP - Schedule yourself time with no people just before and after the event, so you can be on top form.**

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## **You already 'do' small talk.**

Whether you like, or dislike small talk, it has value, and you are probably already quite good at it.

Most people wouldn't like to visit a consultant (medical, business, or any other type) who jumped straight into the consultation by stating "*this is what's wrong with you and this is the cure*".

There is a level of bluntness few like; the difference is a little padding – the small talk. Whether with a hairdresser (yes, that's too much), Doctor, or sales person, there are different varieties (and amounts) of small talk; each with its own rhythms and rules.

What about small talk do you dislike? The subject, duration, certain types of people, or not feeling in control? If the discussion was on your favourite subject, would you feel the same?

I can happily strike up conversation with a stranger if I'm out walking, even if only about the weather, or the countryside. Suddenly there's me (who hates small talk) starting small talk. What's going on?

In this example:

- I choose to discuss something or not
- There's no expectation of duration

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- I do it if I consider I'm brightening up somebody's day, but not if I don't think they'll appreciate it.
- I can move on before I feel stuck, but equally am under no pressure to do so if it turns into a wider and great discussion (it does sometimes)

What's happening?

- I have (the illusion of?) control – talk or not, short or long.
- It normally makes me feel good and I believe it brightens the other person's day
- I'm under no time pressure
- I probably feel relaxed before I start and don't get tense knowing I'm "expected" to join in.

These are all things we can control nearly all the time, or we can set out mindset to be able to be "in the right place for".

**Learning point – Your mindset affects your discussions, especially the social context. Your mindset is in your control – you can't control what happens to you, you can control how you react to it.**

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## Tips for better small talk

There is no magic formula for successful small talk but remembering it's about **PHATICS** will help.

### Prepare

- **Recharged.** If you're introverted, you need to have a period with people around you before the event.
- **Mindset.** You can't choose what happens to you, but you can choose how you react. Be in a positive mind before you start.
- **Who are you?** Odd question, but how do you answer? Having a readily available sentence you're happy to share will stop you feeling as self-conscious. Not a whole 'elevator pitch', but one or two sentences allows the other person to respond with a question.

### Happy

- **No BMWs.** Bitching, moaning, whinging or sarcasm. Keep it positive, you may think you are being clever and may generate a quick laugh from a sarcastic quip but being positive leads the conversation to a better place.

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## Adaptable

- **Dancing.** Be ready to follow their lead and to take the lead, like a dance.
- **Don't work through a list of questions.** You want a discussion, not interrogation. Let your questions flow from your interest in their answers ([however, the next section has some questions that can help](#)).
- **Because.** Never answer a question in the minimum number of words, adding "**because**" reveals more about you. Consider "*I live in Swanage*" or "*I live in Swanage because I'm 300 metres from the sea and I love Scuba diving*". Which could help the conversation more? Create an open conversation.

## Talk

- **Start with (odd) common ground.** The weather is common ground, but better would be a *positive* comment about the shape of the ceiling (assuming you're in the same room), the room layout or an item you both have in common.
- **Mind the gap.** Don't worry about gaps in the conversation. Nobody likes being talked over and some people don't always respond quickly, respect it.

## Interest

- **Interest.** Be interested in them and their points. **Focus on being interested, not being interesting.**

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- **Use the person's name:** Adding somebody's name to every sentence sounds false, I don't like it and suspect you don't either. However early in the discussion it makes it more personal and helps us connect.
- **Listen.** A purpose of your small talk is to move onto "bigger talk", so listen to the other person. That allows you to ask relevant questions, showing you're interested in and learning from them.

## Curious

- **Be curious.** Adopt an attitude where you could learn. You can also thank them for what you've learnt, giving them a positive boost too.

## Social

- **Social bonding AND words.** It isn't just about the meaning of words you exchange. It's also an emotion exchange, making the following "big talk" more acceptable.
- **Nothing coming back?** If after a number of questions, they're asking nothing back, consider moving on. Maybe there's currently something in their life you're unaware of, or it's the way you're asking! Keeping on will frustrate both of you.

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## **Questions to help introverts into a conversation.**

I'm often asked, "how could I encourage introverts into a conversation?". Having a long, pre-prepared, list of questions isn't a great tactic as it helps you focus on the next question and not their answer. As the purpose of asking is (presumably) to engage in small talk for a purpose, interrogation questions don't help.

But one or two of these might help:

- **This is a great event, I love the xyz, what's your favourite part.** This question needs adapting for the setting, it could be about the room you're in, the buffet you're sharing, the speaker you've just listened to – any shared element. It needs no preparation and no memory.
- **What is the best thing that happened to you during the pandemic?** It's relevant, positive and gives them a chance to choose something that is important to them. You can amend it by changing the time period (this year, month, since we last met).
- **What's the most important thing I should know about you?** This might not be the first question to ask somebody. However, it can quickly move out of small talk and into deeper stuff. It works well in a work setting and in a social setting. It's good for getting to know somebody but allows the introvert

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to choose the level of their answer, so the question isn't too intrusive.

