

# The Big Challenge of American Small Talk

You are a new expatriate manager at the American subsidiary of your German firm in Chicago. With a few minutes to spare between meetings, you walk into the mail room to retrieve your mail and get a quick cup of coffee.

"Hey, David, how are you?" one of the senior partners at the firm asks you.

"Good, thank you, Dr. Greer," you reply. You've really been wanting to make a connection with the senior leadership at the firm, and this seems like a great opportunity. But as you start to think of something to say (secretly worrying whether it's actually appropriate to say anything at all to a senior partner), your American colleague swoops in to steal your spotlight.

"So Arnold," your colleague says to your boss, in such a casual manner that it makes your German soul cringe. "So what's your Super bowl prediction? I mean, you're a Niners fan, right? Didn't you do your MBA at Berkeley?"

The conversation moves on, and you slink back to your desk with your coffee. You know how important small talk is in the U.S., and you feel jealous of people like your colleague who can do it well — and with no remorse.

There's nothing small about the role that small talk plays in American professional culture. People from other countries are often surprised at how important small talk is in the U.S. and how naturally and comfortably people seem to do it — with peers, subordinates, men, women, and **even with superiors** like Dr. Greer. You can be the most technically skilled worker in the world, but your ability to progress in your job and move up the corporate ladder in the United States is highly dependent on your ability to build and maintain positive relationships with people at work. And guess what skill is critical for building and maintaining these relationships? Small talk.

When searching for a job, the ability to make effective small talk is essential for creating a quick sense of rapport with potential employers. Once you secure a position, small talk is essential to bond with colleagues, create a positive relationship with your boss, and win the trust and respect of clients, suppliers, and people in your extended professional network. What is also crucial in the eyes of a potential employer, boss, or client is whether they feel they can trust you — and whether they like you and want to work with you. The ability to **forge connections and relationships**

[through small talk](#) is a critical tool for achieving this purpose.

This is certainly true in formal situations such as an interview or a meeting, where small talk is often used as a friendly, lighthearted precursor to the main, "serious" portion of the discussion. It is also critically important during more unpredictable and unscheduled moments of organizational life, such as that impromptu chat you happen to have in the elevator with your boss or on the subway home. Or the discussion you have with a colleague or client seated next to you at a corporate event.

In all these situations, small talk is a critical tool for creating a personal bond. Although ultimately you will likely be accepted or rejected based on more concrete aspects of your work, the fact of the matter is that these interpersonal impressions matter a great deal along the way and can even shape how people judge your more technical production.

The problem, of course, is that small talk differs across cultures, not only in how it's done, but also in terms of its role and importance in business communication. In many cultures — especially those with more formal rules for communication and with a strong emphasis on social hierarchy — it's considered inappropriate to engage in casual conversation with superiors. In addition, it can also feel impolite and even dangerous to openly express your opinion during small talk, especially if it could potentially conflict with the other person's opinion. For example, if you express your allegiance toward a particular team or a point of view about any other topic without knowing that of your colleague, you might put them in the uncomfortable position of having to either suppress their own preference or express something that conflicts with yours.

In many cultures, it can also be particularly inappropriate to make small talk with strangers or to share any personal information with someone you don't know. America may be one of the only countries in the world where it's common to strike up a personal conversation with a complete stranger.

Finally, the way that Americans ask others how things are going or how they are doing can feel superficial to people from other cultures who are used to providing an actual, elaborated answer to such questions. They might understandably assume that if someone is asking them how they are doing, the person is genuinely interested in the answer, when in the U.S., this may just actually be a ritualized way of greeting

that doesn't really actually demand a long answer — and, in fact, a long, elaborated answer to the question of "How's it going?" would likely be inappropriate for most people in the U.S.

What can you do if you are from another culture and want to learn to use small talk in the U.S. to build relationships and establish trust? First, work hard to hone your own version of American-style small talk. Watch how others do it — the topics they cover, the tone they use, their style of verbal and non-verbal communication. You don't have to mimic what they do; in fact, that would likely backfire because people would see you as inauthentic. But if you can develop your own personal version, that can go a long way toward making you feel comfortable and competence.

Second, as you are honing your style, also work hard to appreciate why Americans make small talk as they do from their cultural perspective. Yes, from your point of view, American small talk might feel superficial or irrelevant or unnecessary, but is that how Americans see it? The more you can appreciate the new culture from that culture's own mind-set, the more legitimate you will ultimately feel adopting their norms.

So the next time someone asks you, "How's it going?" or "What do you think of the weather?" don't think of it as an imposition. See it as an opportunity! Use small talk just like Americans do — as a way to build and establish connections and to set the stage for potentially deeper relationships.