

Small Talk: An Important Element of SAM

Lisa's new job required relocating hundreds of miles from home. Prior to the move, she searched the internet for Single Adult Ministries in the new city. Based on this information, she checked the distance from her new home and planned to visit some. Lisa knew this would require her to exercise all her communication skills, especially due to her introvert personality.

John continues to work through his divorce. He attended a divorce recovery program and feels ready to attend some the single adult ministries and programs. Even with his fun-loving, out-going personality, he is apprehensive about attending the first event. Will he be able to break into the group?

Both Lisa and John faces situation that cause many people to feel uncomfortable. One of the greatest fears of people is walking into a people-filled room. Even when you know others, the size of the crowd may be intimidating. How do we overcome these fears?

According to *The Fine Art of Small Talk** by Debra Fine, we need to learn how to start a conversation and keep it going. She also points out some unintentional signals people send. Consider these insights gleamed from Fine's book.

Casual conversations occur throughout the day. Some are comfortable with these off-the-cuff exchanges and don't think much about them. Others find it difficult to engage in these casual conversations. While this often reflects an introvert personality, others perceive the reluctant joiners as distant and cold.

Some people read body language as indicators of a person's involvement. Arms folded across the chest is typically read as a person being closed or aloof or defensive—even if the person feels more comfortable with folded arms or the room is cold. Others read meaning into crossed legs, hands on the hips, or a head resting in a hand. Remember nonverbal signals account for more than 65 percent of a two-person conversation.

To become better conversationalists, Fine gives two objectives:

1. Take the risk.
2. Assume the burden.

Many people are reluctant to take the risk fearing rejection. According to Fine, the risk of rejection is quite small. One means of combating this fear is to prepare some conversation starters before attending the event. This helps to feel comfortable with starting a conversation and gives some reserves for those conversations lulls.

Start by developing some open-ended questions. These could include

- I like this season of the year. What do you like best about it?
- This is a great _____ (conference, event, church, etc.). What have you

enjoyed most?

- Tell me about your career.
- Tell me about your family.
- What are your hobbies? (Be ready to share yours, too.)
- If you could go on a dream vacation, where would it be?
- What's the best book you've read? (Be ready to share yours, too).

Here are some tips for starting a conversation. Approach the person with a smile. Remember if he or she is standing alone, you probably share a feeling of uncomfortableness. A smile sends an inviting signal and identifies you as an approachable person.

If there aren't name tags, ask the person's name and give yours. Be sure to use the name as given. For example, don't shorten Michael to "Mike" or Pamela to "Pam." Use the name in the conversation to reinforce it. Should you forget a person's name, ask him or her to remind you. If one or both of you are new, he or she will understand that remembering names is challenging.

Maintain eye contact. This is an indication of interest in what the speaker is saying. Roaming eyes send a signal that you're not paying attention or looking for someone else.

If it's a stand-up gathering, invite others to join the conversation. This spreads the opportunity for conversation to more people and often makes it easier to maintain the conversation.

If you're seated at a table, include others as quickly as possible. This can be done by introducing yourself and summarizing the conversation. Draw the newcomers into the conversation by directing comments to them, especially if they seem reluctant to join.

Conversation is like the old playground game of Foursquare. A good conversationalist passes the conversational ball to all participants, giving each the opportunity for input. Sometimes this means intentionally throwing the ball to one person by using his or her name or asking a specific question.

Small talk—a vital part of any ministry—is often scary. Consider these insights and plan to become a good conversationalist at the next ministry event you attend. It could be the start of a great friendship, too.

Fine, Debra. *The Fine Art of Small Talk*. New York : Hyperion, 2005.