- **What about you most surprises people when they learn it?** It's a good alternative for the last question as it can be easier to ask, and answer.
- **What childhood memory do you hope you never forget?** It's positive, it's person centred and importantly it allows them to ask the about you. As with all of these questions, don't ask if you're not prepared to answer it about yourself.
- **What's changing in 'your profession' right now?** It allows them to talk about something they know and can help you get to know them. It's work related, which steers the conversation towards business.
- **What is your boss fixated on right now?** Again, it's work related, allowing the conversation to head towards business. You would need to adapt it if they're self-employed, or they own the company! Change 'fixated' if you like but sometimes it can get a positive laugh as well and lighten the mood.

### **Questions to avoid:**

### **Don't get too personal:**

- **What is your most embarrassing memory?** It is digging quite deep and is asking them to share something negative. Ask something positive instead.



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**Don't do the mind numbing, boring and common:**

- **It's great weather for the time of year isn't it?** Not only is it almost pointless and reveals nothing, it's a closed question "No" is an easy answer.
- **What do you do for a living:** If they don't like what they do it leads to discomfort. Also, it often doesn't get much more than a job title (which isn't really what you asked). What's the best thing about your role would be better.

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## **Escaping the conversation**

There are times when you may want to need to escape from the conversation. As an introvert maybe you're exhausted, alternately it could be that the conversation isn't going anywhere. Many introverts fear getting stuck in a conversation, having an exit plan can help reduce anxiety before you start.

The easiest plan is the smart phone. You've just received a silent, vibrating, urgent call/ message needs attention. Alternately a need for the toilet can be a useful emergency exit. Try not to use these two too often!

More assertive ways to end the conversation could include:

**"This has been useful, thank you for letting more know about xyz. Do you have a card?"** Positive and clearly restates what you were interested in. It may lead to follow them following on with things like trying to arrange a meeting".

**"I can't wait to hear how (key point from their conversation) goes! Let's catch up at the next event."**

**"I'm going to go grab [some food, a drink]. Great to meet you."** Works well at a buffet event. It can be useful to only put one or two things on your plate at any one time, so you can use this excuse more easily.

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**“I see my (friend, client, associate) over there, I should probably go say hi; thanks for the conversation”.** It makes a clearer statement that you are going to end the conversation, which can be a good thing. Many introverts have found having a buddy is useful at events, so they can easily get into and out of conversations like this.

**“The next session is starting soon; I’m going to go take my seat” It was nice meeting you!”** Again, it’s a clear end as you’re clearly doing something else.

**“Let me introduce you to xyz, they are....”.** At a networking event this is a good and positive way to move on. It’s especially useful if you’ve been listening to the type of person they would find useful to meet, as you can be helping them both, as well as escaping the conversation.

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## **Small talk and your team.**

Most team leaders want to increase their team's effectiveness. A team that communicates comfortably with each other and can critique each other supportively is likely to be more effective than one which doesn't. An effective team is therefore likely to engage in some small talk and know some non-business things about each other.

How is your team's small talk?

Score yourself 1-5 for each of the following. Your team:

- has a clear, shared and accepted business remit.
- understand each other's different functions/ purpose
- know how they can support each other and do.
- all know some elements of each other's domestic lives
- challenge each other at times, without it creating issues
- all engage in non-business chat at the beginning of each meeting
- all engage in productive and focused team meetings, where all contribute

Total score:

A good way to use this is to ask each team member to, confidentially, complete it. Then you can jointly examine the results and how you could change things. There's a

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handout version of this at the end of the book, which you might like to use.

The results:

Above 30 /35 – sounds like they’re a good team

Below 24 – sound like they need some improvement in how they work together and understand each other.

Score for last 3 questions:

Above 10 – sounds like they work well together

7 or below – maybe helping them with non-business “small talk” will be useful.

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## Appendix 1 – Team small talk.

### How is your team's small talk?

Score 1-5 for each of the following.

Your team:

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purpose
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each meeting
- all engage in productive and focused team  
meetings, where all contribute

Total score:

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## Appendix 2 Making small talk easier.



### Better small talk

- P** **Prepare** - Be in the right state of mind or it's hard to come across well.
- H** **Happy** - Make your points positive, nobody likes unhappy people.
- A** **Adapt** - Follow the conversation and sometimes be ready to lead. Like a dance, not an interrogation
- T** **Talk** - Talk about shared interests to get started (the room, the experience...)
- I** **Interest** - Be interested in their points and show that interest.
- C** **Curious** - Be curious, what can you learn and how will it change your thinking?
- S** **Social** - Phatic communion (small talk) is about social bonding as well as the words