

FAST COMPANY



3 STEPS ANYONE CAN TAKE TO MASTER SMALL TALK

OUR SPEAKING COACH GIVES YOU THE FORMULA FOR TURNING THOSE AWKWARD SILENCES INTO IMPACTFUL OPPORTUNITIES.

BY ANETT GRANT

We've all been there: the minutes before a critical meeting begins. A chance encounter with a former coworker. A first date. An elevator ride with your boss.

During these brief moments, you wonder what you should say. The seconds slow down and the pressure builds. If only you were good at small talk, you could come up with something clever to say.

If you always wanted to be good at small talk but felt you lacked the gift, I have a simple formula that will not only get you over the conversation threshold but will truly open the door to making a genuine connection.

What's great about my formula is that you don't need to spend hours searching the Internet to come up with brilliant content. Forget about trying to memorize clever anecdotes or worrying whether your story is interesting enough. Instead, you need to think about connecting by creating a good feeling. By practicing these three steps, you will become a small-talk aficionado—at ease and ready to engage in all situations, personal or professional.

1. MATCH

Have you ever met someone and had an instant connection, and before you know it you were lost in conversation? How did you get there? Most likely, you were using my match, shift, pass back formula without even knowing it.

The first part of the formula is to match: to make a connection with what the other person has said. When you're walking and talking with someone, you naturally match their stride. It's the same concept for small talk—you need to match the stride of what your conversation partner is saying if you want to have a great conversation. In practical terms, you need to show that you were listening and directly address the other person's statement.

Let's look at an example (your part is in bold):

"So, do you have any fun weekend plans?"

"Yes, actually I'm going skiing with some friends."

Match: "Oh, cool! I've thought about giving skiing a try a few times, but I've never gone through with it."

2. SHIFT

The next part of the formula is to shift: to either add another component to the same topic or to change topics until you hit on something that you're both engaged with.

In the last example, if you aren't a fan of skiing, you could then shift the conversation toward a different activity that you do enjoy. If you are a fan of skiing, you could shift the conversation toward a specific kind of skiing or a specific place to ski.

The idea here is to keep trying to shift the conversation to fruitful territory. Don't just say you're not much of a skier and give up on the conversation—keep it going. Again, you never know where your conversation could end up.

Let's continue the example:

“Oh, cool! I've thought about giving skiing a try a few times, but I've never gone through with it.

Shift: I'm generally not much of a cold weather person, but I do like doing outdoor activities in the summertime—especially hiking.”

3. PASS BACK

The last part of the formula is to pass back: To give your listener a clear invitation to respond to what you are saying.

Here, it is important that you reveal your thoughts on the issue before passing back in order to create a no-risk environment for your conversation partner. By passing back, you're showing that you want to continue the conversation and that you want to listen, not just talk. In addition, you're giving them the opportunity to change topics if they would like.

Let's finish our example:

“Oh, cool! I've thought about giving skiing a try a few times, but I've never gone through with it. I'm generally not much of a cold weather person, but I do like doing outdoor activities in the summertime—especially hiking.

Pass back: Do you like to hike?”

If your conversation partner does like hiking, then you've hit on an area of mutual interest and will have a great time carrying on a conversation. If not, repeat the process. It's as simple as that.

The next time you find yourself in those small-talk moments—before the meeting begins, after the town hall ends, or while the elevator descends—remember to use this simple formula. You can get beyond those awkward, tongue-tied moments and create smooth, genuine connections. Just remember to match, shift, and pass back. The talk may be small, but the impact could be huge.

—Anett Grant (anett@execspeak.com) is the president and founder of Executive Speaking, Inc. She has coached top executives for over 35 years, with clients including PepsiCo, Honeywell, 3M, Hewlett-Packard, Sherwin Williams, Bank of America, and General Electric.