

How does „small talk“ influence the course and success of negotiations?



In many cultures “small talk” is perceived as the first step to establish a successful and long-lasting cooperation. „Small talk“, „lo small talk“, „le small talk“ or „светская беседа“ creates space for breaking ice and building an initial relationship. In some cultures “small talk” skills belong to a basic equipment of a manager. However, there are also cultures which view “small talk” as a waste of time. In their understanding a brief question “How are you?” is enough.

As an intercultural consultant I meet experts who are well-known in the whole world. They have no difficulties to deliver presentations at international conferences, face challenges of crucial IT or economic projects in several countries. However, when they are invited for a business lunch or a coffee to have “small talk” with their business partners or colleagues they are afraid to participate.

What is the purpose of “small talk”?

The main purpose is to establish a pleasant working atmosphere and initiate a fruitful communication between communication partners. “Small talk” should remove barriers resulting from different understanding of some situations while waiting or setting a schedule. “Small talk” provides an occasion to clarify different intentions resulting from cultural differences.

The purpose of “small talk” is also to move closer to a communication partner. In other words to respect and deal with topics which are for their culture and life important. While in some cultures

(e.g. British) family is a closed topic, in other cultures (e.g. Italian) it is a recommended area to show a genuine interest in your business partner. The right choice of a topic contributes to a mutual understanding and building trust necessary for business negotiations. To know and respect cultural values of a business partner provides advantage to build “a positive image” which will be always appreciated and remembered, even after many years. It makes you different from all other business partners who are not aware how cultural values are strong.

To know how much “small talk” is expected from you depends on culture your business partner comes from. “Coconut Cultures” prefer short small talk. It means they expect to exchange a few polite phrases and go down to business. Only after several meetings, you can come with more personalized topics to strengthen your relationships.

“Peach Cultures” expect you to devote more time to small talk and include more private topics such as family, kids, free time activities from the very beginning. Business comes only after establishing trust and knowing you as a person. If you miss the invitation to build a closer relationship with your business partner, there is hardly a second chance.

How to prepare for “small talk”?

To be good at “small talk” requires doing regular exercises. Especially for those cultures which have a direct communication style and usually

go directly to business matters. You can start having a stop at a coffee machine or initiating communication with conference participants. However, one of the key ideas is to learn at least basic information about cultural values and recommended topics in the culture your colleagues and business partners come from.

What are recommended topics for small talk?

There is no universal topic which you can use in all cultures. In fact “small talk” topics depend on values and behaviors of particular cultures. However, the most favorite topics are history, sightseeing, sport, music, traditions and family. In general, people are usually proud of their country, history and natural beauties. Therefore, “small talk” could be open with the questions focused on geography and environmental surroundings. Weather, as a recommended topic, does not always work. There are cultures which hate questions and discussion on raining or sunshine.

“Little things” can make a big result. And it is also the case of “small talk”. To have a pleasant small talk with your business partner can help you to overcome barriers

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Based on cultural values, cultures have the topics and questions which are recommended to include into small talk. Let’s mention some examples:

The proposed topics and questions for small talk with Americans:

- What do you do?
- What is your job?
- Where do you come from?

Americans enjoy the questions which give them the answers to know professional background of people they are in touch with. To learn something about their job and origin is acceptable for a small talk. However, cultures which take care of their privacy, would not be pleased to be asked such questions just meeting somebody for the first time.

The proposed topics and questions for small talk with British:

- How do you like the Czech Republic?
- What about your flight?
- Weather
- Sport

British belong among cultures discussing more general things. They are well known for their comments on weather. Working with cultures from Central Europe, I often hear that managers are lost when their British colleagues analyze how it is raining. As they say: “It is raining. And what more?”

The proposed topics and questions for small talk with Italians:

What about your family?

How are you kids doing?

On the contrary to cultures keeping door closed to their private life, there are cultures which enjoy talking about their family and kids. They usually devote a lot of attention to building relationships and have “family” as one of their key values.

We could make the whole list of recommended and not recommended topics for small talk in different cultures. However, one of the recommendations, which would probably work in many cases, is to listen to your business partner or colleague. Meeting new people for the first time, everybody tries to come with topics which usually work for him in his home culture.

