

Self-Leadership Challenge #9: Small Talk is a Big Art—How to Become a Master

Mastering “small talk” can make a big difference in your career. Yet, time and time again, executive coaching clients tell me they dread it. When I speak to an audience and someone mentions that they dread small talk, I sometimes role-play, acting like I’m an individual who has a lot of trouble with it. I inch my way slowly toward someone in the audience and say, “So ... um ... hi there ... um ... how are you?” When they say they’re “fine,” I say, “Oh good.” I look around the room, fumbling for what to say next. “Then ... um ... do you work in this area?” Once they answer that question, I look stumped. How do I move this conversation forward?

If that sounds a bit like situations you’ve been thrown into (and suffered through), don’t feel badly—you’re far from alone! All across the world, leaders tell me they dislike small talk and avoid it at all costs.

But as a [self-leader](#)—especially one who’s working on expanding and strengthening your network—you will inevitably find yourself in plenty of situations, formal and informal, where you’ll have to have small-talk conversations. Improving your skills in this area is vital to self-leadership and to your brand as a leader.

Keep it “open”

Just like asking (and not telling) is a powerful strategy in the workplace, one of the easiest ways to make small talk more comfortable is to ask open-ended questions. If you ask questions that bring only a “yes” or “no” answer or a short one-word response, you’ve given the other party nothing to latch onto and will likely get nothing back in return—except awkward silence. Questions that start with “What” or “How” will get the other person talking. This is particularly helpful if you’re an introvert who hates to talk about yourself. With this strategy, you can just ask a few simple questions and then listen to the other person do the talking.

Examples of open-ended, small-talk questions include: “So, what do you like most about your job?” “How did you get started in the industry?” “How has your business (or organization or industry) changed over the years?”

You could also make statements that encourage the other person to elaborate: “That’s interesting ... tell me more.” Or, “Help me understand what you mean by that.” Then, listen with genuine curiosity, remembering that nodding your head and murmuring the occasional “Mm-hmmm” will make sure the other person feels heard.

It’s not about you

Keep in mind that good networking is [not about you](#)! It’s about making the other person feel comfortable and feel heard. The good news is that, as the other person’s comfort level increases, your own discomfort level is likely to diminish as well.

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Of course, you shouldn't stay completely silent throughout the entire conversation. To find meaningful ways to chime in occasionally, listen carefully for common ground in the other person's responses. Does the individual say anything that you can relate to in your own experience? For example, your conversation partner might say, "I got into the industry because I really enjoy technology; I just can't get enough of the latest breakthroughs." You can respond with, "I'm with you—that's why I got into the industry, too. I have an endless fascination with everything tech." Then, pick up on that commonality and move the conversation forward with, "So, where do you see the next big technology breakthrough coming from?"

Small talk on the job

Instead of finding yourself in a networking situation with someone you don't know, what if you find yourself at a company event faced with making small talk with a coworker or senior leader? Again, the same guideline applies: Ask open-ended questions rather than tell. If you're talking with someone you don't know well but who's from your workplace, be honest and say, "We've worked together for a while now, and I still don't know that much about you. What do you like to do in your spare time?" Or if it's someone you already know fairly well, you could ask, "How is the XYZ project coming along?"

Be prepared

Here's another powerful suggestion to prepare for our next networking event: The next time you have a small-talk situation coming your way, arm yourself with a list of at least ten possible open-ended questions you could ask that could apply to multiple people and situations. Make sure the questions you have in your arsenal begin with either who, what, when, where, or how (never "yes/no" questions, and [avoid "why" questions](#), too). Examples are: "How often do you attend this type of event?" "Where are you from?" "What is your role at work, and how long have you been holding that position?" "Who is your main contact here, and how do you know them?" "What do you like to do in your free time?"

Of course, don't underestimate the importance of smiling and making eye contact. When the person introduces himself or herself, repeat the individual's first name: "It's nice to meet you, Joseph." Repeating the name makes it more likely you will remember it, and it immediately establishes greater rapport.

Armed with these tips, you'll be prepared for any event where you need to interact with strangers or work colleagues. The more you prepare yourself, the more comfortable you'll feel, and the faster you'll master the art of small talk.

BRENDA BENCE

**BUILDING SUCCESSFUL LEADERSHIP BRANDS
FOR COMPANIES AND EXECUTIVES**

Do you want to strengthen your self-leadership skills? Check out my latest book, [Leading YOU™: The Power of Self-Leadership to Build Your Executive Brand and Drive Career Success](#), where I share dozens of tips, tools, and techniques to help you rise to the top in your career.

Brenda S. Bence is an internationally-recognized branding expert, Certified Executive Coach, Certified Speaking Professional, and the author of several award-winning books, including *Would YOU Want to Work for YOU™?*, *Master the Brand Called YOU™*, and *Smarter Branding Without Breaking the Bank*.



In one of her recently released books, *Leading YOU™: The power of Self-Leadership to build your executive brand and drive career success*, Brenda brings her many years of transformational coaching successes, insights, examples, and real-world stories to the rewarding task of helping leaders reach their full potential.

After earning her MBA from Harvard, Brenda spent the bulk of her career as an executive in *Fortune* 100 multinationals, building brands across dozens of countries spanning four continents. Now, as President of her own company, Brand Development Associates International, she travels the world speaking, training, and coaching individuals and companies to greater success through creative, yet practical, personal and corporate brand and leadership development. Visit www.BrendaBence.com.

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